



Gen. Julian Cunningham (seated) meeting 6 February 1944 with (left to right) unidentified, Lt. Col. Clyde Everett Grant, Maj. D. M. McMains, Col. A. M. Miller, and Lt. Col. Philip Lovell Hooper in Arawe, Papua New Guinea. (Photo courtesy of U.S. Army via Wikimedia Commons)

# Great Staff Officers and Great Commanders

## What's the Difference?



Maj. Meghan Starr, U.S. Army

*Editor's note: The author wrote this article while attending the Command and General Staff Officer Course.*

To begin, I feel it is important to provide a bit of context for this article. Every author brings his or her personal bias to a project, and I feel it is prudent that I am upfront about mine. Understanding the impetus behind this article will provide the reader with the necessary perspective to approach my arguments.

About seven years ago, in the middle of my company command, I was frustrated. I had dreams of being the exceptional company command-

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er that we all aspire to be, and that dream was not coming to fruition. Despite my aspirations, a combination of a rift between Department of the Army civilians and my soldiers, office politics, in-fighting around and above my organization seemed to cut me off at the knees whenever I started to build momentum. Someone who I highly respected, and who had seen me serve on battalion staff and in command, told me that I was just a better staff officer than a commander. Although it stung, I unquestioningly accepted that opinion. I highly respected this person, who had far more experience than me, and it was not the first time in my career that I had heard people say that to officers. Nevertheless, I finished my twenty-seven-month command, which was a perpetual roller coaster ride of successes and failures.

Immediately after command, I was fortunate to have two years at a civilian graduate school that afforded me the opportunity to reflect upon my time in command. I was not used to failure in my career, and the aftermath of my command haunted me. Regardless of what my official evaluations said, I felt like a failure. For those two years, I frequently woke up in a cold sweat after having

nightmares about my experience. I spent countless hours walking to and from class dwelling on what went wrong and how to do it better. By the time I graduated, I felt I had learned the lessons from the experience, and the nightmares slowly stopped. I failed to “lead up,” failed to appreciate the bigger context of what my organization was doing, etc. After all, I told myself, I am a better staff officer than a commander. I just do not have what it takes to be a good commander, but at least I could do it a little better next time if I ever got the chance.

Following graduate school, I spent three years teaching at West Point, which was by far the best job of my career. I had cerebral conversations with coworkers daily, I was able to dedicate hours of my day purely to the mentorship and development of future leaders, and I was able to find and pursue my intellectual passion. “This must be what it means to be a better staff officer than commander,” I told myself. Maybe success as a good staff officer did not mean “less than” success as a commander, despite many people’s preconceptions; maybe it was just something different. Perhaps I could even take pride in being a good staff officer. After all, the majority of the rest of my career is going to be serving on a staff.

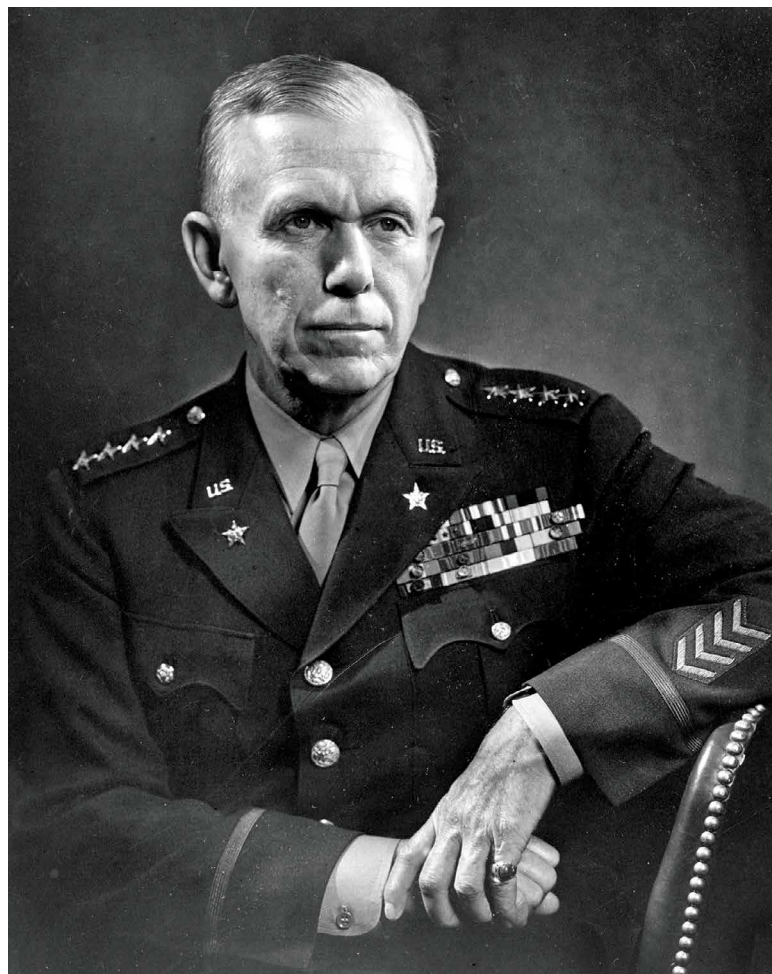
Now, as a Command and General Staff College (CGSC) student, I have begun to question what exactly it means to be a better staff officer than a commander. What qualities make up a good commander that a good staff officer might not have? Are there qualities that make up a good staff officer that a good commander might not have? Aren’t we all supposed to be good leaders and emulate the same qualities as outlined in Army Doctrine Publication 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*? If I could

