LEADERSHIP AND THE EMERGING BATTLEFIELD

The Modern War Journal at West Point

"To Win Tomorrow's Wars, Today"

Produced by the Modern War Institute at
The United States Military Academy at West Point

https://www.westpoint.edu/

"An indomitable will and broad military knowledge, combined with a strong character, are attributes of the successful leader. Only by continual study of military history and of the conduct of war with careful attention to current developments can the officer acquire the above-stated attributes of leadership."

–General Albert C. Wedemeyer, West Point Class of 1919 and key American military strategist in WWII

The Modern War Journal

a production of the Modern War Institute at West Point

About *The Modern War Journal*

The Modern War Journal (MWJ) is produced by the Modern War Institute at West Point (MWI) in support of MWI's mission to generate new knowledge for the profession of arms, enhance the West Point curriculum, and serve as an intellectual resource for solving military problems. In furtherance of MWI's three goals of *research*, *integrate*, and *educate*, this journal features content from academics, policy makers, and practitioners of the profession of arms—from the cadet level to the commander in chief—presented here with one goal: to help win tomorrow's wars, today.

Winning tomorrow's wars begins today—with thought, with study, and with leadership. It begins with understanding that the emerging battlefield is not only a space of weapons and platforms, but of perception, influence, and strategic imagination. And most importantly, it begins with recognizing that at the heart of every conflict, every decision, and every transformation, stands a leader. In light of those facts, the theme for the inaugural edition of the MWJ is "Leadership and the Emerging Battlefield."

This publication capitalizes on West Point's unique positioning as the US Military Academy to highlight speeches given on West Point's grounds, interviews with West Point leaders and visitors to the Academy, and content submitted by cadets, the operational joint US military force, and service members of allied nations.

Through the MWJ, MWI affirms our commitment to fostering a professional discourse that is both intellectually rigorous and operationally relevant. We aim to empower readers not just with insight, but with foresight. Our hope is that this journal becomes a catalyst for dialogue across ranks, services, and disciplines.

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FROM THE DIRECTOR

At the Modern War Institute at West Point (MWI), we help produce warrior-scholars who possess high moral character, strong technical and tactical proficiency, acute awareness of military history and current events, and the will—as well as the ability—to win.

It is with great pride and purpose that I introduce the inaugural edition of *The Modern War Journal*, a new publication born from the ethos of MWI: to study war, to understand its changing character, and to educate and empower the leaders who will fight and win the nation's future battles.

This journal represents more than academic inquiry—it is a call to arms for intellectual readiness. In a world where adversaries adapt faster, technologies evolve relentlessly, and the very concept of warfare stretches across domains both physical and cognitive, we must ensure that our leaders are not just prepared to meet these challenges—but to anticipate them. *The Modern War Journal* exists to serve that mission.

The theme of our first edition, "Leadership and the Emerging Battlefield," could not be more appropriate. Today's battlefield is no longer bounded by geography. It is shaped by algorithms and influence, by information and ideology, by space, cyber, and artificial intelligence. Yet amid these changes, one constant remains: war is a human endeavor, and leadership—principled, adaptive, and informed—remains its decisive factor.

At MWI we believe that understanding war demands more than studying battles—it demands grappling with complexity, history, innovation, and ethics. *The Modern War Journal* is an extension of that belief. It is a space where rigorous thought meets operational relevance, where cadets, officers, and civilian thinkers can engage in meaningful debate on the most pressing security questions of our time.

The articles featured in this edition reflect the intellectual range and operational depth that the MWI seeks to cultivate. As you read this first issue, I encourage you to see it not as a conclusion, but as a conversation—a spark for dialogue, collaboration, and critical thinking that transcends ranks and disciplines. Let it provoke questions. Let it challenge assumptions. Let it fuel your commitment to preparing for the wars we hope to deter, but must nonetheless be ready to fight.

To our many supporters, especially the West Point Class of 1982 and Mr. Tom Hand, thank you. This would not have been possible without your support. To our contributors, thank you for your insights. To our readers, thank you for joining us. And to our future leaders, may this journal serve as both a compass and a catalyst as you navigate the ever-evolving terrain of modern war.

Colonel Patrick J. Sullivan, PhD
Director, Modern War Institute at West Point

FROM THE EDITOR

Welcome to the inaugural issue of *The Modern War Journal*, a publication conceived not only as a platform for scholarly discourse but also as a crucible for ideas vital to the success of our warfighters in the 21st century and beyond. Our theme for this issue, "Leadership and the Emerging Battlefield," is both timely and urgent. As global powers recalibrate and technological acceleration disrupts traditional paradigms of war, the nature of leadership and moral authority in the profession of arms demands fresh examination. In these pages, we explore how doctrinal innovation, historical perspective, and strategic foresight converge to inform the future of warfighting leadership.

Through *The Modern War Journal,* we seek to further expand the Modern War Institute's (MWI) intellectual contribution to West Point and the operational Army by providing thoughtful, provocative, insightful, and useful content that will help America's warfighters achieve victory in the conflicts of the future. Through this publication, MWI affirms our commitment to fostering a professional discourse that is both intellectually rigorous and operationally relevant. We aim to empower readers not just with insight, but with foresight. Our hope is that this journal becomes a catalyst for dialogue across ranks, services, and disciplines.

This journal also presents insights from a wide variety of leaders, ranging from experienced practitioners to emerging scholars. Across each contribution, one principle emerges consistently: leadership in the modern era demands agility of mind, cultural awareness, and comfort with ambiguity. The leaders who will prevail on tomorrow's battlefield will be those who can make sense of a multi-domain environment, integrate human and machine decision-making, and adapt without losing ethical or strategic clarity.

Winning tomorrow's wars begins today—with thought, with study, and with leadership. It begins with understanding that the emerging battlefield is not only a space of weapons and platforms, but of perception, influence, and strategic imagination. And most importantly, it begins with recognizing that at the heart of every conflict, every decision, and every transformation, stands a leader.

Whether examining the shift toward cognitive warfare, the operational use of AI in mission planning, or the resurgence of strategic deterrence, our contributors push the boundaries of conventional military thought. How do we educate and train leaders to function effectively in a battlespace that spans the electromagnetic spectrum, cyberspace, and outer space? How do we instill moral judgment in an era of autonomous systems? How do we remain grounded in war's enduring nature while embracing its ever-changing character? Our contributors address these questions, and many more.

As military professionals, strategists, and students of conflict, we confront a strategic environment where change is rapid, complexity is the norm, and uncertainty is the only constant.

This journal emerges with the mission to bridge the timeless truths of leadership with the evolving character of modern warfare.

Our first edition represents the culmination of more than a year of work by the MWI staff (and a year of patience by our contributors) as we labored to bring this journal to life. I am grateful to the support of *The Modern War Journal* team for their work on soliciting, editing, and preparing the articles, op-eds, speeches, book reviews, and interviews that we selected for our first edition. I am thankful for our first group of contributors, who demonstrated enormous patience with the inevitable delays associated with an undertaking like this. And I appreciate the West Point Press for their publication expertise and their assistance in helping to get the MWJ off the ground. All of us at *The Modern War Journal* and at MWI are especially grateful to the West Point Class of 1982 and Mr. Tom Hand for their generous financial support, without which this publication would not be possible.

Thank you for joining us on this journey. We welcome your feedback, your critique, and most of all, your voice in shaping the conversation that will define the next era of military excellence.

The first edition is done; here's to many more to come.

Dr. Charles Faint
Editor in Chief, *The Modern War Journal*

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Leadership and the Emerging Battlefield

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Mission Command and the Future of the Joint Warfighting Concept

Sandeep S. Mulgund, PhD

ABSTRACT: In response to the imperatives of the National Defense and Military Strategies, the Joint Warfighting Concept (JWC) provides a unifying vision for how the joint force should fight in a future conflict. It presents a shift in thinking on how the joint force will prevail in fast-paced, rapidly changing, and challenging operating environments. This article examines the trends in the evolution of joint warfighting based on the JWC and subordinate service-level concepts in terms of their implications for the practice of mission command. While mission command principles are well established in doctrine, the tenets of the JWC motivate examination of how the two will come together. Most prominent in the JWC are principles for expanded maneuver and pulsed operations, which motivate consideration of how to achieve more effective integration and synchronization of joint force actions in a contested environment. Insights here can inform ongoing current and future organize, train, and equip activities that prepare the joint force to achieve the JWC vision.

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Introduction

Strategic competition is re-emerging as a defining feature of the global security landscape. In this evolving environment, rival nations with global interests, reach, and influence are vying to be the pre-eminent actor in international affairs.[1] Simultaneously, competition between rival great powers is occurring in every domain and across every geographic area in the world. Our adversaries are making aggressive efforts to outpace allied capabilities, negate traditional warfighting advantages, gain strategic advantage and influence, and limit allied options through a combination of ways and means. Emerging challenges to joint and combined forces include:

- Rapid diffusion of advanced technologies that can render any technical advantage transitory and fleeting. These include pervasive intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) which enable faster kill chains, long-range ballistic/cruise missiles, hypersonic weapons, loitering/swarming drones for surveillance or strike, autonomous platforms, cyberspace, and anti-satellite weapons, and capabilities for electromagnetic spectrum operations.

- Highly contested operating environments in which joint force freedom of maneuver is challenged by a wide range of threats.

- Attempts to restrict freedom of maneuver in the global commons.

- Contests for influence and access in terms of access, basing, and overflight.

- Aggressive use of subversion, coercion, disinformation, propaganda, and deception.

- Sovereign territories' increasing vulnerability to a wide range of kinetic and non-kinetic attacks.

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[1] US Space Force. *The Case for Change: Optimizing for Great Power Competition*, February 2024, https://www.spaceforce.mil/Portals/2/Documents/GPC/USSF_Case_for_Change.pdf.

Adversaries simultaneously seek to "win without fighting" while building military forces that can prevail in armed conflict.[2] As a result, the joint force can no longer focus on the efficient execution of operations in a predictable strategic environment. The challenges of a dynamic and unpredictable strategic environment motivate examination of the approaches to readiness, joint/combined force power projection, human capital development, and capability development required.[3]

To orient the US Department of Defense (DoD)'s approach to emergent challenges, the 2022 National Defense Strategy places renewed emphasis on integrated deterrence, campaigning, and actions that build enduring advantages.[4] Those enduring advantages are intended to sharpen the joint force's technological edge by leveraging the DoD itself, the defense industrial base, and the wide array of supporting private sector and academic enterprises. Nesting underneath the NDS and the National Military Strategy, the JWC provides a roadmap to the future for addressing its imperatives. It challenges the joint force to rethink competition, deterrence, and conflict[5] and provides an overall approach to how the joint force should fight in a future conflict. [6]

Concurrent with the increased appreciation for strategic competition and the potential for peer conflict in contested environments is the continued proliferation of guidance on mission command. Mission command is the conduct of military operations through decentralized execution based upon mission-type orders (MTOs),[7] which focuses on the purpose of an operation rather than on the details of how to accomplish it. It is a philosophy of leadership that empowers subordinate decision-making for flexibility, initiative, and responsiveness in the accomplishment of the commander's intent. Mission command principles are now firmly rooted in both joint and service doctrine.[8,9,10]

This article examines the trends in the evolution of joint warfighting based on the JWC and subordinate service-level concepts and the potential implications for the practice of mission command. Even today, there is a tension between the ideals of mission command and their use in a highly connected joint force

[2] *Joint Concept for Competing*, 10 Feb 2023.https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/23698400/20230213-joint-concept-for-competing-signed.pdf.

