

Editor's Note: This essay won the third prize in the Draper Essay Contest, sponsored by the Draper Armor Leadership Award Fund to mark the 75th anniversary of the program. Contestants were asked to write on the subject: "Leadership in the XXI Century — Digital Age."



Leadership in the XXI Century — Digital Age

by Major James K. Morningstar

*"Leadership ...is the thing that wins battles."*¹

- GEN George S. Patton, Jr.

Victory in the digital age, more than ever before, requires leaders who can make bold and quick decisions. New technology delivers unprecedented volumes of information to front line commanders, burdening them with a rapid operational tempo. Only leaders who quickly convert information into decisive action can fully realize the potential of this applied science. These leaders, however, will find that digital technology makes unique demands on the human dimensions of leadership. To meet future needs for bold and decisive leaders, the Army must change its current methods of leader development and begin to seek out and reward junior leaders who take risks.

Army doctrine defines leadership as: "...the process of influencing others to accomplish the mission by providing purpose, direction, and motivation."² This process begins with decision-making. Leaders identify what must be done and then provide others with the reason and motivation to do it. They inspire others through time-honored traits such as experience, physical endurance, judgment, "uprightness and cleanliness of character."³ They build cohesive and efficient teams by establishing standards, enforcing discipline, and conducting challenging training. Above all else, leaders are counted on to know what to do. The essence of

leadership remains unchanged, but the dawning century will reveal shining opportunities and shadowy challenges to leadership new to battle.

The Army foresees "...future information technology will greatly increase the volume, accuracy, and speed of battlefield information available to commanders."⁴ This technology allows greater fidelity in addressing the true nature of combat. Battle is not a predictable unfolding of events along lines in time and space. Battle is not linear, but rather plays itself out in sequences of decision points immune to predetermined direction. Historic command and control systems could not hope to redirect combat power faster than conditions changed in this chaotic system. Leaders were forced to decide direction in advance and apply combat power in a linear fashion against conditions as they hoped to find them (with frequent pauses to adjust to reality). Digital technology will provide the leaders at the decision points with the information and means necessary to address conditions as and when they find them. This does not, in and of itself, equate to greater combat effectiveness, for knowledge does not equal action. Rather, as Robert Leonhard observed, "Information breeds decisions."⁵ It is leaders who translate information into combat power — they make decisions.

The importance of decision-making is more of a remembrance than a revelation. Among the fifty-year-old principles of Army leadership is "Make

sound and timely decisions." Doctrine adds, "You must be able to rapidly assess situations and make sound decisions. If you delay or try to avoid making a decision, you may cause unnecessary casualties and fail to accomplish the mission. Indecisive leaders create hesitancy, loss of confidence, and confusion. You must be able to anticipate and reason under the most trying conditions and quickly decide what actions to take."⁶ The revelation is in understanding that future technology actually increases the importance and difficulty of decision-making and leadership.

Digital technology places unsuspected challenges on leadership. In his analysis of U.S. Army operations in Somalia, Mark Bowden found "Men in battle drink up information like water."⁷ With digital technology, those men drink from a fire hose. A flood of information can drown some leaders' ability to make decisions. Bowden continued, "...Soldiers fought better when things were going their way. Once things turned, it was harder to reassert control."⁸ Perfect situational knowledge leads to perfect frustration when events go awry. Leadership, not technology, changes the direction of events. As S.L.A. Marshall observed more than thirty years, "There are no computers in the jungle. And if there were, they wouldn't help."⁹

Digital technology can, perversely, isolate leaders from the fight. In Mogadishu, the commander "...and his staff probably had more instant information

about this unfolding battle than any commander in history, but there wasn't much they could do but watch and listen."¹⁰ During a "digital rotation" at the National Training Center, I witnessed a battalion employing a digital mobile command post in the defense. While the commander watched his bank of monitors inside the command post, his sergeant major stood outside and watched enemy tanks skirt the battalion's forward positions. When asked what his commander knew of the enemy's maneuver, the sergeant major said, "If he'd get off that damn Nintendo and come out here, he'd see!" As General Sherman said many years before, "No man can properly command an army from the rear, he must be 'at its front'."¹¹ The telegraph, telephone, and radio did not alter this rule, and neither will digital connections. It is old doctrine: "Decision-making must ultimately rely upon the commander's judgment based upon his personal observation of the battlefield."¹²