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identify the difference between the two roles, would it be something I could work to fix, or would it be an inherent trait that cannot be changed?

As a part of CGSC's Art of War Scholar program, we have spent countless hours studying officers from a wide variety of eras and nationalities. We have studied military innovators, general staff officers, thinkers, and commanders, both good and bad. The more I study these historical officers, the less I see a difference between a good staff officer and a good commander. If I had to hypothesize, I would say the one distinguishing characteristic of a good commander is charisma, but that is certainly not universal.



A portrait of Gen. George C. Marshall taken 1 January 1947. Though serving three times as a regimental or brigade commander in his career, Marshall never commanded in combat. He spent the majority of his career as a staff officer, combat developer, and instructor, rising to become chief of staff under Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry S. Truman and attaining the five-star rank of general of the Army. During World War I, he served in France as a staff member of the American Expeditionary Forces under Gen. John J. Pershing and was a key planner for American operations. During World War II, he oversaw the largest military expansion in U.S. history and served as presidential advisor for overall management of the conflict. (Photo courtesy of the Dutch National Archives via Wikimedia Commons)

This article will analyze what the difference is between an effective staff officer and an effective commander, and if there is any difference, I will determine whether it is something “fixable.” To answer this question, I used three approaches: doctrine, history, and discussions with the military community. None of these approaches are exhaustive, but they provide a baseline for leaders to think about this further.

## Doctrine

I started my research where any good officer should: doctrine. Surprisingly, I found little discussion devoted to the differences between the qualities of a staff officer and those of a commander. Doctrine, generally speaking, approaches leadership as a task that all officers, regardless of assignment, must be able to perform. The leader attributes and core competencies listed in Army Doctrine Publication 6-22 are considered universal. There are no specifications as to whether certain attributes or competencies are more important than others in the context of an officer's assigned duties. The development of these traits is also universal, and it is the responsibility of all officers, not just commanders. According to Field Manual (FM) 6-22, *Leader Development*, “responsibility for leader development cuts across all leader and staff roles.”<sup>1</sup>

The only doctrinal reference that makes a distinction between the particular attributes of a commander and a staff officer is FM 6-0, *Commander and Staff Organization and Operations*, which states that “in addition to the leader attributes and core competencies addressed in Army leadership doctrine, a good staff officer is competent, exercises initiative, applies critical and creative thinking, is adaptable, is flexible, has self-confidence, is cooperative, is reflective, and communicates effectively.”<sup>2</sup> It goes on to articulate the role of the commander: “Commanders are responsible for all their staffs do or fail to do. A commander cannot delegate this responsibility. The final decision, as well as the final responsibility, remains with the commander. ... Commanders provide guidance, resources,

and support. They foster a climate of mutual trust, cooperation, and teamwork.”<sup>3</sup> Aside from FM 6-0, no doctrinal distinction between the qualities of a command and a staff officer exist. After reading the qualities of a good staff officer in FM 6-0, I was left wondering how an officer with all of those qualities could possibly fail to be a good commander. In search of a better answer, I turned to history to understand the evolution of the role of the military staff and its relationship with commanders.