[3] US Air Force, The Case for Change, undated, https://www.af.mil/Portals/1/documents/2024SAF/GPC/The_Case_for_Change.pdf.

[4] US Department of Defense, *2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, 2022, https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF.

[5] Grady, C. "Sharpening our Competitive Edge: Honing our Warfighting Capabilities Through the Joint Warfighting Concept," *Joint Force Quarterly 111*, 4th Quarter 2023, https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Joint-Force-Quarterly/Joint-Force-Quarterly-111/Article/Article/3569518/sharpening-our-competitive-edge-honing-our-warfighting-capabilities-through-the/.

[6] Milley, M. "Strategic Inflection Point: The Most Historically Significant Fundamental Change in the Character of War is Happening Now," *Joint Force Quarterly 110*, 3rd Quarter 2023, https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/3447159/strategic-inflection-point-the-most-historically-significant-and-fundamental-ch/.

[7] Joint Publication 1 Volume 1, *Joint Warfighting*,27 Aug 2023.

[8] Air Force Doctrine Publication 1-1, *Mission Command*, 14 Aug 2023, https://www.doctrine.af.mil/Operational-Level-Doctrine/AFDP-1-The-Air-Force/AFDP-1-1-Mission-Command/.

[9] Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-0, *Mission Command*, July 2019, https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN34403-ADP_6-0-000-WEB-3.pdf.

[10] Marine Corps Doctrine Publication 6, *Command and Control*, 4 April 2018, http://www.marines.mil/Portals/1/Publications/MCDP%206.pdf?ver=2019-07-18-093633-990.

and an operating environment characterized by rapidly shrinking threat timelines. Rhetoric on mission command can outpace its actual sustained use in practice, especially in an era in which higher headquarters have access to exquisite tactical situational awareness that can tempt senior leaders to exercise centralized control simply because they can. Accordingly, it is valuable to examine the implications of established future directions for joint warfighting and what they will mean for mission command principles and practice to help guide force development and employment approaches.

Joint Warfighting Concept

The JWC presents a fundamental shift in how the joint force should think about maneuvering through space and time in fast-paced, rapidly changing, and challenging operating environments. Its key tenets are:[11]

- *Integrated, combined joint force*: All military services will integrate across all warfighting domains, enabling operation as a unified force. This will entail synchronized planning, shared situational awareness, and effective communications, as well as alignment and interoperability with allies and partners.

- *Expanded maneuver*: The joint force will maneuver to gain or exploit advantage through land, air, sea, space, cyberspace, the electromagnetic spectrum, the information environment, and the cognitive realm.

- *Pulsed operations:* An approach to joint all-domain operations centered on concentrating strength in space and time to generate or exploit advantages over an adversary. In a contested environment, pulsed operations focus on creating the episodic superiority needed to achieve joint force objectives.

- *Integrated command, agile control:* Command and control (C2) of forces across all domains, integrating sensors, platforms, and decision-making processes in support of real-time battlespace awareness and rapid decision-making.

- *Global fires:* Integration of kinetic and non-kinetic fires to create precise, synchronized effects throughout all domains and in multiple areas of responsibility.

- *Information advantage:* Leveraging advanced technologies to improve the ability to collect, analyze, and disseminate information rapidly in support of decision-making and action.

- *Resilient logistics*: Rapid movement of personnel, equipment, and supplies to where they are needed.

Joint and service exercises and experiments are ongoing to define how the joint force will realize the objectives of the JWC. The JWC's tenets provide the foundation to inform each service's operations, activities, and investments to shape future force design and development. Each of the services has developed its own operating concepts and approaches nested within the JWC, as follows:

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[11] Walsh, T. and Huber, A. "A Symphony of Capabilities: How the Joint Warfighting Concept Guides Service Force Design and Development," *Joint Force Quarterly 111*, 4th Quarter 2023.

The Air Force Future Operating Concept (AFFOC)[12] establishes six key "fights" in which airmen must be able to prevail in the defense of Allies, partners, and national interests. Airmen will win these fights through the application of *pulsed airpower*, which is the concentrating of airpower in time and space to create windows of opportunity for the rest of the joint/combined force.[13] Closely tied to the AFFOC is agile combat employment (ACE), a scheme of maneuver relying less on large traditional main overseas bases as hubs for projecting combat power and more on launching, recovering, and maintaining aircraft from dispersed forward operating locations in concert with allies and partners.[14] Over the past four years, ACE has become increasingly normalized as a way of generating airpower. Revised Air Force doctrine emphasizes mission command executed through centralized command, distributed control, and decentralized execution.[15] An emerging area of focus for airpower is the increasingly contested *air littoral*, which is the airspace between ground forces and high-end fighters and bombers.[16] Traditional conceptions of air superiority in the open skies may not guarantee victory in a battlespace fought increasingly in this environment.

To shape future force design and capability planning, the Air Force has developed a "One Force Design" framework consisting of three priority mission areas:[17]

- Mission area 1 focuses on short-range mass fires and sensing, for forces generating combat power from within dense threat areas.

- Mission area 2 capabilities center on long-range systems and fires to project power, operating from defendable areas beyond the umbrella of most adversary ballistic and cruise missiles or attack UAVs.

- Mission area 3 capabilities allow the Air Force to respond to a range of contingencies anywhere on the globe, operating from positions resilient to limited adversary attack.

The Army has continued implementation of its concept for multidomain operations (MDO), which are the "combined arms employment of joint and Army capabilities to create and exploit relative advantages, defeat enemy forces, and consolidate gains on behalf of joint force commanders."[18] Multidomain operations expand combined arms beyond traditional one- and two-domain approaches to

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[12] *Air Force Future Operating Concept Summary*, 6 Mar 2023, https://www.af.mil/Portals/1/documents/2023SAF/Air_Force_Future_Operating_Concept_EXSUM_FINAL.pdf.

[13] Grady.

[14] Air Force Doctrine Note 1-21, *Agile Combat Employment*, 23 Aug 2022, https://www.doctrine.af.mil/Operational-Level-Doctrine/AFDN-1-21-Agile-Combat-Employment/.

[15] Air Force Doctrine Publication 1-1, *Mission Command*, 14 Aug 2023, https://www.doctrine.af.mil/Operational-Level-Doctrine/AFDP-1-The-Air-Force/AFDP-1-1-Mission-Command/.

[16] Grieco, K. & Bremer, M. "Contesting the Air Littoral," *Aether: A Journal of Strategic Airpower and Spacepower*, Vol. 3, No. 3, Fall 2024.

[17] Air Force Public Affairs, "Air Force leaders discuss 'One Force Design' to enhance readiness in era of Great Power Competition," 2024, https://www.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/3966541/air-force-leaders-discuss-one-force-design-to-enhance-readiness-in-era-of-great/

[18] Army Field Manual 3-0, *Operations*, 1 Oct 2022, https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN36290-FM_3-0-000-WEB-2.pdf.

include all domains.[19] Expanding combined arms using complementary and reinforcing effects created through capabilities from different domains is at the core of multidomain operations.[20] They emphasize the use of *defeat mechanisms*[21] while maintaining cohesion of friendly operations. Defeat mechanisms are the methods through which friendly forces accomplish their missions against enemy opposition. Army forces at all echelons use combinations of four defeat mechanisms: destroy, dislocate, disintegrate, and isolate. Defeat mechanisms are the building blocks for an overall *theory of victory*, which is a plausible set of principles for overcoming an enemy, i.e., the logic explaining why a strategy is expected to work. Another key idea is of *consolidating gains*: conducting operations with the end state in mind, taking action to achieve that end state as quickly as possible, and then seeking to make those gains more permanent. Key MDO tenets are:

- *Agility* to move forces and adjust their dispositions and activities more rapidly than the enemy.

- *Convergence* through the concerted employment of capabilities from multiple domains and echelons to create effects against a system, formation, decision-maker, or in a specified geographic area.

- *Endurance* to persevere over time throughout the entirety of an operational environment.

- *Depth* to enable extending operations in time, space, or purpose to achieve definitive results.

Army doctrine emphasizes that uncertainty, degraded communications, and fleeting windows of opportunity will characterize combat. MDO will therefore require disciplined initiative cultivated through a mission command culture.

The Navy's focus in relation to the JWC has been on the development and implementation of its concept for Distributed Maritime Operations (DMO), which is its central fleet-level organizational construct for future operations. DMO emphasizes distributed warfare and mission command needed to gain and exploit sea control. It entails dispersing the fleet while concentrating effects through methods such as: [22]

- Dispersing naval units over a larger area within a theater of operations, to make it harder for an adversary to detect and target them, while still enabling mutual support and concentration of fires on enemy targets.

- Spreading sensors and weapons across a wider array of ships and aircraft, to reduce the proportion potentially lost due to the destruction of any one asset.

- Increased use of longer-ranged weapons as well as unmanned vessels and aircraft.

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[19] Beagle, M., Creed, R., and Farmer, M. "Musicians of Mars in Multiple Domains Expanding Combined Arms in the Twenty-First Century," *Military Review*, March-April 2023, https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/March-April-2023/Musicians-of-Mars/.

[20] Beagle et al.

[21] Hoffman, F. "Defeat Mechanisms in Modern Warfare," *Parameters*, Vol. 51, No. 4, Winter 2021, https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol51/iss4/6/.

[22] Congressional Reports Service, "Defense Primer: Navy Distributed Maritime Operations (DMO) Concept," 20 Nov 2024, https://news.usni.org/2024/02/29/report-to-congress-on-navy-distributed-maritime-operations-concept.

- Using resilient communications and networking to integrate dispersed assets into a coordinated battle force.

DMO envisions a distributed force operating across all domains, more survivable and able to mass effects as required in support of joint force objectives. It blends decentralization and unity of effort in a way that places new demands on fleet commanders.[23] Navy doctrine emphasizes this decentralization through tenets of mission command, which in practice the service has been exercising for centuries. Because of time and distance, naval commanders have long been accustomed to accomplishing tasks of varying degrees of complexity with only general instructions.[24]

Under the overall framework of its Force Design 2030 initiative, the Marine Corps has developed concepts for stand-in forces (SIF) and expeditionary advanced base operations (EABO).[25] SIF envisions a consistent Marine presence west of the international date line, providing constant forward capabilities intended to enable initial joint pulses. Tightly coupled with DMO and the JWC, EABO are a form of expeditionary warfare involving the use of mobile, low-signature, persistent, and relatively easy-to-sustain naval expeditionary forces operating from a series of austere, temporary locations ashore or inshore within a contested maritime area.[26] EABO missions include:

- Supporting sea control operations

- Conducting sea denial operations within littorals

- Contributing to maritime domain awareness

- Providing forward command, control, communications, computers, combat systems, intelligence, surveillance, targeting (C5ISRT) and counter-C5ISRT capability

- Providing forward sustainment to support and enable the joint force, allies, and partners

Principles of mission command and maneuver warfare are expected to permeate all actions of littoral forces conducting EABO, to enable commanders at every level to cope with uncertainty, exercise initiative, generate tempo, and seize opportunities guided by mission and intent.

