

## Learning about Leadership

My favorite book on leadership is *Prodigal Soldiers* by James Kitfield. The subtitle is “How the generation of officers born of Vietnam revolutionized the American style of war”. To me, the more interesting part of the story is how the defeated and demoralized Army of Vietnam was transformed into the Army of Desert Storm. In fact, the book begins at Desert Storm and then shifts to Vietnam and describes the transformation of the Army.

Towards the end of the Vietnam War, a group of faculty members at the Army War College conducted what they called “A study on military professionalism”. It involved interviews of a large number of junior officers, based on the notion that they would have fresh eyes, not yet having bought into the system as it existed. The findings of the study were not pretty. By this time, William Westmoreland was Chief of Staff. This study was brought to his conference room and reported to the generals assembled there. As the authors of the study described the results, “Gentlemen, a scenario that was repeatedly described to us during our interviews for this study includes an ambitious, transitory commander, marginally skilled in the complexity of his duties, engulfed in producing statistical results, fearful personal failure, too busy to talk with or listen to his subordinates, and determined to submit acceptably optimistic reports which reflect faultless completion of a variety of tasks at the expense of the sweat and frustrations of his subordinates.”

Following a heated discussion of the validity or invalidity of the study, the group accepted the conclusion that the Army had very serious problems with its senior officers. Westmoreland then asked what action the authors recommend they take. The authors said that the first step toward fixing the problem would be to report the results of the study to the officer corps. In my own experience in conducting surveys of this type, certainly under less dramatic circumstances, that is always the first step in dealing with the results.

Westmoreland declined to publicize the results which would have obviously embarrassed him. However a group of younger officers, which included Colin Powell and Barry McCaffrey, took steps to deal with the situation over the next 10 years.

An additional factor here was the result of our observations of the 6 days war in the Middle East. Historically, the United States had a habit of losing the initial battles but eventually winning the war. Based on observations made during the 6 days war, we concluded that the firepower of modern armies was so great that if you lost the first battle there would likely not be a second. Consequently the army had to be ready to fight and win a first battle. This led to the creation of a Training and Doctrine command, known as TRADOC, which developed both the war fighting plan and the training associated with that plan. The practice was that for any doctrine that was created there would be a training program which would prepare everyone from the newest private to the most senior general to execute that doctrine. This was considered by Kitfield to be the most important command in the Army headed for much of this critical period by Gen. William DePuy, a hero to people knowledgeable about the Army, and unknown to the rest of us. The end result of this process was the extraordinary performance of our forces in the first Gulf war.

Sometime in the mid-1990s, I had the opportunity to visit Fort Irwin and see the product of this transformation. Fort Irwin is extensively described in Kitfield's book. It is a place where brigades of National Guard troops come to be trained in desert warfare. They fight laser tag tank battles against the home team or *opposition force*. This was an important training ground for the army of Desert Storm.

At that time the opposition force was commanded by Col. (now Lt. General) H. R. McMaster. Although I was unaware of his accomplishments at the time, it was clear to me that he was an extraordinary leader. His respect for the troops and their respect for him was palpable. It turned out that he had been awarded the Silver Star in Desert Storm. He led a platoon of 6 tanks which encountered a Republican Guard unit of 80 tanks. His unit destroyed every tank without losing a single tank themselves.

During our discussions, I learned from a colleague that McMaster held a PhD in History of War and that his doctoral dissertation had produced a best-selling book, *Dereliction of Duty*, a study of the joint Chiefs during the Vietnam War. Subsequent to our meeting, he served in Iraq and was responsible for the development of the first successful pacification program. Standing orders were that patrols could be taken into insurgent dominated areas but could not stay there. McMaster reasoned that under these conditions we could not protect citizens who might point out insurgents, so he set up his headquarters in Tal Afar and successfully pacified the region.

Throughout our conversations at Fort Irwin he was completely open, honest, and extremely articulate. It was clear that he had an extreme passion for his work. His promotion to general was not without controversy, but he now has three stars.

One of the many stories of courageous leadership in the book is about Lt. Colonel Jack Galvin (eventually a Four Star General). Toward the end of the Vietnam War, Galvin was ordered by his commander to launch an attack on well-fortified enemy position. Galvin knew that his men would take heavy losses for an objective of little value. Consequently, he refused the order knowing that it was a court-martial offence. His commander did not press for court-martial, but he did insert the following paragraph into Galvin's fitness report: "Lt. Colonel Galvin puts consideration for his men before that of the mission," which was intended to be a rebuke. According to Kitfield, Galvin was more proud of that fitness report than of the Distinguished Service Cross, the Silver Star, or any of the other medals and campaign ribbons he brought back from Vietnam.

I will digress briefly. For the past 10 years I have participated in a very active forum on the Internet with a group of my roommates at Yale. Recently we had some discussions about the military and I discovered that one of the fellows, a man I didn't know well but respected deeply, had served in Vietnam as an intelligence officer. He later served in several Republican administrations and was generally quite knowledgeable about the military. I decided to ask him if he thought *Prodigal Soldiers* was an accurate portrayal.

It turned out that he was unfamiliar with the book so he obtained it. He thought it was a tremendous book and could not put it down. Between my observations of Fort Irwin and my conversations with my

college friend, I am further convinced that book is authentic. I recommend it to anyone interested in learning more about leadership.

References:

Kitfield, J. *Prodigal Soldiers*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1995.

McMaster, H. R. *Dereliction of Duty*, Harper-Collins, New York, 1997.