



You Are Fired

Maj. Gen. Michael W. Symanski, U.S. Army Reserve, Retired

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You may not see it coming, but usually few are surprised when a senior leader does his duty by relieving a subordinate leader who committed unacceptable personal behavior or who publicly failed in leadership and

management. The firing probably is done for the good of the service or to ensure mission accomplishment, and the guilty party and the public expect it. Granted, toxic leaders rarely are aware of their own poison and believe they are good

Brig. Gen. Courtney Whitney, Gen. Douglas MacArthur, and Maj. Gen. Edward M. Almond observe the shelling of Inchon from the USS Mt. McKinley, 15 September 1950. Gen. Douglas MacArthur was fired by President Harry S. Truman because of MacArthur's open and public opposition to U.S. policy during the Korean War.

performers up to the moment the ax falls. Sometimes, however, unseen forces are at work, and the victim and bystanders are taken unaware.

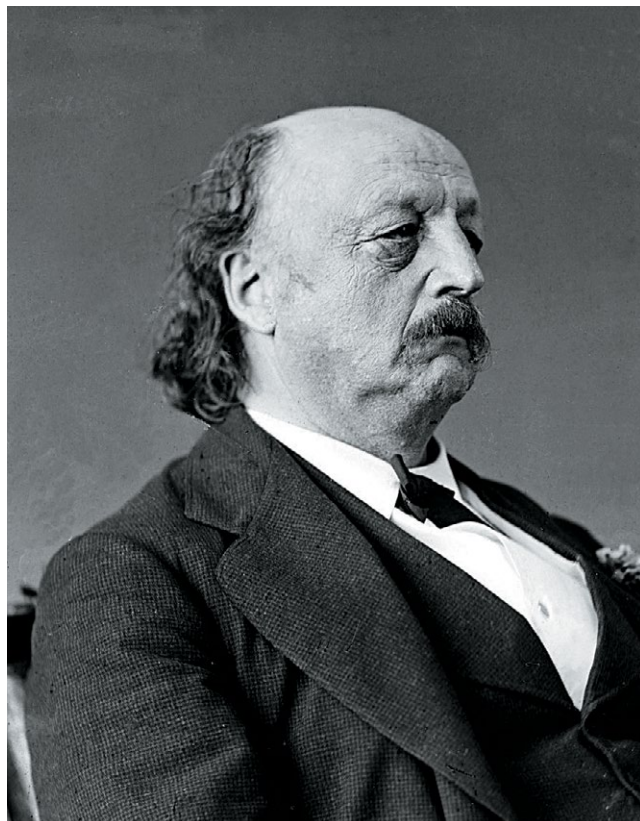
The military is a hierarchal organization that can suffer from the same self-serving behaviors that often afflict any bureaucracy. The motives of the senior official who pulls the plug may be courageous and commendable, or they may be craven and contemptible. The decision is often a judgment call. It may be made under pressure of outside influences. The dismissal of anyone of strategic rank can push disruptive ripples throughout the institution, so we should explore the process by which the authority arrives at the unhappy decision. Effective leaders must fully understand this decision-making process and the necessary follow-up from the perspectives of their own office and the person who is relieved. Relief is a necessary and inevitable tool of leadership that must be applied judiciously and effectively. Moreover, its user must accept personal accountability for the decision. Relief can even be used creatively.

Getting the chop is a gut-wrenching experience, and so is wielding the ax. Therefore, for readers who have never been fired, this article will try to involve you in the emotions of getting canned, by including you as the subject of a fictional scenario based on historical events. How would you handle either side of the desk? Some of either character's actions leading up to the firing might have been less than noble. How might anyone's professional compass become perverted? How can a hierarchical organization prevent corrupt and corrupting behavior? Is corruption among those who wield power inevitable?

You have been called into the presence of your immediate senior, who says—

I am relieving you from command, immediately, and sending you home. Since this meeting and conversation are not being recorded, I can be starkly frank about why. This may surprise you. Sit down; your knees look wobbly.

I want to make it clear that there is no allegation of moral turpitude. There have been several instances when your conduct has been below standard, and I have tried hard to work with you to help you improve so it pains me to give up on you, but I must. This dismissal is due, in reality, to your poor performance as a leader. Aside from that, the recent exposure on



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Benjamin Franklin Butler, U.S. representative from Massachusetts (1870-1880). A general during the Civil War, Butler was relieved of duty by Gen. Ulysses S. Grant for his incompetent leadership.

social media of your unprofessional behavior would be sufficient grounds for termination. That public exposure means I cannot delay because I cannot cover up your failures, and it gives me the opportunity to make a highly visible change by firing you. This will show everyone that I am clearly in charge and leading. It does not make the bad news better, but it relieves some stress and satisfies the public.