Lastly, as the newest service, the Space Force's efforts in this area are comparatively nascent. The Space Force's core competency as part of the joint fight encompasses space security, space mobility and

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[23] Chief of Naval Operations Navigation Plan for America's Warfighting Navy 2024, https://www.navy.mil/Leadership/Chief-of-Naval-Operations/CNO-NAVPLAN-2024/.
[24] Conners, M. "Mission Command is essential to mission success." USNI Proceedings, Vol. 146/4, April 2020, https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2020/april/mission-command-essential-mission-success.
[25] Walsh and Huber.
[26] HQ US Marine Corps, "Tentative Manual for Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations," May 2023, https://www.marines.mil/Portals/1/Docs/230509-Tentative-Manual-For-Expeditionary-Advanced-Base-Operations-2nd-Edition.pdf

logistics, information mobility, and space domain awareness.[27] Space operations are recognized as inherently multi-domain: an attack against any one segment or combination of segments, whether terrestrial, link, or space, of the space architecture can neutralize a space capability. As such, space domain access, maneuver, and exploitation require deliberate and synchronized defense operations across all three segments.[28]

Critiques

While sustained experimentation has been ongoing and the services continue to invest in the capabilities and training needed to bring these concepts to life, practitioners and analysts have provided reflections helping to calibrate further efforts at the joint and service levels. Common themes are clarity of purpose, C2 approaches, and sustainment of distributed forces:

- Realizing the full USAF ACE vision will require significant investment in infrastructure and equipment to enable dispersed operations.[29] Ensuring necessary access, basing, and overflight in wartime circumstances is another concern.[30] Separately, experience suggests that in practice, the utility of MTOs is inversely correlated to a subordinate headquarters' need for external support and coordination. In an ACE context, MTOs may be most useful for delegating responsibilities and authorities outside of the traditional air tasking cycle, expressing "left/right limits" in relation to established rules of engagement, collateral damage concerns, or acceptable risks.[31] More generally, wargaming results suggest that narrow interpretations of "pulsed airpower" may lead to standoff-dependent tactics, unnecessarily ceding portions of the battlespace to an enemy.[32]

- An early criticism of Army MDO was that it did not articulate a well-developed theory of the problem and related theory of victory, both understandable and logical to allies and adversaries alike.[33] Wass de Czege argued that early articulations of MDO advocated for symmetrically countering adversaries by framing conflict as a contest between their ability to deploy advanced air defense and area denial capabilities, and our ability to overcome them. He advocated for defeating adversaries through asymmetric strategies and tactics. More recent concerns relate to MDO's clarity

[27] Walsh and Huber.
[28] United States Space Force, Space Capstone Publication – Spacepower Doctrine for Space Forces, 2020, https://www.spaceforce.mil/Portals/1/Space%20Capstone%20Publication_10%20Aug%202020.pdf.
[29] Oppelaar, I. "Agile Combat Employment: The Next Big Thing for NATO Air Power," Journal of the Joint Air Power Competence Centre, Edition 36, Oct. 2023, https://www.japcc.org/articles/agile-combat-employment/.
[30] Congressional Research Service. "Defense Primer: Agile Combat Employment (ACE) Concept." June 2024, https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF12694/1.
[31] Coleman, F. "The Limited Utility of Mission Type Orders for ACE … and a Better Way to Execute Mission Command," *The Mitchell Forum*, No. 49, Jan 2023, https://mitchellaerospacepower.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/MI_Forum_49-C2-MTO-FINAL.pdf.
[32] Praiswater, S. and Thornhill, P. "The B-21 and Tactical Creativity," *Air and Space Operations Review*, Vol. 3, No. 1, Spring 2024, https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/ASOR/Journals/Volume-3_Number-1/Thornhill_Praiswater.pdf.
[33] Wass de Czege, Huba, "Commentary on the US Army in Multi-Domain Operations 2028," US Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, April 2020, https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/909/.

of purpose,[34] logistics and sustainment challenges in contested environments,[35] and interoperability of approaches and capabilities with allies and partners.[36]

- Concerns regarding the Navy's DMO concept include whether dispersal of a force can dilute offensive and defensive capability to the point where both are rendered ineffective.[37] There is also concern about the extent to which the concept is understood at tactical levels across the fleet. There are the technical challenges associated with managing distributed operations, but a greater issue may be articulating a visual mental model of what DMO looks like at the tactical level.[38] Managing dispersed platforms with no clear points of connection has the potential to be mentally taxing, requiring commanders to assess proximity among forces and their individual and collective relationship to enemy threats.

- Echoing dialogue on the other service concepts, a challenge with EABO is expected to be how to support and sustain isolated units operating inside a contested environment.[39] A key insight from an EABO wargame was that legacy units were too large, and to execute the concept effectively would call for minimizing electronic signatures, operating as part of the Navy's integrated fires network, pre-positioning equipment and supplies at potential operating locations, and emphasizing sensing rather than missiles.[40] Observations from Russia's war in Ukraine suggest imposing air denial should be a priority for littoral Marine forces, to better enable sea denial and to expand options available to the joint force commander.[41]

Such analysis and learning will inform the continued development and implementation of service-level and joint concepts, with direct consequences for the practice of mission command.

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[34] Aurelius Labs, "MDO Misses the Target," 12 Oct 2024, https://aureliusthinking.com/mdo-misses-the-target/.

[35] Quinn, B. "Sustaining Multidomain Operations: The Logistical Challenge Facing the Army's Operating Concept," *Military Review*, March-April 2023, https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/March-April-2023/Multidomain-Operations/.

[36] McEnany, C. "Multi-Domain Task Forces: A Glimpse at the Army of 2035," *Association of the United States Army Spotlight 22-2*, March 2022, https://www.ausa.org/publications/multi-domain-task-forces-glimpse-army-2035.

[37] Ullman, H. "Are there flaws in the US Navy's distributed maritime operations," 23 Jan 2023. https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2023/01/23/are-there-flaws-in-the-us-navys-distributed-maritime-operations/.

[38] Clarity, T. "Distribute DMO to Tactical Commanders," *US Naval Institute Proceedings*, Vol. 149 No. 1, Jan 2023, https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2023/january/distribute-dmo-tactical-commanders

[39] Kreisher, O. "Controversial EABO concept has potential but will be vetted, speakers say," *Seapower Magazine*, 5 April 2022, https://seapowermagazine.org/controversial-eabo-concept-has-potential-but-will-be-vetted-speakers-say/.

[40] McBreen, B. "EABO Wargame AAR," Sept 2022, https://www.themaneuverist.org/post/eabo-wargame-aar-by-ltcol-brendan-mcbreen-usmc-ret.

[41] Bowsher, H. "Air Denial Lessons from Ukraine," *US Naval Institute Proceedings*, Vol. 149 No. 9, Sept 2023, https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2023/september/air-denial-lessons-ukraine.

Implications for joint operations and the practice of mission command

Examination of the JWC and related service-level concepts suggests that the conduct of military operations against a peer actor will call for several dimensions of integration and synchronization of forces, actions, and effects, all within the framework of pulsed operations and expanded maneuver:

- Coordination of stand-in forces operating inside a contested environment with stand-off forces delivering fires from a distance.

- Coordination of theater-assigned forces with globally managed forces such as those for strategic airlift, strategic bombing, space operations, or cyberspace operations.

- Use of joint force packages consisting of traditionally manned platforms, remotely controlled unmanned platforms, and increasingly autonomous systems.

- Distribution or dispersal of forces for increased survivability and resilience combined with massing of effects (but not necessarily massing of forces).

- Generation of combat power from austere operating locations.

- Ensuring the sustainment apparatus can meet the requirements of current and future pulses in a contested environment.

Layered on these challenging requirements is the expectation that communications and information-sharing as well as other key enablers such as position, navigation, and timing (PNT) services will be disrupted or degraded for periods of time. Considerable effort is ongoing to modernize the US military's C2 apparatus to make it more connected, capable, and resilient to attack, under the banner of Combined/Joint All-Domain C2 (CJADC2).[42]

Of interest here is what these trends mean for the practice of mission command. The operating concepts described earlier and the themes listed above suggest a mix of centralization and decentralization, both unity of command and unity of effort, all playing out simultaneously in an all-domain fight against a peer actor. The associated tension between more control (centralization) and less control (decentralization) in military operations is nothing new and is well articulated in doctrine.[43,44] Operations requiring close synchronization of multiple units or creation of effects in a tightly prescribed time window may necessitate more centralized control, as may operations in which the joint force commander wants to manage risks directly at the expense of tactical efficiency (e.g., high-value targets, covert/clandestine operations, or operations with extreme political sensitivities). Conversely, operations not requiring such time-sensitive coordination, or the movement and maneuver of forces between pulses may better lend themselves to looser control. A set of joint pulses, particularly in the early stages of a

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[42] McGiffin, J. "Mission (Command) Complete: Implications of JADC2," *Joint Force Quarterly 113*, 2nd Quarter 2024, https://digitalcommons.ndu.edu/joint-force-quarterly/vol113/iss1/14/.
[43] ADP 6-0.
[44] Joint Publication 3-0, *Joint Campaigns and Operations*, 18 Jun 2022.

major conflict, may span a broad spectrum of actions necessitating different degrees of centralization or decentralization. All of this may be occurring in a potentially communications-denied environment, further challenging the joint force's ability to prevail in conflict. [45]

The implications of this combination of challenges for the practice of mission command can be examined through the lens of each of its tenets: commander's intent, mission-type orders, shared understanding, disciplined initiative, risk acceptance, competence, and trust. Mapped against the imperatives of the JWC and subordinate service concepts, examining each of the tenets offers insight on challenges and opportunities for force development and employment.

Commander's intent

Commander's intent is a clear and concise expression of the purpose of an operation as well as its desired objectives and military end state.[46] It describes the boundaries within which subordinates may exercise initiative while maintaining unity of effort, and it provides the basis on which staffs and subordinate elements develop plans and orders.[47]

Within the framing of the JWC and subordinate concepts, commander's intent becomes the basis for how pulsed/distributed operations will proceed. It provides the focus subordinates can use to coordinate separate efforts that must integrate into a whole – to design pulsed actions, to identify left/right bounds for initiative-taking, and to establish when tighter or looser control of operations may be warranted. Commander's intent is not static, and both subordinates and commanders should recognize the need for ongoing feedback and refinement as operations progress. Such ongoing feedback will aid forces in maintaining the initiative when communications are degraded.

