

# WAITING FOR THE METEOR

## Thoughts on Personal Leadership

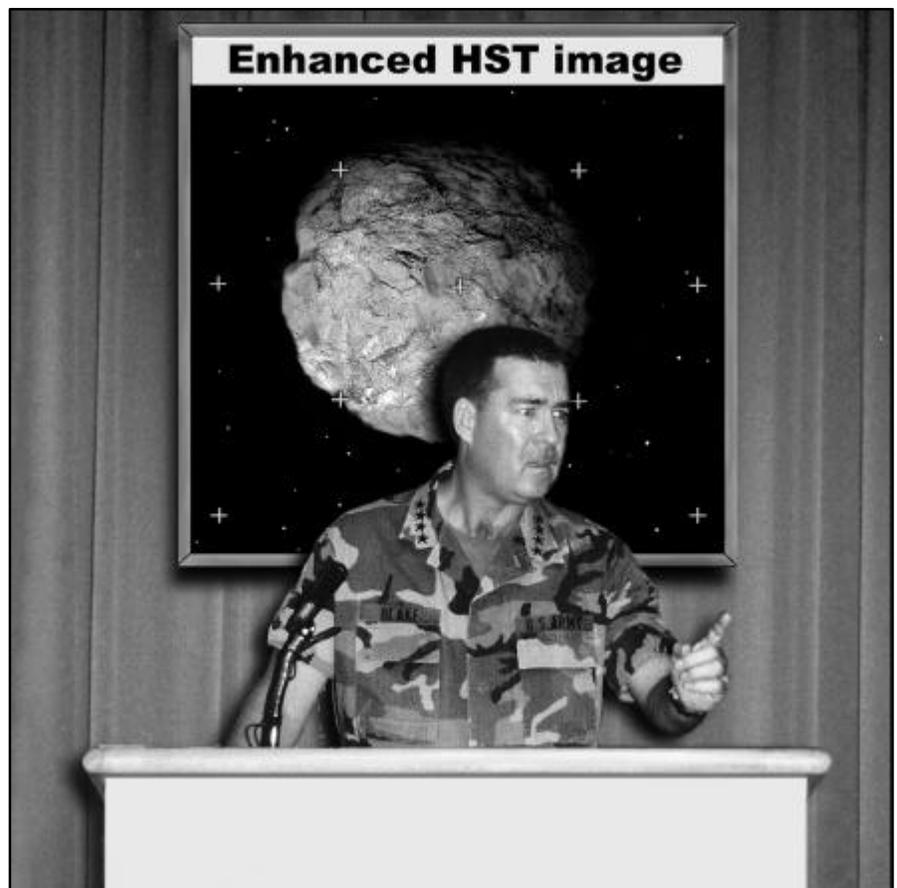
by Lieutenant Colonel Kevin C.M. Benson

*"It is probably the right time for a little reflection on just what it is we are supposed to do for the American republic."*

A recent *Atlanta Journal Constitution* article concerned a Harvard University astronomer's sighting of a mile-wide meteor projected to pass near the Earth in the year 2028. Asked to speculate on the nation's reaction if it was likely to hit the Earth, he said, "A space mission would have to go out to it and find some way to deflect it. The *military types* would come in and do their thing." (emphasis added).<sup>1</sup> On the same day, the same newspaper ran another article, on how Atlanta-based Third U.S. Army troopers were doing in the Persian Gulf. Asked about how our troops spend their days of 12-hour shifts and constant vigilance, SPC Mark Gunnell said, "No one knows for sure how long the tour will last. We thwarted a war, and we're all proud of what we did."<sup>2</sup>

These vignettes, strangely enough in the same paper on the same day, reflect the American attitude toward the military. We are living in an age of wonder and danger, and very few of our fellow Americans know what it is we soldiers do. In a democracy, that is probably a good thing. The people do not know about us until we are needed, and then expect us "military types" to come in and do our thing, whatever that thing is or whatever it requires of us. They don't ask, "Are they ready?" or "How many days will they need to get ready?" The Harvard astronomer had it right on the nose: we will be expected to come in and do our thing.

In the midst of the confusion over Force XXI, Army After Next, 45 tanks in a



battalion with no CSS, a half-full glass, OPMS XXI, and the new OER, it is probably the right time for a little reflection on just what it is we are supposed to do for the American republic. This is at the heart of success for our Army and, indeed, for our brothers and sisters in the Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps as well.

Think of the high standard that Harvard astronomer just set for all of us in uni-

form! Talk about take a message to Garcia! He expects that soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines would go out on a mission, determine what needed to be done, and do it. This is what our fellow Americans expect of us. Indeed, in the absence of personal knowledge, our fellow Americans probably think that all we do is get ready to do impossible tasks to standard. When the bugle sounds or when the meteor's impact is imminent, the American people expect us to be ready to

go into the breach. The people will not care at all for our consideration of others, how we manage diversity, or if we use polite speech; they will expect us to be ready. At that awful moment, we must be tough, trained, hardened, united, and ready to sell our lives dearly if that is what is required. This ought to make us all really proud of what we do, and it also ought to make us really think.