## History

The role of commanders and staffs has a complex and evolving history. Napoleon Bonaparte did his own planning. The role of his staff was to write down the plan he dictated, then deliver it to subordinate units. As other nations struggled to adapt to Napoleon’s military genius, they realized that few could match him alone on the battlefield. It is impossible to discuss this without mentioning Carl von Clausewitz, who argued that two qualities are required for true military genius: *coup d’oeil* (the intellect) and *courage d’espri* (determination).<sup>4</sup> Clausewitz went on to argue that to find one man with both of these qualities is rare. The solution was to equip commanders who lacked such comprehensive talents with a more robust staff so that multiple minds could combine to combat the rare military genius.

During this time, however, the American military, while taking some concepts from Prussia, still relied on the French model of command through the Civil War. Staffs were small, and the Army did not utilize staffs’ potential. Napoleon’s armies, with all of their successes, were



Lt. Gen. Laura J. Richardson, commander, U.S. Army North (USARNORTH), speaks to the soldiers of Company D, 3rd Battalion, 187th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), 24 December 2019 at a mobile surveillance camera site in Del Rio, Texas. As an Army aviator, Richardson flew Sikorsky UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters. Promoted to general officer, she subsequently served in a variety of staff and command positions including deputy commanding general–support for the 1st Cavalry Division at Fort Hood, deputy commanding general of U.S. Army Forces Command, and chief of staff for communication in the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan. Richardson assumed command of USARNORTH on 8 July 2019. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Mark Torres, U.S. Army)

the standard to which the United States aspired. It was not until 1866 and the Prussian alliance won the Battle of Königgrätz that the United States started to devote greater attention to the Prussian way of war.<sup>5</sup>

The Prussians realized that the battlefield was more complex with the advent of railroads, telegraphs, and other technologies, and it was impossible for one man to manage alone. Helmuth von Moltke the Elder, influenced by Clausewitz’s writings, completely restructured professional development for officers and designed the *Kriegsakademie* (war academy). This led to the creation of the Prussian General Staff and a career path dedicated to developing exceptional staff officers. Units would have a commander and a general staff officer who shared in the decision-making responsibility. One officer might have robust combat experience, while the other might have significant military education and training. When Moltke passed, however, his successors failed to maintain

the system. Where Moltke had been able to integrate new technology into systems for the general staff, his successors were unable to incorporate the new technologies of their time (e.g., balloons and a more robust navy).<sup>6</sup> As the American military's attention turned to emulating the Prussian education system, Prussia's system was devolving. The professionalization of the American officer corps, however, was a turning point as reformers like former Secretary of War Elihu Root strove to improve the education and organization of the officer corps.<sup>7</sup>

The Germans maintained the general staff system, but it resembled its original concept less and less. Instead of staff officers rotating between staff assignments and command, many senior staff officers at the dawn of World War II had little command experience and minimal combat experience from World War I.<sup>8</sup> Admittedly, this also had much to do with the significant downsizing of the German army as a result of the Versailles Treaty. The performance of these staff officers in

combat is, at best, mixed. Rather than prize its general staff officers, the army thus began to value its commanders and lost respect for those staff officers whose mistakes in command cost thousands of lives.<sup>9</sup> This divide between commanders and staff officers permeated the American military as well. Commanders, held in high esteem, often looked down their noses at staff officers who had an unproven track record in command.<sup>10</sup>

While studying the use of the military staff and how staff officers were viewed is helpful, perhaps the greatest historical insight into the different qualities of staff officers and commanders is from Gen. Kurt von Hammerstein-Equord, commander in chief of the Reichswehr from 1930 to 1934:<sup>11</sup>

I distinguish four types. There are clever, hardworking, stupid, and lazy officers. Usually two characteristics are combined. Some are clever and hardworking; their place is the General Staff. The next ones are stupid and lazy; they

make up 90 percent of every army and are suited to routine duties. Anyone who is both clever and lazy is qualified for the highest leadership duties, because he possesses the mental clarity and strength of nerve necessary for difficult decisions. One must beware of anyone who is both stupid and hardworking; he must not be entrusted with any responsibility because he will always only cause damage.<sup>12</sup>

Hammerstein-Equord's sentiment is seen today in the form of a chart (see table). I used this chart when I began the next phase of my analysis: discussions with the military community.