Mission-type orders

Mission-type orders are directives to subordinates emphasizing the results to be attained, not how to achieve them. They enable subordinates to understand the situation, their commander's mission and intent, and their own tasks. They empower subordinates with the greatest possible freedom of action within the guidelines of commander's intent.[48] Joint and service doctrine provides extensive guidance on best practices in relation to the development and communication of MTOs. Generally, they should provide only the specific information needed to guide the synchronization of combat power at times and places needed while allowing subordinates as much freedom of action as possible.

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[45] Peters, R., Miller, B., and Hanrahan, B. "The Atrophy of Mission Command," *US Naval Institute Proceedings*, Vol. 148 No. 8, Aug 2022, https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2022/august/atrophy-mission-command.
[46] Joint Publication 3-0.
[47] Army Doctrine Publication 6-0.
[48] AFDP 1-1.

The evolution of joint warfighting in accordance with the JWC and subordinate service concepts suggests some specific directions to consider in the preparation of MTOs, all with an eye towards enabling executing forces to visualize and understand the intended operational approach and adjust it as conditions evolve in a contested environment. While concepts and terminology for pulsed and/or distributed operations continue to develop, it is reasonable to posit that an overall operation may consist of more than one pulse. Over time, in a protracted conflict against a peer actor it will be desirable to overcome the threats making such tactics necessary in the first place, to the extent they interfere with accomplishing overall operational objectives. Within such framing, MTOs should communicate:

- The theory of victory and associated defeat mechanisms, which subordinates can use to adapt their approach amid unexpected events or to capitalize on emergent opportunities consistent with commander's intent.

- Whether pulses (and any associated dispersal activity) will be synchronized at the joint force level or left to the discretion of individual functional/service components. If synchronization is to be at the joint force level, the command and signal to be used should be specified.

- Which parts of each envisioned pulse may call for tight synchronization of effects vs. looser control of subordinate actions.

- The weight of effort to place on consolidating gains (i.e., making them more permanent) relative to pushing forward to the next step of the pulse in support of overall operational objectives.

Shared understanding

A common understanding across participating forces of the operating environment, specifically an operation's purpose, problems, and approaches, equips commanders at all levels with the insight and foresight needed to make effective decisions and manage associated risks.[49],[50] Shared situational understanding, together with the flow of information to the lowest possible level, provides the basis for unity of effort and subordinate initiative. Effective decentralized execution isn't possible without such comprehension.

In a contested environment, the joint force must be ready to act with little signal.[51] There will, however, be a limit to the extent of continued synchronized actions possible to advance the achievement of commander's intent without the necessary level of shared awareness and cueing. Within the context of pulsed operations in a contested environment, an important consideration is how much degradation of shared understanding of the operating environment can occur before the established plan becomes unviable. Such degradation may occur because of lost sensors, non-functional communications links, cyber-attacks, or destruction of C2 nodes. An operations order will generally establish a plan

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[49] ADP 6-0.
[50] AFDP 1-1.
[51] Peters, et al.

establishing primary, alternate, contingency, and emergency (PACE) mechanisms for information-sharing and communications. Key questions are:

- At what point down the PACE plan is the original approach no longer viable?

- How long can distributed forces maintain unity of effort with limited signal and feedback?

- What should forces do absent that signal to advance the commander's intent as best as possible?

While steps in planning can enable more resilience in the face of communications degradation, inevitably there will be a breaking point, especially when tight synchronization of actions is required. Day-to-day training activities and pre-mission rehearsal should illuminate where the breaking point lies, to inform the development of branch plans for how to maintain the initiative within or between pulses while recovering from communications degradation.

Disciplined initiative

Disciplined initiative is the proactive application of creativity and inventiveness within the bounds of the commander's intent to achieve the desired end state,[52] which is crucial when existing plans no longer fit the situation or when unforeseen threats or opportunities arise.[53] Its application enables subordinates to gain a tactical or operational advantage in an adverse environment, reporting to the commander when it is possible to do so.

As discussed above, the JWC's vision for pulsed operations will concentrate forces and/or effects in space and time advantageously and ideally asymmetrically. The utility of disciplined initiative is readily apparent in relation to the decision-making needed to disperse forces for survivability in accordance with ACE, EABO, and DMO concepts. It will be just as valuable when forces are pressing forward in a pulse. In a dynamically evolving engagement, the enemy may do something unforeseen, a new threat may arise, or an opportunity emerges to advance the intent of the pulse more effectively than the original plan. The understanding executing forces have of the overall theory of victory and supporting defeat mechanisms will enable them to make informed decisions on what initiative they should exercise, and when. That understanding will enable them to align focus and timing of unplanned actions with the intent and methods of the pulse. As discussed earlier, the approach to operations envisioned by the JWC will call for a mix of centralization and decentralization, dispersal and massing. Knowing when to exploit an emergent opportunity will be as important as identifying the situation itself.

Risk acceptance

Military operations inherently contain uncertain, complex, ambiguous, and volatile elements, creating the potential for harm or loss. In collaboration with subordinates, commanders must analyze risks to

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[52] ADP 6-0.
[53] AFDP 1-1.

balance the tension between force protection and the uncertainty inherent in mission accomplishment. Whether it is worthwhile or not to take a given risk requires an understanding of the wider strategic and operational environment, as well as a thorough appraisal of the potential payoff of planned actions. The traditional formal approach to military risk assessment entails establishing the expected probability of an adverse event and the severity of its consequences.[54] Risk management options include accepting the risk without mitigation, avoiding it by forgoing the associated activity, reducing it through mitigation measures, or transferring it to change where and when the risk is incurred, and potentially by whom. "Real-time" risk assessment calls for greater application of instantaneous judgment, but use of more formal methods during planning can build the thought process needed in rapidly unfolding situations.

Given the ideas inherent to the JWC and subordinate concepts, *interdependence* is a useful lens for assessing risks, defined as the necessary reliance on access to one another's capabilities to succeed.[55] Pulsed operations will entail synchronization of all-domain effects by cooperating forces, dispersal for survivability, and other decentralized initiative-taking. Risk analysis would entail articulating the potential conditions that could make a plan inexecutable or materially reduce the likelihood of success below what is acceptable within the commander's intent. Potential hazards may relate to communications as previously discussed, but also to force attrition, availability of operating locations for reconstitution, equipment/materiel availability, and other considerations. An area of analysis in planning then becomes characterizing how those interdependencies can affect operational outcomes.

A challenge with the traditional approach to military risk assessment is that it can be difficult to arrive at meaningful probabilities of an adverse event occurring in dynamic and uncertain environments. Unlike rolling evenly weighted dice or drawing cards from a fair deck, potential uncertain events of concern generally do not have defensible probability distributions that planners can attach to them to evaluate how likely they are to occur. Such probabilities do exist for narrow physics-based considerations such as munitions or sensor accuracy, but for most classes of events they will be difficult to define or will be unavailable to the planners developing assessments and to the commanders responsible for mitigation in rapidly unfolding situations.

What, then, are additional tools to use? An approach may be found in recognizing the difference between *resolvable* and *radical* uncertainty.[56] Resolvable uncertainty can be removed by looking something up or making a measurement. For example, uncertainty about an ally's force availability can be resolved by contacting the ally. Resolvable uncertainty can also be represented by a suitable probability distribution, e.g., the probability of kill for specific munitions. In contrast, radical uncertainty offers no such solution, and can come from obscurity, ignorance, vagueness, ambiguity, or a lack of information (which might be remedied later). The possibility that an adversary might escalate a

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[54] Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Manual 3105.01B, *Joint Risk Analysis Methodology*, 22 Dec 2023, https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Library/Manuals/CJCSM%203105.01B.pdf.
[55] Joint Staff J7. "Insights and Best Practices Focus Paper: Mission Command," January 2020, https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/fp/missioncommand_fp_2nd_ed.pdf.
[56] Kay, J. and King, M. *Radical Uncertainty: Decision-Making Beyond the Numbers*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2020).

terrestrial conflict by destroying key allied space capabilities would be an example. Kay and King propose that coping with such uncertainty depends in part on understanding in depth what is happening now, framing what *could* happen next as events progress, and developing strategies resilient to such uncertainties. Risks and uncertainties in military operations will likely incorporate both resolvable and radical uncertainties, requiring a broad perspective to understand and cope with them. Putting effort into characterizing what could happen next (and then watching for it) can aid in understanding the risks in a potential course of action. In the context of interdependencies in pulsed/distributed operations, it would entail elaborating on key adverse events that could hinder the successful synchronization of actions and effects.

A practical consideration for pulsed/distributed operations will be assessing risks related to dispersing forces from a primary operating location. Rather than discussing some speculative "probability of attack," it may be more tangible and meaningful to assess the situation in terms of the identifiable *indicators* consistent with the expectation of an attack within a relevant time horizon. Potential indicators identified in planning stages can be used during execution to make an informed decision in the presence of uncertainty, without the artificiality of some invented probability.

Competence and mutual trust

While they are separate mission command tenets, competence and trust between commanders and subordinates underpin everything discussed in this article. Tactically and technically proficient commanders, subordinates, and teams who are confident they can rely on one another are the foundation for mission command.[57] Such trust is the cornerstone of effective cooperation, and it is a function of familiarity and respect.[58] As joint and service-level exercises continue their re-orientation towards the imperatives of great power competition and readiness for the possibility of conflict with peer actors, combat-representative training will be crucial to building the common experiences required to exercise and thrive in dynamic, uncertain environments. Such events cannot be a "one-off," never repeated. They should build on one another to increase each service member's ability to handle dynamic, uncertain environments and to continue to grow confidence in their teammates.

Way ahead

To borrow a phrase concerning warfare itself, the nature of mission command tenets may be enduring, but their character may change as the joint force's approach to warfighting evolves. The ideas presented in this article offer approaches to evolve the practice of mission command in a manner that aligns with the key principles of the JWC and subordinate service concepts.

Expanded maneuver and pulsed operations will call for a nuanced understanding and simultaneous exploitation of centralization and decentralization; dispersal and massing; and coordination of stand-in

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[57] ADP 6-0.
[58] MCDP 6-0.

and stand-off forces. As experimentation, force development, and future force design efforts continue, exploration of these issues will be crucial to building an enduring advantage for the joint force. As demanding as the requirement for supporting technical capabilities will be, the critical element will be in developing the judgment for operating in such an environment. Applying a calibrated understanding of mission command in this context will be a key part of the journey for the joint force in realizing the JWC's vision.