No doubt, you will feel humiliated and angry because I am crushing your dream of a long military career and a place in the history books. Remember, though, that when you accepted the authority of command and the deference that comes with it, you also accepted the risk of blame and disgrace for failure. Your troops are risking wounds or worse in combat while you only have risked your reputation. Stalin's commissars may have given a failed general a pistol and a single bullet to do what must be done, and a defeated Roman commander may have sought an honorable death fighting in the front rank, but that is not the American way. I don't want you to be a damned fool about this and harm yourself.

You are not the first commander that I have relieved during this deployment. I fire officers when they are an impediment to successful operations, to the command, and to my career. We all know how often our boss has removed officers, and that recently he has been very unhappy about our lack of operational progress. If I don't fire you, he probably will fire me.

When you assumed command, you probably made a list of your objectives, imperatives, and priorities—including those imposed by me, and maybe a second list of the things that could get you fired, but I doubt you anticipated this. Maybe you couldn't manage your own time or priorities well because your bosses always imposed their own priorities. Nowadays, the public's perception is as damning as hard evidence against a senior officer. Since a commander is held responsible for everything, it is easy to blame him for things outside his control, but you were not blameless even if there was plenty of blame to go around.

Did you think that a Secretary of the Army would take the blame because some unsupervised soldiers were living in an untidy room in a motel about to be abandoned? Did you imagine that a brigadier general would be fired because a staff sergeant was running a cell of sadists? You should have seen the ax coming or at least prayed for enough luck to get through your assignment.

We all know how critical luck is for success and survival in the military. Napoleon wanted all of his generals to be lucky, above all other traits. Anyone who rises to lieutenant colonel in the Army has been lucky and has had a successful career. The officers who rise further in rank often forget how lucky they have already been, and they come to believe that they are entitled to even more, like many people who inherit wealth. Some who are stupid survive by good luck, but your good luck ran out when that video went viral.

As the senior commander, I set the culture of my command. My boss is a no-nonsense reliever of officers, and he expects me to be ruthless, too. Am I a toxic leader if I enable a threat-based command climate in which my subordinates expect instant and arbitrary punishment for less than outstanding performance? Like executing Admiral Byng on his own quarter-deck—as Voltaire said in his novel, *Candide*—the others are encouraged to do better, or else!¹ Of course, if my officers are always looking over their shoulders, their

fear and anxiety probably choke their imagination and initiative. So, what! We are engaged in combat, and unforgiving leadership is most appropriate for accomplishing combat's short-term objectives. The operational force is like a big business that has only quarterly objectives—the burned out hulks of over-stressed employees attest to the leader's anxiety for getting a good bottom line instead of building a cohesive management team. He has a budget instead of a strategy. The hierarchical nature of our military powerfully draws us into such bureaucratic behaviors and values. Scott Adams' comic strip "Dilbert" represents the sociology of military-leader behavior better than most of our leadership courses with their aphorisms and bumper-sticker platitudes. Like any good bureaucratic manager, I must be seen to be in control of my lane, whatever the reality, and I must box out all rivals for my boss's favorable attention. But that is not why you are being fired.

Would my future be brighter with someone else commanding your unit? I could not fire you if I did not have a qualified replacement on hand, and someone is now available. Since my boss is pressuring me, I can't wait any longer to fix the problem. You must go, today. Even if the replacement commander only has better luck than you had, my stress will be less than it is now.

This cannot be an opportunity for an ingenious use of relief even though history shows the possibilities. In World War I, the 89th Division was organized and trained in Kansas by a two-star commander. He was not allowed to deploy with the division because he would have competed with Pershing for the top job. The best of the two brigade commanders led the 89th to France and expected to command it in combat. Instead, he was replaced by a competent two-star from Pershing's headquarters. The relieved brigadier general was in despair, but he was retained in command of his brigade. Thus, the most able and experienced brigade commander led the division spearhead while Pershing's surrogate directed division operations. The result was outstanding success. At the armistice, Pershing sent the two-star to command a corps, and the brigadier resumed command of the division.² But we do not have these kinds of options.