**Table. Hammerstein-Equord's Four Types of Leaders**

Types of officers	Hardworking	Lazy
Clever	Appoint to the general staff	Highest leadership duties
Stupid	Remove	Routine duties

(Table by author)

## Discussions

Armed with the Hammerstein-Equord chart, I started a discussion on #miltwitter, Facebook, and with my CGSC staff group to solicit the opinions of others. The participants were a combination of enlisted (sergeant first class through command sergeant major) and officer (captain through

lieutenant colonel). In all cases, the debate was impassioned and thoughtful.<sup>13</sup> Here I was able to finally draw some conclusions. Several themes emerged in the debate:

- *There is absolutely a difference between what makes a good staff officer and what makes a good commander.* After a long debate, the consensus on all platforms was that the attributes and competencies required of both were the same; however, they should be weighted differently. The top three attributes necessary for command are not the top three attributes required for staff work.
- *It is much easier for someone in the "stupid" category of the chart to survive on staff than in command.* Most disagreements occurred when people referred to the qualities needed to be a sufficiently competent staff officer instead of a good one. Many mediocre officers can "hide" on staff, but they cannot hide when they are eventually led to the perception that being a staff officer is easier than being a commander or



requires less skill. Once reoriented to address the qualities that make a *good* staff officer, most agreed with the first point above.

- ♦ *Two particular qualities tend to be the largest discriminators in the criteria for a good commander and a good staff officer.* These qualities are charisma (the ability to inspire soldiers to do physically hard tasks) and audacity (the ability to make decisions and accept appropriate risk). Examples of both certainly permeate history. The ability to accept risk, in particular, is tied to what Hammerstein-Equord meant by a great commander being “lazy.” A commander may often need to make decisions with imperfect or incomplete information, relying on what is available to make the best decision possible. There often is not time to do further analysis or research, and a “lazy” commander is willing to accept the necessary risk to make a “good enough” decision on time rather than wait for perfect information in order to make the perfect decision or choose the perfect course of action.
- ♦ *It is possible for a great staff officer to transition into a great commander, but few know how.* The consensus was that most people had seen examples of officers who were great at both roles and that being “smart” makes that transition easier. Unfortunately, how to transition between roles was left under the umbrella of “self-development” with few tips for the officer trying to make that transition. The only consensus was that it was highly individual and could not be done through large CGSC courses. Part of the need

for a solution, however, comes from little thought on this topic and too much focus on universal leadership traits or preparing for command. Most people do not receive training on the specific leadership traits required to be a great staff officer. Instead, they receive training on how to use systems (e.g., manage a budget, the military decision-making process, etc.).

## Conclusion

After researching doctrine and history and combining it with excellent discussion, I agree with the conclusions of the discussion above. The skill sets required to be a great commander and a great staff officer are different but only in priority. I am still not sure if it is possible to transition from one to the other, in either direction. Personally, I have identified the areas that I need to develop in order to make that transition, and I will strive to do so. Time will only tell if I am successful. I am still left wondering, however, why being a great commander is considered superior to being a great staff officer if both require the same attributes. My best estimate is that few people take time to distinguish between the mediocre and the great staff officer, and many perceptions are colored by mediocre performances. I wonder if asking more senior commanders, those above the level of battalion command, would provide more insight. This is but one of the many remaining questions that ought to be researched further. For my own journey, however, I think I have found what I need to move my own development forward. ■

## Notes

1. Field Manual (FM) 6-22, *Leader Development* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, June 2015), 2-1, accessed 7 August 2020, [https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR\\_pubs/DR\\_a/pdf/web/fm6\\_22.pdf](https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/fm6_22.pdf).

2. FM 6-0, *Commander and Staff Organization and Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, May 2014), 2-4.

3. Ibid.

4. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 102.

5. Jorg Muth, *Command Culture* (Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 2011), 19.

6. Ibid., 26.

7. Stephen Skowronek, *Building a New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities, 1877–1920* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 88.

8. Muth, *Command Culture*, 27.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid., 27–28.

11. “Kurt Freiherr Von Hammerstein-Equord,” Gedenkstätte Deutscher Widerstand (German Resistance Memorial Center), accessed 1 April 2020, [https://www.gdw-berlin.de/en/recess/biographies/index\\_of\\_persons/biographie/view-bio/kurt-freiherr-von-hammerstein-equord/?no\\_cache=1](https://www.gdw-berlin.de/en/recess/biographies/index_of_persons/biographie/view-bio/kurt-freiherr-von-hammerstein-equord/?no_cache=1).

12. Horst Poller, *Conquered Past: The 20th Century, Witnessed, Endured, Shaped* (Munich: Olzog Verlag, 2010), 140.

13. For transcripts of these discussions, please contact the author.