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Striking First with Machine Learning: Field Research in the 101ˢᵗ Airborne Division

Analise Callaghan

ABSTRACT: This paper presents the results of a pioneering machine learning (ML) field experiment conducted by the 1st Battalion, 502nd Infantry Regiment of the 101st Airborne Division during its 2024 rotation at the Joint Readiness Training Center. Tasked with operationalizing "bottom-up innovation" in support of the Army's "transformation in contact" initiative, the unit partnered with Raic Labs to integrate ML for real-time object detection using drone-collected full-motion video. Soldiers trained ML models to identify enemy vehicles using an intuitive interface, demonstrating that even non-specialists could rapidly build, train, and apply models under field conditions. The experiment validated the utility of ML for tactical reconnaissance, showing that colored video models performed effectively while infrared models required real-time retraining. Key findings highlighted the importance of dataset diversity, interface usability, and timely video transmission. The study underscores that ML object detection is feasible at the tactical level, but success depends on adequate data collection assets and the ability to apply models to live or near-live feeds. The initiative also affirms that traditional tactical skills like concealment remain vital in an era of AI-enabled warfare. These insights contribute to ongoing efforts to modernize force capabilities in preparation for large-scale combat operations.

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Background

In 2024, the 2nd Brigade Combat Team of the 101st Airborne Division–now the 2nd Mobile Brigade (2MBDE, or "Strike")–was selected to become one of the first brigades to test the Army's "transformation in contact" concept, an initiative to enhance the survivability and mission readiness in which brigade-sized elements conduct overhauls of their organic equipment and personnel structures to become lighter and faster, thereby enhancing survivability and mission readiness. In support of its higher headquarters' mission, the 1st Battalion, 502nd Infantry Regiment (1-502d, or "Talon") was tasked to pursue "bottom-up innovation," including machine learning (ML), mimicking what has been observed with Ukrainian forces in their ongoing conflict with Russia. The desired outcome of the experiment was for the units to test and validate their new structure and capabilities in a simulated peer-to-peer conflict scenario hosted at the Joint Readiness Training Center in Fort Johnson, Louisiana. This is a report of the results of our experimentation.

Use Case

Throughout the two months preceding Strike's JRTC rotation, Talon established and cultivated a partnership with Raic Labs, a third-party company that was willing to offer free use of a ML model development platform during the exercise in exchange for data and feedback on their product's performance under field conditions. The product is an end-to-end ML model development interface, in which a user can:

(1) Ingest full motion video, which serves as a user's "dataset."

(2) Quickly and efficiently select and label a desired category of objects within the dataset.

(3) Receive a "context map" that identifies and assigns similarity values to every similar image within the dataset, which the user can then discriminate within to expand their category.

(4) Train a model on the established dataset and its resident categories.

(5) Apply a model to any ingested video to run "inference jobs," where the user will in turn receive all identified results from the span of the selected video that match a pre-established category of object within the user's specified confidence threshold.

Process

After receiving several days of instruction from the partner company on how to utilize their platform, Talon's intelligence cell and multi-purpose company (MPC) collaborated to establish a process by which the unit could plan to operationalize the use case:

(1) Prior to starting the simulated battle at JRTC, the MPC's drone operators conducted flights over the unit's motor pool. The output of these flights consisted of one colored and one infrared feed.

(2) The collected motor pool videos were uploaded to the ML platform as initial datasets. ML models were built on both the colored and infrared videos to identify BMP-2Ms, T-72s, "gun trucks," 122mm "Primas," and 155mm "Caesars."

(3) While in the JRTC maneuver box, the MPC conducted reconnaissance on key named areas of interest with its organic aerial collection assets (namely, Skydio X2Ds). After a successful flight, the company's drone operators removed the SD cards from the drones and uploaded the feeds from their flights to a shared Dropbox folder, to which they and the battalion intelligence cell had mutual access.

(4) Upon receiving new drone feed, the intelligence cell ran its pre-built ML models against each new video to test whether they could successfully identify new targets. If a pre-built model did not work on a new piece of feed, the Talon intelligence cell would utilize the new feed to build and train a new model, and in turn use that model to run new inference jobs.

Findings

Throughout the exercise, Talon was able to successfully field-validate the ML model development platform and demonstrate its ability to detect and identify targetable enemy equipment using commercial-off-the-shelf (COTS) drone feed as input. The team's findings can be broken into two major categories: platform utility and model performance.

Platform Utility

There were several features of the partner company's interface that added critical value to the use case. The first, and most important of these, was that it was *intuitive*: that the platform is (1) easy to use and (2) easy to understand means that it can empower any soldier, regardless of background or experience with ML, to develop and employ models to detect and identify targets. This means that, whereas units often need to reckon with single points of failure–for instance, the one soldier who knows how to code leaving the unit–this platform enables successful handoff of a capability over time.

Additionally, where a unit would usually need to send a product such as a model back to a company's engineers or software developers in the face of friction or failure, the platform used here places that power in the hands of the user, thereby dramatically increasing its accessibility and the ability to navigate unforeseen issues. Though secondary to this bottom line, the platform's user-friendly interface also makes it easy to explain: if a commander wants to know how their analyst went about identifying an object on their high-payoff target list, it is easy to show them, visually and verbally. The transparency of the ML model also makes it easier to trust its findings, lowering potential barriers to fielding a future asset across the larger force.

The "deep search" function of the partner company's platform is the second particularly useful contribution. With this feature, a user can play the video they've ingested, draw a single box around one instance of the type of object they'd like to establish as a category within their dataset, and hit search. The platform will then run that image against every frame in the video and create a "context map." The context map is, effectively, a visual representation of every image chip within the video that resembles the user's input: each chip is assigned a mathematical value based on how similar it is to the original, and then the chips with close mathematical values are in turn grouped together and bordered with a color that aligns to that group's threshold of similarly.

This way, a user can then zoom in on a red cluster (the color that is assigned to the images that are most similar), and if the image chips within that cluster all represent the same type of object, they can highlight and add all of them to their desired category. Though this process might seem tedious, it is a significant improvement on the typical time-consuming data-labeling process, where a developer would need to draw a box around every instance they could observe of their target occurring and/or develop code to do it for them (which would then need to be vetted for accuracy). Ultimately, this feature substantially reduces the cognitive load and time a user needs to devote to the data labeling process while building a model – both are essential to soldier success under field conditions, operating under the time constraints of an active combat mission.

The third set of opportunities provided by the platform to offer enhanced detection are the upload, web search, and synthetic imagery functions. For anyone developing a ML model, there are several problems that arise alongside time constraints and data availability. First, a developer might have an image of their

target but might not know whether it occurs in a video or have enough time to watch the footage to confirm. The upload function allows them to take an external image and run that against a video to see whether it can be detected. In another variation of this issue, a user might be faced with the same constraints, but additionally not have an external image to use as a reference. In this case, they can conduct a web search within the company's platform to find a suitable image. Both capabilities allow a user to expand their datasets through the number of different visualizations of a target they are able to run for an initial detection test.

Another problem set developers often reckon with is a shortage of datapoints. Put simply, the more different angles, lightings, and settings in which a model can observe a target, the better it will be at identifying targets unilaterally, even under varying conditions. Rarely, however, do developers have access to such an ideal dataset. Synthetic imagery allows users to enter a prompt for the type of image they would like to see – for instance, "aerial view of Army HMMWV travelling through a jungle" – and receive a synthetic image meeting the description. Over time, if a user runs multiple outputs from both similar and different prompts, they can expand the number of initial images they can add to their dataset, and in turn improve the ultimate model's ability to consistently identify a target.

Model Performance

Model C worked consistently on new colored feed collected by Talon's MPC. When applying a previously developed ML model to a new dataset, the process of identifying targets within a new drone feed of any length (the MPC's flights typically ranged from five to twenty-five minutes) took approximately five minutes, depending on the strength of the user's internet connection.

Model I did not work consistently on new infrared feed. Though the pre-developed model could in some cases identify that there were vehicles present within the feed, it was at a much lower confidence level than with the colored feed, and the identified vehicles were generally mislabeled (the model would label one of the MPC's Humvees as a BMP, a BMP as a T-72, etc.).

The intelligence cell was able to overcome the friction point of *Model I* not working on a new piece of feed by developing a new model (*Model I2*) for the type of feed being received under field conditions. Through this approach, Talon was able to apply a new infrared model to correctly identify BMPs and gun trucks within the feeds it received from the MPC. The end-to-end process of building such a new model and applying it to a drone feed of any length typically took around twenty minutes, depending on the strength of the user's internet connection and the number of categories the user building the model chose to establish. A limitation on the salience of the results in the case of this model is that it was trained on the same piece of feed to which it was then applied, substantially increasing the model's ability to successfully detect the targets at a high level of confidence.

Analysis

There are several possible explanations for the model results, whereby *Models C* and *I2* worked effectively, but *Model I* did not. One of these has to do with the fact of the environment in which targets were observed in the colored versus infrared feeds: in the colored feeds the battalion was able to acquire, targets were typically traveling along roads or were placed in clearings and open danger areas, whereas the targets in the infrared feeds were typically concealed in tree lines. This could be significant to the results for two reasons. First, traditional efforts to conceal targets make it more difficult for computer algorithms and ML models to distinguish from their surrounding environments (an important note for traditional, tactical infantry units); second, since *Models C* and *I* were built on feed from Geronimo's motor pool–where the vehicles and systems were all placed in an open parking lot with a reasonable color contrast–there was an alignment of surroundings for *Model C* that did not exist for *Model I*. To put the latter reason simply, neither model was trained to identify targets within a wood line: it would make sense, then, that *Model I* didn't work as well on new infrared feed, where concealment was a reality for the observed targets.

Since infrared feeds appear predominantly as light and shadow, it is also possible that targets within them are simply more difficult to identify – any object's features are inherently more difficult to separate from the surrounding environment. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that even when running *Models C* and *I* against the same feeds upon which they were built and trained, *Model C* would typically perform correct inference at a higher threshold of confidence than *Model I*. In the same vein, the pixelation quality of infrared feed is generally lower than that of colored, which could equally contribute to the disparity in results. These points yield another deduction: when building a ML model, it is critical that the dataset the model is trained on either consists predominantly–or if diverse, is inclusive of–the types of environments within which one will ultimately seek to perform object detection and identification, and with the qualities and/or types of feed (colored, infrared, etc.) they expect to receive for the results to be fruitful.

For this requirement to be fulfilled in future efforts, it will be critical that the interface being used for model development allows users to perform two actions that weren't feasible in the current use case. First, a platform must allow a user to make their datasets universal to a workspace. When a user uploads a new video, they must be able to use it to add additional datapoints to a pre-existing set to make that set more diverse and inclusive of the ultimate targets and their anticipated environments. Second, it is critical that the interface provide recourse for its user to provide feedback to the models they make; having an option to tell the model when it identifies an object incorrectly is critical to its learning process over time, and in turn, its ability to improve on previous results.

A limitation on this use case that could additionally play into the ultimate results is the size of its dataset. During the field exercise, among the foremost challenges Talon faced was not with the ML platform or its subsequent models' performances, but with the battalion's own organic aerial collection assets. Fore example, the MPC found that it had trouble with airborne assets not being able to fly in the heat of Fort Johnson in August, or if they could fly, that it would not be for very long. This meant that the battalion could not collect as much feed as anticipated to ingest into the partner company's platform, and that when it could collect feed, the number of targets that would be available to observe would be limited to only those systems the enemy chose to place closest to friendly forward lines, which are generally not on the high payoff target list.