In assessing future operations, the U.S. Army's Training and Doctrine Command acknowledges the limits of technology and the importance of decision-making: "Despite advances in information technology, commanders, leaders, and soldiers will never have perfect knowledge of the operational situation surrounding them. Yet, due to the pace and complexity of future battle, commanders, more so than in the past, must accept uncertainty and not hesitate to act instead of waiting for more analysis or information."¹³ The best technology will not motivate men forward in dangerous and uncertain circumstances. Only leadership, that ability to make a decision and move out, can cut the fog of war. As General George C. Marshall noted, "The great difficulty is observing the execution, and pushing it at the weak point and getting it ahead."¹⁴

Ironically, the more prominent computers become in battle, the more important becomes the human bond between leaders and their soldiers. J.F.C. Fuller wrote, "The more mechanical become the weapons with which we fight, the less mechanical must be the spirit which controls them." In the midst of the great mechanical revolution of World War II, General George S. Patton Jr. eloquently observed, "Wars may be fought by weapons, but they are won by men. It is the spirit of the men who follow and the man who

leads that gains victory." When operations follow computer guidance, soldiers will only follow leaders. Soldiers know computers don't care. Only leaders, as General Dennis Reimer says, "... know their soldiers' strengths and weaknesses. This is the key to success."¹⁵

The digital battlefield challenges leaders to motivate soldiers in a torrent of information. General Marshall illustrated how leaders motivate soldiers in a confused, rapidly moving battle, rife with information on the situation, in recalling Patton at Strausburg in 1945. Marshall said, "He [Patton] interviewed several commanders. In each case they, in accordance with their training, began to tell him about enemy movements. They were doing what they were taught. But this was a great emergency. Everything was in confusion. In each case, Patton would interrupt and say, 'I don't want to know a goddam thing about the enemy. What are you doing?' This changed their psychology. It was a perfect example of leadership."¹⁶ Finding his soldiers searching for accurate information, Patton sought action. Digits will not transmit this will to win. That is the leadership required in tomorrow's battles.

Today, the Army's challenge is to produce tomorrow's leaders. The "digital age" demands quick decisions by leaders at the front who can see into the souls of soldiers and inspire them in the face of danger and uncertainty. Some of these traits can, as the Army believes, "... be learned through self-study, education, training, and experience." Some can only be revealed.

To make quick decisions in ambiguous circumstances, a leader must take risks. Unfortunately, the Army has little toleration for such leaders. Because tight training budgets often limit leaders to a single maneuver or gunnery exercise during a rating period, only those who avoid mistakes get high ratings. A bad rating will haunt even the newest lieutenant for the rest of his career. Command goes to those who, through choice or nature, avoid mistakes by avoiding risks. While the future demands decisive leaders, the present environment produces passive types.

This climate is cyclic in Army history. During the 1840s and 1850s, men who sought safe duty enjoyed meteoric Army careers. In 1853, for example,

one young officer prone to avoid risk refused to enter unexplored areas of wilderness despite his mission to survey territory in the Pacific northwest.¹⁷ This refusal did not harm George McClellan's rise to the top of the Army. When later confronted with the unexpected on campaign in Virginia in 1862, McClellan lost his nerve, his battles, his campaign, and many men's lives. He proved over-dependent on (faulty) intelligence and lacked the ability to make decisions when faced with uncertainty. In peacetime, that liability wasn't as important to promotion as other, more aesthetic, characteristics.

Talk with today's junior leaders and you will find suspicions that the Army is again promoting "lack of failure" over bold decision-making. They feel the same systemic constraints noted by Roger H. Nye a decade ago:

"... the power of the company commander has been denigrated by modern communications, by theories of management that have moved much of the company administration to higher headquarters, and by centralized systems of pay, promotion, training, maintenance, and supply that bypass the commander's authority and impact directly on the soldier below him. It is possible for a captain of average ability to be quite successful in the eyes of higher authorities if he faithfully obeys, enforces standards set by others, and does not violate some cardinal rules of leadership and management. This is good followership, but it is not command."¹⁸

In the 1990s, LTG Stroup added, "...studies and surveys confirm that something in the Army environment is changing. We hear anecdotal accounts of careerism, stifled initiative, lack of trust of subordinates and a growing *zero defects* mentality ... the shift has been subtle and unconscious."¹⁹

In such an environment, it is virtually impossible to groom and assess the decision-making abilities of junior leaders. So instead we promote photographs, PT scores, and "lack of failure" in one's record. We reward only those slavishly faithful to the rules, but as General Grant said, "If men make war in slavish observance of rules, they will fail."²⁰ Any officers ambitious for higher command seem to make "a career out of their own careers rather than a career out of leading their units."²¹

There is little doubt that today's Army would promote McClellan and send Grant and Sherman back to civilian life.