To your credit, you accepted the responsibility of command and were comfortable being in charge. You took the risk of seizing the initiative, and you balanced your tactical audacity with situational awareness so

that you did not become a gambler against the odds. You kept me informed. I once commanded an officer who did not alert me to an initiative that eventually failed. He explained that it was easier to seek forgiveness than to ask permission, so I did not counsel him before I fired him. Commanders can only hope not to be second-guessed by someone with hindsight, as my boss often does.

You were a barely adequate commander when we were in garrison and training for deployment. Then, your mission was to build readiness, and your role was to be a good coach, teacher, and mentor who would grow the long-term abilities of your officers. Your performance then was passable. Your talents and style are better suited for combat, however, when you have to execute decisively in the short term. Maybe other commanders have been no more effective than you, but leadership practices that work in combat do not always work in garrison.

I have concerns about your integrity and character. Your driving ambition to succeed as a commander has beguiled you into rendering glowing reports in self-assessments, especially in subjective readiness reporting. You may have been dishonest with yourself, if not completely delusional. For instance, after your final predeployment exercise, you reported your command was ready for the range of military operations even though some key personnel and equipment were not yet on hand. If you had reported the quantifiable truth that your command was only marginally combat ready, you might have been replaced then for the deficiency, and we would have been spared this situation now.

You are physically capable of commanding. In fact, most of your command policies promote the physical fitness that the Army seems to admire more than technical skills. When the Army has to reduce the force, soon, it will probably start by cutting the overweight people regardless of their professional credentials. You are only marginally technically competent, but you are at least physically fit. Maybe you preferred extreme exercising to the hard mental work it takes to be a better officer and commander.

What is expected of a combat commander and by what metrics is his performance evaluated? There is very little about this war that can be sensibly quantified. We cannot define the terrain that we control tactically, and the enemy body count is an irrelevant

indicator of his combat power. We soldiers are here because we accept the risk inherent in a soldier's job, but neither you nor I brought our soldiers here to become casualties. We protect our soldiers by the quality of our training and leadership although we cannot protect them from very, very bad luck. Since we can't win the war by hiding behind our compound walls and vehicle armor, we have to expose our soldiers to greater risk by taking the offensive. Our friendly casualty rate is another unhelpful metric here, unless it indicates poor training, inadequate equipment, or that the commander is having consistent and prolonged bad luck.

If only one of your subordinate units was failing, I could blame its commander. When two or more peer units are failing, however, I must look for their common denominator at their higher headquarters. Admittedly, you have been able to recover from your tactical mistakes much better than the last commander I relieved. He could not fix a bad development, which eventually cost him the confidence of his troops, peers, and me. Your setbacks have taught you some valuable lessons, and pain is a much better teacher than uninterrupted success. To some extent, you have learned and recovered from defeats. It may have been Marshal Turenne who said, "Show me a general who has made no mistakes and I will show you a general who has seldom waged war."³ When the political and military authorities are in the same hand, wrote Field-Marshal Montgomery, the failed *generalissimo* does not fear dismissal.⁴ Because he was unaccountable to anyone, Napoleon's authority survived his defeat in Russia in 1812, and he went on to very nearly win at Waterloo in 1815. Our boss, however, remembers failure better than comeback successes and holds us accountable for them.

You are energetic. Indeed, you are often frenetic! Hyperactivity is part of your theatrical effort to be a Homeric, larger-than-life, Pattonesque figure. Instead, you should have been calmer under pressure. You should have shown confidence that your planning and battle management, and your team, would succeed in the end. Defeat is born in the mind of the commander, wrote Field-Marshal Montgomery, and the commander must demonstrate confidence in the basic plan even after adjusting it during execution.

I admit you were a loyal supporter of the policies and operational intent of your seniors and, even if skeptical of them, gave the subsequent orders in your



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Maj. Gen. Lloyd Fredendall was relieved of command of the U.S. Army II Corps by Dwight D. Eisenhower due to a lack of confidence in his leadership. Fredendall was replaced by George S. Patton.

own name. Loyalty is not easy to give here. Whenever some back channel feeds our boss information that we couldn't possibly know about our troops, he loves to blindside and embarrass us with snarky gloats that he knows more about our commands than we do. It's his way of chest beating and keeping us on the back foot. Even though you were loyal to your higher chain of command and the Army, we cannot remain loyal to you.

You took command with appointed authority, but you did not grow it into acquired authority. Early American militiamen elected the best-known local fighters to be their officers. If the soldiers lost confidence in any officer later, they shunned him until he went home. The insurgent leaders' authority over their followers is acquired, and some Afghan government officials have recommended that the Afghan Army soldiers elect their

own officers, too. In your case, your bullying manner has alienated your officers, and they were united only by their despair and frustration. It is like the tragedy of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (act V, scene II)—

Those he commands move only in command,
Nothing in love: Now does he feel his title
Hang loose about him, like a giant's robe
Upon a dwarfish thief.