This is the reason that, when the model was successfully field validated, the only results pertained to detections of BMPs and gun trucks, as these were the only targets *available* to identify within the feeds. If the battalion were able to collect a larger number of feeds to run its models against, it is possible that the results would be different. That being said, the limitation itself underlines a key point: to the extent that the Army would like to (1) see tactical units perform bottom-up innovation and (2) for said units' intelligence cells and reconnaissance units (such as the MPC) to lead those innovation efforts–not least with artificial intelligence and ML, where performance relies on both the quantity and quality of collected data–it must equip them with collection assets that will fly reliably under harsh conditions, over longer time horizons. To perform innovation with intelligence, there needs to be sufficient, reliable organic collection capabilities at the echelon where the innovation is expected to occur.

There are two additional friction points which, though only tangentially related to the data, platform, and models, are nonetheless critical to the salience of the intelligence they ultimately provide. Of these, the most important is the data transmission problem set. In this use case, due to security and acquisitions-related constraints, Talon relied on its drone operators being able to upload their feeds to a shared Dropbox post-flight. This course of action relies on the operators having access to (1) computers, whether at their launch site or a company command post, and (2) time to remove the SD card from each drone and wait for every feed to upload to said computer.

It is easy to see how this creates real constraints on the intelligence cell's ability to even receive the baseline input for its ML models. At best, the cell would be able to receive the feed several hours (and at worst, several days) after it had been collected, meaning that, even if the ML models then succeed in performing accurate inferences on the data, it will likely be too late to then treat those inferences as input to a fusion cell and target any enemy systems detected. In an Army racing to posture for large-scale combat operations, where intelligence and the speed at which it can be processed and passed to fires are central and critical to survivability and success, it is not only unrealistic but also irresponsible to rely on manual post-flight transmission methods for tactical aerial reconnaissance assets. Moving forward, it will be critical for users to be able to either (a) make their ML models exportable to edge devices, where they can perform inference on live aerial feed and the operators can observe from the controllers and/or (b) for there to be a mechanism by which the intelligence cell can view and apply their models to the feed live from the command post.

Conclusion and Recommendations

If there is one major takeaway for the 101st Airborne Division and the greater Army from this use case, it is that line units can leverage ML capabilities for object detection and identification in field conditions at the tactical level. For such efforts to be successful, there are several key requirements:

(1) The ability to collect large, representative datasets prior to and during a mission.

(2) A user-friendly interface for the development and training of ML models.

(3) An individual or group with sufficient knowledge of enemy equipment to establish high-payoff target categories for the models.

(4) The ability to transmit full-motion video from forward reconnaissance units to the cell that is responsible for applying the ML models to the data.

The above requirements represent the least a unit can have to demonstrate any level of success. There are two key recommendations for other units to consider in future efforts, however, that could significantly advance the level of success demonstrated with this use case:

(1) *Acquire and validate organic collection assets that will meet mission requirements.* The performance of a ML model in detecting a target depends on that target's availability within the data to which the model is applied. The ability to collect on the types of systems that would fall on a typical tactical commander's high-payoff target list ultimately depend on the unit having longer-range, weather-resilient organic aerial reconnaissance assets.

(2) *Establish a capability for live or near-live model application.* For any intelligence drawn from ML inference to be useful to a unit's success, the data from which it is drawn needs to be transmitted live or near-live to the members of the unit responsible for applying the model, and the interface on which the model is hosted needs to be deployable on that type of feed. This empowers an intelligence cell to provide the fires warfighting function with timely assessments of target locations without substantial decay in their salience, thereby empowering the unit to "strike" first and compress its kill chain.

As the 101st Airborne and the greater Army continue working through the process of bottom-up innovation and its application at the tactical level, there are two final points of emphasis Talon would like to offer to those interested in and responsible for advancing the effort. The first is that the collection, organization, and preservation of data is of utmost importance. A unit that has diverse, representative, and appropriately organized datasets at the outset of a ML use case will be far ahead of one that does not. The second is that technological advancement and innovation do not negate the importance of practicing the basics in a tactical fighting environment. Traditional practices of concealment and rapid displacement will be, if anything, even more essential to survivability in the wars of the future, where ML-enabled object detection and identification capabilities are expected to be commonplace. War's character evolves; its nature does not.

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Problems with Partnership: How to Measure Effectiveness

Kevin Krupsky and Nathaniel Bishop

ABSTRACT: The Department of Defense (DoD) increasingly relies on partnerships—both internal and external—to achieve strategic objectives, yet lacks clear methods to measure the effectiveness of these engagements. This article examines the challenges of defining and evaluating successful partnerships across key military entities, including First Army, Security Force Assistance Brigades (SFABs), and Special Forces Operational Detachments (ODAs).

The authors argue that current assessments emphasize measures of performance (activities undertaken) over measures of effectiveness (actual impact). Due to the absence of counterfactuals and standardized metrics, units are left to interpret partnership success independently, creating inconsistent practices and outcomes. Drawing from private sector consulting, the authors propose adopting well-defined key performance indicators (KPIs) tailored to defense objectives. However, they caution that misaligned metrics can distort behavior and undermine mission goals. The article recommends increased research into effective KPIs, improved personnel selection and training for partnership roles, and the development of a unified operational picture to harmonize reporting across organizational silos. Ultimately, the authors assert that while measuring partnership outcomes is complex, it is essential for maximizing the long-term strategic value of these engagements.

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Introduction

Ron Swanson, Nick Offerman's extreme libertarian/government bureaucrat character on the hit TV show *Parks and Recreation,* once explained, "I work hard to make sure my department is as small and as ineffective as possible." He could just as well be describing the historical breakdown from the American "Administrative State" described by Dwight Waldo in 1948, [1] or today's "Hollow State," in which the government is increasingly in the business of managing others who make the state function, rather than directly providing services itself.

It is this "hollow" phenomenon—extrapolated into the security realm—that has created an increasing demand for partnerships, both internal and external, by the US Department of Defense (DoD). The DoD partners with foreign militaries, government agencies, states, businesses, and within itself. It also lends assistance in many forms, including procurement and training. The trend is towards accumulating partnerships, but there is less discussion of how partnerships help the DoD achieve its desired results. But as the US Army increases the execution of partnership and assistance in pursuit of security objectives, it has failed to define what constitutes good partnership.

To explain this problem and its solutions, we will first offer important background related to partnership and discuss how DoD executes partnership and assistance. After highlighting how consultants measure "partnership engagements" in the private sector, we then highlight the difficulties involved in attempting to place metrics of success on a partnership in the national security sector. We then offer three recommendations on improving the defense department's partnership efforts.

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[1] Dwight Waldo, *The Administrative State: A Study of the Political Theory of American Public Administration* (New York: Ronald Press, 1948).

Background

Partnership and Assistance Definitions

Different organizations define assistance in their own terms, but each definition covers the same general items. Partners, advisors, mentors, coaches, and so on all deliver information or resources to their counterparts, but may use different verbiage to describe the nuances of that exchange. The First Army enterprise, Security Force Assistance Brigades (SFAB), and Special Forces Operational Detachments-Alpha (ODAs) all fit into the Army's realm of assistance.

First Army is a three-star command that partners with the Army National Guard and Reserves to enable Reserve Component readiness in support of Combatant Commander requirements. First Army derives this mission from the Title 10 requirement of the Secretary of the Army to provide 3,500 active personnel to serve as advisors to combat units.[2] First Army assigns a high value to pre-mobilization partnership operations. The concept of pre-mobilization support adheres to the adage that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Instead of waiting until mobilization to identify problems, a First Army partner can flag issues as early as one year prior to a unit's mission. Yet First Army has no way to measure the effectiveness of its pre-mobilization partnership efforts.

Security Force Assistance Brigades (SFABs) are multifunctional teams of selected officers and non-commissioned officers whose persistent mission involves partner capacity building and security force assistance.[3] SFABs achieve their mission by way of training and advising partner nation forces around the world in order to advance US relations. SFABs build up American partner militaries enough for those nations to secure not only their own interests but also contribute to US interests.[4] This endeavor requires SFAB elements to build and maintain lasting relationships; a necessary objective, but one that is subjective and difficult to quantify.

ODAs similarly partner with foreign forces at the tactical level as part of their foreign internal defense and unconventional warfare capabilities. While the ODA mission is distinct from the SFAB mission, both entities leverage partnership to achieve their ends. Accordingly, ODAs must build strong and effective relationships with their partners—yet another critical, but hard to measure, aim.

Current Metrics of Partnership Success

Currently, both analyses and doctrine development of partnership success rely on measures of performance (things we do) but lack measures of effectiveness (whether we made a difference). There are different reasons across the spectrum of assistance, but the same issue persists.

In First Army, the true outcome of interest is increased readiness. The enterprise partners with Reserve and National Guard elements in an effort to reduce post-mobilization training days throughout the readiness certification process. The problem in measuring this kind of partnership is the lack of a counterfactual to pit against empirical observations. Since First Army partners with every mobilizing

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[2] Administration of Reserve Components, 10 USC. Section 10216, https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/10/10216.
[3] Andrew Feickert, *Army Security Force Assistance Brigades (SFABs)*, CRS Report (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2024), 1-2, https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10675.
[4] National Security Strategy of the United States of America (Washington, DC: The White House, 2022), 7, https://whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-0.2022.pdf.

unit there is no natural experiment available to compare the post-mobilization training of a unit that received partnership support with one that did not receive partnership support. Even if that were possible, it is difficult to isolate the readiness of a unit with a strong partnership against the readiness of a unit with little to no partnership. There are too many organizational and mission variables that differ across units. On top of that, there is no example of a partnered unit mobilizing at the same echelon for the same mission at the same time as a non-partnered unit, and the Army would not accept the risk of creating this scenario for analysis.

This creates a dilemma for First Army: there is no way to link the quality of a First Army unit's training support to its partner unit's readiness metrics. Therefore, leaders cannot offer clear, coherent guidance to subordinate advisor elements. This leaves First Army's ten combined arms training brigades to their own devices to interpret what partnership is and how best to achieve it. This effect compounds at respective echelons to the point where First Army advisors conduct a variety of partnership activities—some of which matter, some of which don't, and none of which the First Army enterprise can measure effectively.

Joint doctrine discusses assessments for Security Force Assistance at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels. At the operational level, commanders assess a partner's willingness, capability, and capacity to carry out a specific role and focus on conditions affecting partner's behavior and is tied to the overall mission success (e.g., increased partner nation willingness and ability to defend its borders and/or reduce requirements for US forces). Meanwhile, at the tactical level, commanders assess activities that a US unit carries out with an ally or partner. In doing so, commanders discern all aspects of partner performance—an optic that informs decision making at the operational and strategic levels.[5]

Time is another factor that complicates analysis. Whether it is cultural change or generational readiness, many partnerships exist to pursue long-term objectives that may not be apparent with short-term observations. Getting a partner to think a certain way, train a certain way, or promote specific types of leaders can take a long time, and you can expect little discernible change in a year or two. But a decade later, the hope is to start seeing the fruits of partnership labor.