Our Army has historically waited until the fighting starts to replace passive peacetime leaders with bolder decision-makers. Famous first defeats, like Kasserine Pass, served as wake-up calls. We should not wait to apply Major General Ernest Harmon's after-action observation from Kasserine, "Up to the time of battle itself, we are inclined to stress administration, paperwork, and tactical knowledge above the flair for leadership. In this we are wrong...."²² The precision, lethality, and tempo of the next first battle could make the consequence of poor leadership unimaginably disastrous. We *must* have bold, decision-making leaders in place when the first shot is fired.

Today, we often hear the mantra of digitization echoing like a chant to ward off the specter of future defeat. While technological developments in rapid shared communications and precision weapons are tremendous combat multipliers, they are not a warranty for victory. To succeed on the future battlefield, the Army must develop decisive leaders today. Tomorrow's battles will be characterized by rapidly flowing information in a fast-paced, uncertain, and lethal environment. Today's Army must encourage and reward leaders who can take risks and make quick, bold decisions in fast-paced and ambiguous circumstances. It is this leadership that continues to be "the thing that wins battles."

Notes

¹GEN George S. Patton, Jr., in a letter to his son, 16 Jan 1945.

²FM 22-100, *Military Leadership* (Headquarters, Department of the Army, Washington, D.C.; 31 July 1990) p. 1.

³These are the four traits Theodore Roosevelt used to describe General Leonard Wood when he asked him to lead the Rough Riders. See "Raising the Regiment" from *The Essential Theodore Roosevelt*, ed. John Gabrielle Hunt, (Gramercy Books, N.Y., 1994) p. 48.

⁴TRADOC Pamphlet 525-5, *Force XXI Operations*, 1 Aug 1994, p. 1-5.

⁵Robert Leonhard, *The Art of Maneuver* (Presidio Press, Novato, Calif., 1991) p. 119.

⁶See FM 22-100, *Military Leadership*.

⁷Mark Bowden, *Blackhawk Down*, (Grove Atlantic, Inc., 1999) p. 55.

⁸Ibid.

⁹S.L.A. Marshall, in a speech, "Problems in Combat Leadership," to CGSC Class at Ft. Leavenworth, 3 Dec 62.

¹⁰Bowden, p. 20.

¹¹FM 22-103, *Leadership and Command at Senior Levels*, (Headquarters, Department of the Army, Washington, D.C.; June 1987) p. 15.

¹²FM 25-4, *How To Conduct Training Exercises* (Headquarters, Department of the Army Washington, D.C.; 10 Sep 1984).

¹³TRADOC Pamphlet 525-5, *Force XXI Operations* (Headquarters Department of the Army Washington, D.C.; 1 Aug 1994) p. 3-4.

¹⁴George C. Marshall, *Interviews and Reminiscences for Forrest C. Pogue*, Larry I. Bland, ed. (George C. Marshall Research Foundation, Lexington, Va., 1991) p. 450.

¹⁵GEN Dennis J. Reimer, "Leadership for the 21st Century: Empowerment, Environment, and the Golden Rule" in *Military Review*, (Jan-Feb 96), pp. 4-9.

¹⁶Marshall, pp. 547-548.

¹⁷See "McClellan's Life before 1860" in *The Peninsula Campaign* by David G. Martin (Combined Books Inc., Conshohocken; Pa. 1992) pp. 24-26.

¹⁸Roger H. Nye, *The Challenge of Command* (Avery Publishing Group Inc., Wayne N.J., 1986) p. 26.

¹⁹LTG Theodore Stroup, "Leadership and Organizational Culture: Actions Speak Louder than Words" in *Military Review*, Jan-Feb 96, p. 44.

²⁰Quoted by Nye, p. 28.

²¹Douglas Kinnard's observation of the officers during the Viet Nam War from his book, *The War Managers* (Avery Publishing Group Inc., Wayne N.J., 1985) p. 112.

²²Quoted by Douglas MacGregor in *Breaking the Phalanx* (Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington D.C.; 1997) p. 159.

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