## LEADERSHIP AND STRATEGY

*Carnes Lord*

Winston Churchill once said that most strategic failures in war are due to the "total absence of one directing mind and commanding willpower." During World War II, Churchill was determined to be that one directing mind, taking for himself a new cabinet portfolio for defense as well as the office of prime minister. Difficult as it may be to resist the ideas of one of the greatest leaders of the twentieth century, there are many today who will be skeptical of such a claim.

The literature of contemporary international relations (for all its hard-fought differences) is united when considering leadership as secondary in importance to military or political success. Realists believe the most important factor to be the unique strategic logic of each situation that imposes itself on world leaders. Liberals emphasize it is the power of institutions that shape ideas. Constructivists point to cultural and historical factors, or to the dynamics of collective psychology.[1]

In the narrower sphere of military affairs, the picture is not very different. For example, in *Military Misfortunes* (1991), Eliot Cohen and John Gooch criticize the tendency to blame strategic failure on the commander (the "man in the dock") and emphasize instead the central role of dysfunctional military organization.[2] (Debunking leadership in the academic studies of war is hardly new.) The distinguished British historian Michael Howard, in his well known paper on "the forgotten dimensions of strategy," for example, argues that the logistics, technological, and social dimensions of military success have been systematically neglected and undervalued when compared to the operational dimension, in large part because of the myth of glamour of the commander in the field.[3]

In professional military studies, the great captains of history continue to hold a place of honor, and military education maintains its traditional concern with practical leadership issues. Yet even in today's military, the standing of leadership is becoming increasingly precarious. For many, the revolution in military affairs (RMA) validates Howard's emphasis on the technological dimension of strategy rather than the operational. Though rarely directly saying so, proponents of the RMA presume that leadership will inevitably become irrelevant as technology increasingly takes over that function.

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The Gulf War is of particular interest here. In spite of much subsequent self-congratulation over the allied flanking maneuver that broke the Iraqi Republican Guards, what was most impressive and decisive in sober retrospect for the allied victory happened in the dimensions of logistics and technology, not in operations. Indeed, it could be argued that the war's outcome foreshadowed for future wars how unimportant operational art and military leadership are becoming.

But did it? Let us look more closely at the Gulf War. The failure of the flanking maneuver to close the ring on the Republican Guards clearly reflected a failure of operational art and leadership at senior command levels, which greatly impacted the war's strategic outcome. Also, at the level of political-military decision making, a series of errors compounded this failure. The premature halt of the ground war for ill-considered public relations reasons, the signaling of the U.S. intent to withdraw from Iraq without a quid pro quo, the abandonment of the Kurds and Shiites, and more generally, the obvious absence of any serious planning for the war's endgame—all helped turn a stunning feat of arms into something considerably less than a strategic victory.[4]

Even a cursory review of the recent record of American military actions suggests that this state of affairs is not the exception. From Lebanon and Somalia to Bosnia and Kosovo, American political and military leadership has too often been operationally inadequate and unsure, internally divided, and shortsighted in its strategic decision making. Rarely has the world sensed in American councils the presence of "one directing mind and commanding willpower." At the same time, there are few signs that the military-technical revolution is easing the requirements for leadership at senior command levels. Recent U.S. military actions in Iraq, as well as in Kosovo, point to the futility of RMA-style precision bombing, absent appropriate operational concepts and serious thought about strategic outcomes. Technology cannot substitute for an appreciation of the logic of war; the responsibility of senior military leaders becomes that much greater when the logic of war is lacking in civilian decision makers. It is not even clear that the dynamics of the contemporary battlefield are reducing the scope of command authority. A good case can be made that the evolving technologies are at least as likely to recentralize control at relatively senior echelons.[5]

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What exactly is the relationship between strategy and leadership? Searching for a productive way to come to grips with this large question, one could do worse than consult ancient history. The word "strategy" is derived from the

classical Greek, *strategia*, which does not mean strategy as we define it but "generalship," or "leadership of the army," or more literally, "leading out the people in arms." (In contrast, "tactics" refers to drawing up an army in battle formation.)