Discussion

A natural point of comparison for the DoD's partnership activities resides in private sector consulting. Whether a company hires a consultant to streamline operations or to boost sales, consultants assign key performance indicators (KPIs) to measure the effectiveness of the support they offer. Metrics associated with a business's profits, payroll, time, and deliverables signal the effect a consultant might have on its partner company. Furthermore, good KPIs should be well defined, well understood, create expectations, and drive actions.[6] And perhaps the most telling KPI is recurring business—that is, whether a company continues paying for services a consultant provides. Absent quality KPIs, it is difficult to quantify the success of a partnership.

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[5] Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Security Cooperation*, JP 3-20 (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2022), V-3, https://jdeis.js.mil/jdeis/new_pubs/jp3_20.pdf.

[6] "How to Measure Success: Key Performance Indicators for Consultants," *Wrike* (blog), 11 March 2024, https://www.wrike.com/blog/measuring-success-for-consultants/.

There is a caveat to defining a partnership's success on defined metrics: overreliance on metrics can have behavioral consequences and drive actors to perform counter to an organization's critical success. This phenomenon accentuates the importance of choosing the correct metrics above all else. To do so, managers must have well-trained teams collaboratively identify measures that properly align behavior with the goals of the organization.[7] Therefore, the greatest dilemma across the partnership spectrum is how to choose the metrics that matter most to the organization's mission.

Once organizations can agree on what metrics matter most, they must still contend with stovepiped reporting on those metrics. Units report up their chains of command, partners report up theirs, and states, bureaus, and countries receive their own. In short, no one is looking at these organizations from the same vantage point. Common operational pictures exist to facilitate shared understanding and reduce confusion. Absent this, stakeholders begin to determine their own relative importance for the data points they are looking at and ignore those they do not.

Recommendations

As long as the DoD continues to rely on partnerships, it must apply considerable and deliberate attention to select and define partnership effectiveness measures. Academic research, data analysis, and relationships with private sector consultants are avenues that merit US military leaders' consideration in the realm of partnership-focused KPI selection. Cross-referencing our affected partners and other actors in the joint and allied partnership spectrum could yield further analysis that points leaders in the right direction.

Concurrent to KPI research and implementation, the DoD must remain committed to personnel selection and training processes to ensure it assigns the right people to partnership roles. A range of applicable experiences exists across and beyond the defense department. Accordingly, organizations should share and reflect on best practices to promote continual improvement in how they build and maintain expert partnership teams.

A corollary to these efforts is how units report updates to higher headquarters. In many cases, a partner can do little more than parrot concerns their partner has already identified, and likely reported, in a separate chain of command through established reporting mechanisms. For example, how does First Army report on a mobilizing partner drive decision points, and is that clearly articulated across the enterprise? Or what is the impact of an SFAB reporting on a partner nation? These constraints are imposed by law or treaty and therefore unlikely to change. People inherently find their boss's opinion more relevant than an advisor's--so how do we impart the same gravitas to an advisor as someone's boss possesses? The power of hiring, firing, withholding of funds, and so on would be beneficial in the right circumstances to better incentivize partner behaviors. Building a more robust and transparent common operating picture across all stakeholders would be a step in the right direction, eventually bolstered by reporting the right metrics for visibility.

Most importantly, these discussions must accelerate across the spectrum of partnership and at echelon. Amplifying these concerns and identifying areas for further research and evaluation will eventually lead to more successful partnership endeavors.

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[7] David Parmenter, *Key Performance Indicators for Government and Non-Profit Agencies: Implementing Winning KPIs*, 3rd ed. (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 2012), 4-6.

Conclusion

The importance of tracking metrics for partnerships is difficult to quantify because while their importance is acknowledged, most organizations fail to articulate properly how impactful they can be. The US Army will continue to need partnership—for the Total Army, the joint force, and international partners—so defining these will continue to gain importance.

Looking at the difficulties of measuring partnership effectiveness, it is easy to denigrate the existence of partnerships as a waste of time with little real effect. Or, to quote Ron Swanson: "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Don't each a man to fish, and feed yourself. He's a grown man. Fishing's not that hard." Most partnerships exist so that a person can fish to feed you in addition to themselves. Even Ron Swanson may like that deal.

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The Dragon's Shadow: Shedding Light on China's Military Challenges

Noah Jager

ABSTRACT: Despite rapid modernization and formidable advancements in military capability, China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) faces critical internal challenges that may hinder its strategic aspirations. This paper analyzes the PLA's structural vulnerabilities across three key domains: combat readiness, institutional capacity, and long-term sustainability. While China's military boasts the world's largest standing force, a technologically advanced missile program, and expanding cyber and space warfare capabilities, its lack of combat experience and reliance on scripted training undermine operational preparedness. Institutional rigidity, stemming from the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) centralized control and politicized military hierarchy, impairs battlefield autonomy and leadership effectiveness. Persistent corruption and leadership purges further destabilize the command structure.

Compounding these issues are demographic shifts, talent recruitment and retention difficulties, and the PLA's limited experience with international military alliances. China's aging population and reluctance to form formal defense partnerships contribute to strategic isolation, jeopardizing its ability to sustain global power projection. Drawing on insights from Chinese military doctrine and assessments by Western defense analysts, the paper contends that these systemic weaknesses offer strategic opportunities for adversaries, even as China works to mitigate them. In light of Sun Tzu's counsel to know both oneself and the enemy, understanding these constraints is essential to forming a balanced and effective response to China's growing military ambitions. This analysis provides a nuanced perspective on the PLA, moving beyond surface-level assessments of strength to illuminate enduring and emerging vulnerabilities.

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"If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle."
　　　―The Art of War, Sun Tzu

Introduction

In his timeless work *The Art of War*, Chinese General Sun Tzu emphasized the importance of understanding oneself and the enemy before battle. As China modernizes its military at a rapid pace, scholars and military leaders often fixate on its advanced capabilities but fail to thoroughly assess its vulnerabilities. This narrow focus not only contradicts Sun Tzu's call for a comprehensive evaluation of both strengths and weaknesses, but also limits a country's ability to identify and exploit potential vulnerabilities within China's military. While it is more prudent to overestimate than underestimate a potential adversary's capabilities, it is still critical to analyze their weaknesses in order to develop a balanced strategic approach. In an effort to highlight China's military challenges, this essay offers a

comprehensive analysis of the obstacles and limitations that affect its military today and are likely to impact its future.

China's military, known as the People's Liberation Army (PLA), faces challenges in three critical domains: combat readiness, institutional capacity, and long-term sustainability. In particular, the PLA's combat readiness is constrained by an inexperienced force, training limitations, and technological gaps. Challenges also persist in China's institutional capacity because the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) emphasis on control over the military creates tension with the PLA's operational autonomy and battlefield flexibility. Leadership deficiencies and corruption, as acknowledged by the CCP, further challenge the PLA's ability to develop a dependable and cohesive organization. Finally, in terms of long-term sustainability, China's recruitment and retention difficulties, aging population, and its reluctance to develop formalized military alliances pose obstacles in its pursuit to project credible military power in the future.

By examining the challenges in these three interconnected domains, this essay aims to provide insight into potential opportunities for Western forces to gain strategic advantages while highlighting areas where China will likely focus its resources and efforts within the PLA. The following sections first outline the PLA's current capabilities and growing ambitions to provide a necessary understanding of China's military status. It then transitions into a detailed analysis of the challenges the PLA faces through the mentioned lens of combat readiness, institutional capacity, and long-term sustainability.

A First World Military Power

According to a 2024 Department of Defense report,[1] the PLA commands the world's largest active-duty force, operates a navy with more vessels than any other nation, and maintains a nuclear triad capable of delivering warheads by land, sea, and air. Additionally, it boasts the third-largest aviation force globally and possesses one of the most technologically advanced missile programs in the world. China has also achieved advancements in cyber, space, and electronic warfare, positioning itself as a formidable competitor to the United States. Recently, US Air Force Secretary Frank Kendall acknowledged that the US is in a race for technological superiority, noting that "China is not a future threat; China is a threat today."[2]

As for China's defense spending and industrial base, it ranks among the world's most robust in both categories. With the second-largest GDP globally, China allocated an estimated $474 billion to defense in 2024. Although its GDP and defense spending lag behind that of the United States, China increased its defense spending at a higher rate than the US in 2024. Additionally, China boasts tremendous industrial capacity, accounting for approximately 25% of the world's manufacturing output, with an estimated 50% being dual-use for civilian and military applications, according to the RAND Corporation.[3] Notably, China is a global leader in naval production. US Congressional Representative Raja Krishnamoorthi explained that "for every one oceangoing vessel that [the US] can produce, China can produce 359 in one single year."[4] Furthermore, the Rand report highlights that 18 of the 37 minerals vital for military

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[1] US Department of Defense, "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China: Annual Report to Congress*,"* 2024, https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/25462830-cmpr-2024/.

[2] Olay, Matthew, "Threat from China Increasing, Air Force Official Says," US Department of Defense, 2024, https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3907669/threat-from-china-increasing-air-force-official-says/

[3] RAND Corporation, "Assessing Systemic Strengths and Vulnerabilities of China's Defense Industrial Base," 2022, https://www.rand.org/t/RRA930-1.

[4] Olay.

applications are concentrated within China, whereas only five are concentrated in the United States, Australia, and Canada.[5]

China's military strategy has evolved to reflect its growing capabilities and ambitions. Rooted in the principle of "Active Defense," China's military strategy emphasizes a proactive approach that combines defensive measures with the ability to conduct offensive operations when necessary.[6] Initially formulated to counter regional threats, such as a potential Soviet invasion during the Cold War, the strategy has expanded to accommodate China's desire to project power beyond its borders. For instance, according to China's 2019 Defense White Paper, the PLA Navy has transitioned from "near seas defense" to "far seas protection,"[7] while China's Aerospace Studies Institute stated that the PLA Army has shifted "from a regional defense model to a global combat model."[8] As China adopts a more assertive military posture in East Asia and beyond, it is vital for countries to thoroughly assess China's military capabilities and identify its vulnerabilities. The following passages offer valuable insights into China's challenges in combat readiness, institutional capacity, and long-term sustainability.