What we do is get ready for war, or fight wars. Wars are now rather more loosely defined, as I'll bet the 2d Cavalry Regiment in Bosnia or the 2d Brigade of the 3d Infantry Division in Kuwait would second. Let us say then that what we do is go places, ready to fight if needed, when the American people want us to. In getting ready for war, and fighting war, we must set conditions for success. Call that what you will — consideration of others, managing diversity, etc. — but one of the conditions required of us as soldiers is the ability to deal with people.

There are many points of view about dealing with people, both civilians and the soldiers who make up our Army. It is chic now to speak in terms of managing diversity and showing consideration for others' points of view. Fehrenbach reminds us, though, that on the battlefield, the sergeant's word must be obeyed as if it came from a four-star general.<sup>3</sup> Discipline is not a four-letter word. It is not negative. Discipline is the soul of the force; it shows we all look out for each other, even in the absence of orders. This does not require special consideration of others, it requires what our Army should solely call personal leadership.

American military history is replete with examples of this form of leadership. In that awful, shrieking moment when death is staring men in the face and panic means dishonor, leadership — personal leadership — stands to the fore. The "Lost Battalion" of World War I is a prime example. The battalion was a part of the American offensive in Saint Mihiel, in 1918. Ernest Hemingway cited this action in *Men at War*, "All through October 6, the battalion held its position. Commanders and commanded were discovering the secret of the siege — that the human capacity for endurance exceeds all belief, as long as there is a leader to say, 'Don't give up, we're not licked yet.' And this battalion had such a leader, a man who held his men steady by his own unshaken presence."<sup>4</sup> This man

was MAJ Charles Whittlesey, the battalion commander.

Another great leader of Armor and Cavalry, GEN (then MAJ) G.S. Patton, Jr., also had a flair for personal leadership. In an essay written for the *Cavalry Association Journal*, he wrote, "Our means of studying war have increased as much as have our tools for waging it, but it is an open question whether this increase in our means has not perhaps obscured or obliterated one essential detail; namely the necessity for personal leadership."<sup>5</sup> This essay sounds as if it was discussing what we face today. We are on the verge of developing means of greater situational awareness on and off the battlefield. War may not ever again be a circle of serious soldiers around a map; it is more likely that we will be huddled around a liquid crystal display screen or a large screen, high-definition television. Patton wrote of this, reminding his peers then that war is an intensely personal thing, indeed it must be, because we still require our soldiers to go out and face death and cause death. This requirement, so horrible that we do not talk about it in the crush of meeting the requirements of training, demands that there be personal leadership at all levels.

In his master work, *Citizen Soldiers*, Stephen E. Ambrose wrote of 1LT Lyle Bouck, "Lt. Lyle Bouck commanded the intelligence and reconnaissance (I&R) platoon of the 394th Regiment, 99th Division. He was commissioned as a second lieutenant at age 18. Informal in manner, he was sharp, incisive, determined, a leader."<sup>6</sup> In a roaring moment of decision, this 18-year-old platoon leader changed the course of the Battle of the Bulge. Short of Elsenborn Ridge is a little crossroad village called Lanzerath. At this cross road, the I&R platoon under the leadership of 1LT Bouck held up the advance of the lead elements of the entire Fifth Panzer Army for 18 hours. Every member of the platoon was wounded, but they held their ground and accomplished their mission. Then as now, scouts are required to find the enemy and report, but in this instance, the platoon had to fight. 1LT Bouck held his men at their posts in one incident which helped turn the tide of battle and gave us a real example of personal leadership.

Personal leadership requires all of us who call ourselves leaders to get away from the computer screens and know the

men and women we have the honor to lead. We must do this despite the pressure of other requirements generated by well-meaning staffs at PERSCOM, Department of the Army, and the Defense Department. Our friends at these levels do their best for the rest of the force. The demand of personal leadership, though, is to know when to say no to these well-meaning requirements, or ignore them when faced with the requirement of preparing for war. Truly, anything we do in the Army can and is justified in the name of assisting readiness. The measure of the leader is to know just what is important when. This ability must be developed in peacetime because it is far too late, and can lead to great tragedies, in war. Ambrose points this out in *Citizen Soldiers*.

The pressure for constant advancing of the front lines was remarkable in the European Theater of Operations. Ambrose writes, "SHAEF put the pressure on Twelfth Army Group; Bradley passed it on to First, Third, and Ninth Armies; Hodges, Patton, and Simpson told their corps commander to get results; by the time the pressure reached the battalion COs, it was intense. The trouble with all this pressure was that the senior officers and their staffs didn't know what they were ordering the rifle companies to do. They had neither seen the terrain nor the enemy. They did their work from maps and over radios and telephones... When the chase across France was on, senior commanders (although seldom their staffs) were often at the front, urging the men forward. But when the line became stationary, headquarters personnel from battalion on up to corps and army found themselves good billets and seldom strayed. Of course there were notable exceptions, but in general, the American officers handing down the orders to attack and assigning the objective had no idea what it was like at the front."<sup>7</sup> The great danger of ignoring the requirements for personal leadership rapidly become a form of hubris, the feeling that all the accomplishment of a mission needs is the right kind of push from an unattached, dispassionate point of view.