Several points can be made here. First, strategy is not only a military function; the ancient Greeks saw little distinction between military and political leadership.[6] Second, strategy is less about operational maneuver than about motivating and disciplining citizen-soldiers. In classical Greece, to borrow Howard's terms once more, the key to strategy was not the operational, logistic, or technological dimension but the social dimension. This is apparent in Thucydides' famous account of the Peloponnesian War. His history is short on details of military operations (not to speak of logistics or technology), but he has taken great pains to record speeches made by generals and politicians designed to encourage troops in the field or to persuade citizens at home to support particular policies or courses of action. Third and finally, it is noteworthy that the Greeks also did not distinguish between strategy and diplomacy. In an age that lacked established diplomatic services, generals abroad necessarily played the ambassador's role, making friends and influencing people as they marched.

Obviously war is infinitely more complicated and technical now than it was 2,500 years ago—because of the reason just discussed, because of its sheer scale, and because it requires a much higher level of organization, teamwork, and discipline. However, none of this obviates the need for leadership. In fact, today leadership is all the more important.

In contemporary states, leadership is a vital strategic function for two reasons. First, it is essential to control and correct astrategic tendencies of modern military organizations; and second, it plays a key role in countering the astrategic tendencies of modern governments and societies.

Cohen and Gooch are certainly right to pinpoint organizational dysfunction as a prime cause of strategic failure. Organizational routines, service rivalries, the dominance of managerial perspectives, etc., often make contemporary defense establishments highly resistant to strategic rationality. The United States recognizes these problems and has made major changes in its defense organization (the Goldwater-Nichols reform legislation of 1986) that center on strengthening the leadership role of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Recent U.S. history has shown, however, that such problems call for continuing leadership from outside the ranks of the military as well.[7] The tendency for military establishments to develop a strong corporate identity and outlook is also well known. Therefore, informed and vigorous civilian leadership is essential, not only to ensure basic civilian control but also to maintain a genuinely strategic perspective and to facilitate broader cooperation between military organizations and other elements of the bureaucracy in common strategic enterprises.

Perhaps less well known is the requirement for strong leadership as a counterweight to the astrategic tendencies of contemporary government and society, particularly in the United States. As Alexis de Tocqueville put it almost two hundred years ago in his great work *Democracy in America*, "Democracy finds it difficult to coordinate the details of a great undertaking and to fix on some plan and carry it through with determination in spite of obstacles. It has little capacity for combining measures in secret and patiently waiting for the result. Such qualities are more likely to belong to a single man or an aristocracy. But these are just the qualities which, in the long run, make a nation prevail."[8] Planning, coordination, secrecy, and patience tend to be in short supply in ordinary democratic politics, and it is the particular burden of the democratic leader to provide or facilitate them.

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More important, the democratic leader, whether political or military, has the equally difficult task of reconciling these requirements with the openness and accountability of a democratic government. (This is where the classical model of strategy or generalship may have some further relevance.)

Central to democratic leadership, particularly in time of war, is the task of persuasion, motivation, and inspiration. In a modern bureaucratic state, this task extends beyond the public to the legions of soldiers and civilians on which the government must depend for the implementation of its policies. In order to perform effectively, leaders (especially, though not only, political leaders) arguably need four qualities: an understanding of their country and its history; an understanding of the strategic environment they face, and of their actual and potential adversaries; a vision of the future; and an ability to communicate. Churchill's possession of all four qualities explains why he was the great leader that he was.[9]

However, the example of Churchill is likely to discourage as much as inspire, or else strike us as simply irrelevant. After all, the present strategic environment is very different from that of Churchill's. It is one thing to call for "one directing mind and commanding willpower" to lead a nation in total war, but quite another to apply it during an era of ambiguous threats and politically constrained military operations. Under such circumstances, what may be required is not so much a leader but rather someone who is skilled at crafting compromise and consensus at home and abroad.