We commanders lean heavily on our staff to provide analysis and recommended courses of action. We need them to protect us from ourselves by speaking truth to power—you did not let your staff do that for you. They have to be a team of star performers with a deep bench within their areas of expertise. The commander should explain his intent well enough for everyone to understand it. But you have forced your staff only to silently cower in mutual fear of your capricious outbursts and hope for your removal. If your soldiers were militiamen, would they elect you to be their commander? Your leadership is weak, and that screwball video makes it clear that they have no respect for you.

I already told you that we are held responsible for so much that is actually beyond our control—and that my boss plays the “gotcha!” game. We are driven to micromanage to avoid being caught by surprise. We can't really trust our subordinates' judgment if our own necks are always on the block. Anyway, military culture always admires commanders who are in total control.

When the television reporter came, you politely declined a one-on-one interview and directed her to talk to your public affairs officer. That was the smart way to handle the press. I can't think of anyone who has been fired for not talking to a journalist, but I can remember several who were fired for what they said to a reporter, like the Navy commander who said that his job did not include chasing pirates. We shouldn't leave a trail of unguarded statements. You remember the foolish officer whose naughty emails to his deployment “cruise romance” were forwarded to the world, last summer.

Your replacement will be able to get the organization back on track because the dysfunction is mostly confined to the two echelons of people below you. Two levels of command down is the normal “effective range” of senior leadership traits. Command policy letters will affect everyone, but optimism or paranoia is transmitted primarily through direct contact. We senior leaders are too far removed from the junior enlisted soldiers to

lead them effectively from in front. Platoon sergeants and company commanders are far more important to privates than are generals, and most private soldiers remember only the eccentricities of their distant senior officers. Your theatric attempts to conjure up charisma have caused your soldiers to write you off as a phony flake. Remember when a unit of your soldiers marched past your field command post in the rain, and you stood outside the tent entrance to show them that you shared their suffering? They concluded that you didn't have enough common sense to get out of the rain!

I calculated the cost of dismissing you. The government has made a substantial investment to develop you as a senior commander over the years—perhaps even as much money as I hope to make in my future senior officer's pension. Could you still be considered an asset? The Army has gone through a period of rapid promotion for almost all eligible officers, so maybe some have been advanced before they were ready. You were assigned beyond your leadership ability; yet, you might be fit to serve somewhere on staff. Under the circumstances, I cannot recommend that you be kicked upstairs to some other position of higher responsibility. Since you are not a career competitor to my boss or to me, we would have no reason to block

your reassignment elsewhere at your current rank. Of course, you will undergo a psychological evaluation so that you will have very little hope of appealing our decision.

Therefore, it behooves us to give you the push and hope that some of the stink of this operational stagnation will follow you out the door before it rises up your chain of command. The announced reason for your relief will be the candid camera video of you that your staff noncommissioned officer (NCO) made with his cell phone. When you lectured your staff about how half of them are parasitic morons, you never suspected that his edited video of it would go viral and make you the lunatic poster boy for toxic leadership. There is no need for me to take the time to build a documented case against you, so your relief is immediate. There will be no change of command ceremony, and two NCOs will escort you to your office to ensure that you do not destroy or take classified material. They will then parade you through your headquarters to the exit carrying a cardboard box with your family photos. Remember, this isn't personal ... it's just business.

The characters described in this article are fictitious, except for named historical or literary figures. ■

Notes

1. Admiral John Byng of the Royal Navy was executed in 1757 for failing to do his utmost while commanding in battle at Minorca. Voltaire satirized him in the novel *Candide* with a scene in which an officer is executed by firing squad with the explanation that "in this country, it is good to kill an admiral from time to time, in order to encourage the others."

2. The story of the commanders of the 89th Division is told well in William M. Wright, *Meuse-Argonne Diary*, edited with an introduction by Robert H. Ferrell (Columbia, MO: University of

Missouri Press, 2004).

3. Although several authors have repeated the quote from Turenne, I have found no confirmation that he actually said or wrote it in 1641.

4. For the observations of Field-Marshal Montgomery see Bernard Montgomery, *Memoirs of Field-Marshal Montgomery*. (Cleveland, OH: The World Publishing Company, 1958), Chapter 6; and *The Path to Leadership* (London, Collins, 1961) Chapter 2.