What kind of leader can live the requirement of personal leadership? Col. Michael D. Wyly, USMC (Ret.), writes of two theories of war, Technological Superiority Theory and Mental Agility Theory. Technological Superiority The-

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ory’s essence is that secure digital communications, information dominance, brilliant munitions, and long-range weapons will deter any foe less sophisticated than our forces. Mental Agility Theory’s essence is that any system or system of systems can be overcome by a determined enemy.<sup>8</sup>

Wyly writes that the leaders of the force that defends American culture, the wars of the future, must possess that mental agility to understand that American soldiers defend American culture, and also understand the people among whom they fight. The enemy will immerse himself in the local populace, thus we must also either win the sympathy of the local people or neutralize their support of the enemy. Of course all of this must be done under the glare of the intrusive eye of the media, because that is also what sustains the support of the American people.<sup>9</sup>

The leaders of the 21st century Army must be able to use the technological systems to determine the decisive point, use the systems as an electronic Napoleonic hill, then go to the point on the ground, sharing the danger with his troopers and refining his understanding of the war his men are fighting and which must be won. Truly, the path of virtue lies between the extremes of the leader who disdains his headquarters and the “chateau” leader who remains at his electronic vantage point without going forward at all. Finding this path of virtue will require all of us to constantly study warfare; it is a life work. The demand of personal leadership is one which requires all of us to remain prepared for war our entire careers, and whether the war comes as a junior officer or as a senior officer on the day of retirement, we must be ready to fight and lead. This duty is a harsh taskmaster.

I return then to the original thought of personal leadership. We confuse ourselves in an already confusing time by allowing ourselves to follow the dictates of the times calling personal leadership by other names, like “consideration of others,” or “managing diversity.” Those old enough to remember the backlash against MacNamarian management recall the slogan, “No one can be managed up a hill; you lead men up the hill.” It is time

to recall those days. We lead by example, a truism since Caesar. Leaders of the 21st century, as those of the preceding centuries, must use personal leadership and all it demands. We must know our systems and our troopers. We must deeply give a damn about our troopers and treat them like adults. We must also know that sometimes this requires us to use impolite speech to get the attention of those who do not respond to adult treatment. Using trite phrases confuses the issue. Do we lead, or do we have rap sessions and then hold hands and sing “Kumbaya?” Clearly, we lead, and leadership is and always will be a personal interaction with those we want to lead, namely our troopers.

The American people, because they do not understand what we do, nor really want to, I suspect, set high standards for those of us in uniform. We have the privilege of bearing arms in the defense of the Republic. When the Republic calls, we must be ready to fight in that instant. Any less is failure, any less could lead to the defeat of the Republic. As the Harvard astronomer said, “The military types come in and do their thing.”

The defense of the Republic demands straightforward terms and an understanding of our history as an Army and as a Republic. We are soldiers; let us use a soldier’s terms and call leadership what it is, leadership. The requirements of leadership are timeless: technical and tactical competence, and knowing the men and women, like the SPC Mark Gunnels of the force, we have the honor of leading and serving. Change is a constant, but in times of change, there is the need for a fixed point, something on which to focus. Leadership is the constant, and personal leadership is required of all of us.

The wars we will face at the dawn of the 21st century will not be high tech and clean. Our dominance in those realms will make our opponents, who deeply hate us and our American culture, fight us in different ways. The leaders of the 21st century must be able to convince the policymakers that wars cannot be quick and clean. These leaders will also have to keep the Republic out of the globe-spanning techno-conflicts which could destroy it. The leaders’ path of virtue will

require understanding the technological systems, using them in the best possible manner, while remaining in touch with the troopers doing the fighting. The unchanging requirement of leaders from any age remains, personal leadership and sharing the danger with the soldiers. Our Harvard astronomer placed quite a burden on us “military types” when he said we would “come in and do our thing.” We must be willing and able to meet this challenge. Think about it; are you willing?

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>*Atlanta Journal Constitution*, p. A-1, 12 March 1998. Hereafter cited as *AJC*.

<sup>2</sup>*AJC*, p. B-2.

<sup>3</sup>T.R. Fehrenbach, *This Kind of War, A Study in Unpreparedness*, New York: Bantam Books, 1991, p. 415.

<sup>4</sup>Ernest Hemingway, ed., *Men at War*, New York: Bramhall House, 1979, p. 735.

<sup>5</sup>G.S. Patton, Jr., “Success in War,” as cited in the *Cavalry and Armor Heritage Series, Vol. 1, Leadership*, Ft. Knox, Ky., U.S. Armor Association, 1986, p. 53.

<sup>6</sup>Stephen E. Ambrose, *Citizen Soldiers*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997, p. 192. The I&R platoon received a Presidential Unit Citation, four DSCs, five Silver Stars, and ten Bronze Stars for Valor.

<sup>7</sup>Ambrose, p. 166.

<sup>8</sup>Michael D. Wyly, “Combat in the 21st Century,” *U.S. New & World Report*, 16 March 1998, p. 1, e-mail version.

<sup>9</sup>Wyly, p. 4.

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