Churchill's dictum points out several important problems that currently confront U.S. leaders. One is the pluralism in national security policy making, the result of the constitutional structure of the American government, as well as

certain developments of the last three decades that have strengthened the policy role of Congress. (Let it be said here that there is much left to do. Reforming the internal structures of Congress, rationalizing legislative authorities for various executive branch national security activities [the War Powers Act and perhaps even the National Security Act of 1947, for example], and repairing executive-legislative relations could have large payoffs for American policy. Although such steps are often dismissed as hopeless, it is far from clear why. The relatively benign international environment of the present offers a good opportunity to address these sorts of legal and institutional issues.)[10]

Another is the uncertain relationship between military and civilian authority within the executive branch. Although the alarmists have recently gained ground, when discussing U.S. civil-military relations today one should be concerned with the growing estrangement and lack of communication between the military and its civilian leaders, and with the continuing difficulties that the U.S. government as a whole encounters in articulating coherent doctrine for the use of force and in applying force with strategic effect.[11] While part of the problem is philosophical, much is a reflection of the clash between military and civilian cultures and their failures to craft new organizational solutions to the novel challenges of contemporary limited warfare and operations other than war. It is, therefore, a prime leadership issue, on both sides.

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Finally, a few remarks may be in order concerning the personal dimension of leadership. It is often said that leaders are born and not made; there is no doubt of this. On the other hand, it is also a convenient excuse for not thinking very hard about how one finds, recruits, trains, and manages the careers of potential leaders. In particular, it is an excuse for ignoring the central but too often neglected issue of the intellectual (as distinct from the personality-based) requirements of leadership. In the business world, there has long been a tendency to separate leadership from substantive knowledge of a particular business sector or kind of enterprise, though the limitations of such an approach are by now frequently acknowledged. While perhaps not as pronounced, this tendency can also be seen in the political world and in government itself. What exactly do our leaders need to know to be strategically effective? We have only to pose this question to realize that an Ivy League education today gives little consideration to the subject; even a professional military education offers no guarantee.

A further point: good leaders do not necessarily make good strategists, and good strategists are not always effective leaders. The qualities that Churchill listed are more typically scattered among several individuals. From this perspective, the management of personnel and decision-making systems, both civilian and

military, must be seen as an integral aspect of strategic leadership. Leaders should be more attentive to the individual talents and character of their subordinates and to the dynamics of team organizations, be they personal staff or interagency committees. Leaders must also be quick to recognize ineffective performance and deal with it decisively. This, of course, was one of Churchill's great gifts. It is not apparent that these matters should be handled any differently today.[12]

All this is easily summarized: leadership itself is today the truly forgotten dimension of strategy.

### NOTES

1. For a classic presentation of the opposing case, see Sidney Hook, *The Hero in History* (New York: Humanities Press, 1943).

2. Eliot A. Cohen and John Gooch, *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

3. Michael Howard, "The Forgotten Dimensions of Strategy," *Foreign Affairs,* Summer, 1979; reprinted in his *The Causes of Wars and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1983), pp. 101–5.

4. Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *The Generals' War: The Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1995), chaps. 19–20 and epilogue.

5. James R. FitzSimonds, "The Cultural Challenges of Information Technology," *Naval War College Review*, Summer 1998, pp. 9–21.

6. See Donald F. Kagan, *Pericles of Athens and the Birth of Democracy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991).

7. See Dick Cheney's leadership role in the Gulf War, as recounted in Bob Woodward's *The Commanders* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), pp. 290–6, 327–3, and passim.

8. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J. P. Mayer (New York: Anchor Books, 1969), pp. 228–9.

9. For a useful recent survey of Churchillian statecraft, see Robert Blake and William Roger Louis, eds., *Churchill* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993).

10. Consider, for example, Zbigniew Brzezinski 's *In Quest of National Security* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1988), chap. 6.

11. General John Shalikashvili remarked, shortly after his retirement as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, about the problems concerning U.S. policy in Bosnia: "We don't have a system that puts someone in charge of the overall operation that can coordinate the efforts." See Philip Shenon, "No G. I. Role Seen in Arrests of Bosnian War Suspects," *New York Times*, 29 August 1997. For a general discussion see Douglas E. Lute, *Improving National Capacity to Respond to Complex Emergencies: The U.S. Experience* (New York: Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict, 1998).

12. A striking case is the Falklands War, which the Argentines might have won had they not made the fatal mistake of appointing a military administrator, rather than an operationally oriented leader or strategist, as the island's governor. See Lawrence Freedman and Virginia Gamba-Stonehouse, *Signals of War: The Falklands Conflict of 1982* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1991), pp. 147–9.