Combat Readiness

The PLA is composed of a combat-inexperienced force that has operated in peacetime for over four decades. China's prolonged absence from war causes difficulties for the PLA to assess the effectiveness of its training, doctrines, and equipment under real-world conditions. A lack of combat experience also raises uncertainty about how PLA soldiers will respond under the stress and unpredictability of actual combat scenarios. China's Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), General Zhang Youxia, acknowledged this problem by stating, "the gap between the PLA and foreign militaries is growing day by day" because "the PLA hasn't been in actual combat for many years now."[9] Exacerbating this challenge, PLA leaders have recognized that their military suffers from lax attitudes and practices, a phenomenon often characterized as the "peace disease" in China.[10] In 2018, China's official military newspaper, the *PLA Daily*, described the "peace disease" as "more dangerous than rusting guns."[11]

The PLA has attempted to mitigate the effects of an inexperienced, peacetime force by engaging in anti-piracy operations, United Nations peacekeeping missions, and dynamic training exercises.[12] However, scholars and military leaders emphasize that these efforts likely fall short of replicating the

[5] RAND.

[6] Fravel, M. Taylor, *Active Defense: China's Military Strategy Since 1949.* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022).

[7] Gill, Bates, Adam Ni and Dennis Blasko, "The ambitious reform plans of the People's Liberation Army: Progress, prospects and implications for Australia," *Australian Journal of Defence and Strategic Studies* 2, 1 (2020): 5–26, http://www.defence.gov.au/ADC/publications/AJDSS/volume2-issue1/ambitious-reform-plans-of-thePLA.asp

[8] Benson, Jeff W., and Zi Yang, "Party on the Bridge: Political Commissars in the Chinese Navy. Report of the CSIS International Security Program and Freeman Chair in China Studies," 2020, https://csis-website-prod.s3. amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200626_BensonYang_PartyOnTheBridge_Web_v2.pdf.

[9] Blasko, Dennis J., "Ten Reasons Why China Will Have Trouble Fighting a Modern War," *War on the Rocks*, February 18, 2015, https://warontherocks.com/2015/02/ten-reasons-why-china-will-have-trouble-fighting-a-modern-war/.

[10] Blasko.

[11] *The Economist*, "Xi Jinping Worries That China's Troops Are Not Ready to Fight," November 6, 2023, https://www.economist.com/special-report/2023/11/06/xi-jinping-worries-that-chinas-troops-are-not-ready-to-fight.

[12] US Department of Defense, "2023 Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China," 2023, https://media.defense.gov/2023/Oct/19/2003323409/-1/-1/1/2023-military-and-security-developments-involving-the-peoples-republic-of-china.pdf.

unpredictability and intensity of real combat. For instance, in 2015, PLA expert Dennis Blasko highlighted widespread criticism within the Chinese military regarding "formalism" and a tendency toward "training for show."[13] Similarly, in 2018 Timothy Heath, a defense researcher at the RAND Corporation, suggested that China's training exercises are unable to reveal "the extent of the PLA's deficiencies," which in turn impairs "an accurate assessment of all the factors that contribute to combat readiness."[14] With such potential training limitations and an inability to thoroughly evaluate its own deficiencies, the PLA may struggle to rapidly and effectively execute its missions at the onset of conflict.

Furthermore, although China has made impressive progress in upgrading its military weaponry, it still lags behind technologically in a few critical areas. Highlighting this issue, the DoD reported in 2024 that the PLA "still employs a mix of modern and legacy military equipment."[15] For example, China is behind in areas such as nuclear-powered submarines, advanced engine design, and semiconductor production. Reports from the US Office of Naval Intelligence back in 2009 indicate that the PLA's Jin-class nuclear submarines are noisier and less stealthy than the US Ohio-class and even Soviet-era Delta III-class submarines.[16] The increased risk of detection from the Jin-class submarines weakens the PLA's ability to conduct stealth operations and maintain an at-sea second-strike nuclear capability.[17] Additionally, despite unveiling a new fighter jet recently, China has yet to prove that its engines can enable its jets to match the speeds of the US F-22 and F-35. Liu Daxiang, deputy director at China's state-owned Aviation Industry Corporation, acknowledged that the PLA faces an "unprecedented challenge" and an "urgent political task" to produce higher-quality engines.[18] If the PLA's fighter jets are still behind technologically, this deficiency poses a risk to China's combat readiness, as advanced engines are critical for maintaining air superiority and increasing operational range.

China also faces challenges in achieving self-sufficiency in semiconductor production. These chips are essential for military systems because they enable missile guidance, electronic warfare, satellite communications, and radar. Beijing's *Made in China 2025* initiative aimed to achieve 70% self-reliance in semiconductor production by 2025, but this target has been delayed until 2030 due to insufficient advancements.[19] Further highlighting China's challenges in this domain, the US Semiconductor Industry Association (SIA) reported in 2022 that China's research and development performance in semiconductors was only 40% of that of the United States and lagged behind other global leaders like Europe, Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan. China's dependence on foreign semiconductors risks the PLA's

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[13] Blasko.

[14] Heath, Timothy R., "China's Military Has No Combat Experience: Does It Matter?" RAND Corporation, November 27, 2018, https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2018/11/chinas-military-has-no-combat-experience-does-it-matter.html.

[15] US Department of Defense, "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China," 2024, https://media.defense.gov/2024/Dec/18/2003615520/-1/-1/0/military-and-security-developments-involving-the-peoples-republic-of-china-2024.pdf.

[16] Office of Naval Intelligence, "The People's Liberation Army Navy: A Modern Navy with Chinese Characteristics," 2023, https://www.oni.navy.mil.

[17] Funaiole, Matthew P., Joseph S. Bermudez Jr., and Brian Hart, "A Glimpse of Chinese Ballistic Missile Submarines." Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), August 4, 2021, https://www.csis.org/analysis/glimpse-chinese-ballistic-missile-submarines.

[18] Lee, Amanda, "China Faces Urgent, Unprecedented Challenge to Develop Jet Engines," *South China Morning Post*, December 17, 2020, https://www.scmp.com/economy/global-economy/article/3114338/china-faces-urgent-unprecedented-challenge-develop-jet.

[19] Wang, Che-Jen, "China's Semiconductor Breakthrough: SMIC's 7nm Process Advancement – Despite Heavy US Sanctions – Will Have Major Implications for East Asia," *The Diplomat*, August 4, 2022, https://thediplomat.com/2022/08/chinas-semiconductor-breakthrough/.

ability to carry out missions if access to these components is cut off during geopolitical tension or conflict. While China has made impressive strides in modernizing its military, the PLA continues to face challenges in its combat readiness due to its lack of combat experience, training limitations, and technological gaps.

Institutional Capacity

Despite the PLA's institutional reforms over the last decade, it remains a highly politicized force with an organizational structure that poses challenges to flexibility and adaptability on the strategic and operational levels. The CCP maintains control over the PLA through its Central Military Commission, which holds ultimate authority over military decisions and strategic doctrine. The CCP further ensures alignment with the Party's interests through political commissars, ideological training, and a dual-command system, where military commanders and political officers share authority. On the strategic level, such politicization risks hindering the PLA's ability to adjust its military strategy, as it remains heavily dependent on the CCP's internal cohesion and stability. Taylor Fravel, author of *Active Defense,* observed that major Chinese military reforms have only occurred during periods of unified and stable CCP leadership.[20] She finds that internal divisions within the CCP constrain decision-making and delay the PLA's ability to adapt to shifts in modern warfare. Hence, if internal divisions arise within the CCP, it may struggle to adapt to the modern military environment.

On the operational level, the CCP's emphasis on control can restrict the PLA's battlefield autonomy and thus limit its capacity to react in real-time. Andrew Scobell, a PLA expert at the US Institute of Peace, argues that the CCP's "obsession with control means they're not agile and flexible," pointing to a critical imbalance between "control" and "command."[21] The organizational structure of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is a clear example of this dynamic. PLAN vessels follow a dual-command system, where military commanders are responsible for operational planning and executing missions, while political commissars ensure adherence to CCP ideology, maintain discipline, and oversee morale. Although this structure reinforces Party control, it can cause delayed decision-making and potential miscommunications due to leadership clashes. As Commander Jeff Benson, an Adjunct Fellow at the United States Naval Institute, explains, "Officers, enlistees, and various organizations within the unit cannot act as they please."[22] He suggests that the vessel's military commander is "influenced by the existence of a superior decision-making organization," which ultimately shapes their leadership and behavior.

In addition to limitations in autonomy and adaptability, the PLA faces challenges within its leadership ranks. Xi Jinping and the Chinese state media have highlighted the persistence of the "Five Incapables" among the officer corps.[23] The Five Incapables suggest that PLA officers struggle to 1) judge situations, 2) understand the intentions of superior officers, 3) make operational decisions, 4) deploy forces effectively, and 5) manage unexpected situations.[24] While the CCP may project these claims as a

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[20] Fravel, M. Taylor, Active Defense: *China's Military Strategy Since 1949*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023).
[21] Martin, Peter. 2023. "Can China Fight? The Russia-Ukraine War Offers Warnings." Bloomberg, November 16, 2023, https://www.bloomberg.com/features/2023-war-china-taiwan/.
[22] Benson, Jeff W., and Zi Yang, "Party on the Bridge: Political Commissars in the Chinese Navy," Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200626_BensonYang_PartyOnTheBridge_Web_v2.pdf.
[23] Blasko.
[24] Blasko.

motivational tool to combat the "peace disease," they likely reflect deeper, entrenched issues within the PLA's command structure. The US Department of Defense's 2023 report on China highlights this issue, noting that "although PLA writings do not specify how widespread the 'Five Incapables' are, PLA media outlets have consistently raised them." The report notes that this repeated acknowledgment signifies underlying systemic challenges and "may indicate the PLA lacks confidence in its proficiency to execute its own operational concepts."[25]

The PLA is also plagued by institutional corruption. Reports suggest that corruption within the PLA takes various forms, including disloyalty, bribery for promotions, leasing military land for personal gain, and accepting illicit payments in exchange for approving food or equipment contracts. The 2024 US DoD report on China finds that "corruption touches every service in the PLA." In response to this issue, Xi Jinping and the CCP ousted over 15 senior PLA figures on corruption charges in 2023.[26] This reaction reflects a broader trend of leadership purges under Xi, with many reports noting removals, including one citing at least 45 high-ranking officials between 2013 and 2016.[27] Despite such anticorruption efforts, corruption within the PLA still hinders its ability to develop an institution built on merit and cohesion. With factors such as loyalty and bribery influencing promotions, the PLA is at risk of developing an officer corps that prioritizes personal connections and self-interest over competence and talent. Furthermore, the removal of numerous high-ranking officials has led to increased leadership turnover, which may disrupt continuity and create inefficiencies within the PLA. Finally, such a turbulent leadership environment may discourage officers from questioning or challenging CCP strategies and doctrine, even when flawed.

Long-Term Sustainability

While the PLA commands the world's largest active-duty force, it struggles to recruit and retain talent at the pace needed to operate increasingly complex machinery. Timothy Heath reported to the Indo-Pacific Defense Forum in 2023 that "by their own admission, the PLA "continues to struggle to attract and retain educated and skilled people who can use the weapons and equipment."[28] In response to this issue, China has increased wages by 40%, permitted retired service members to re-enlist, and expanded its conscription cycle from once to twice per year.[29] In 2017, the Central Military Commission also allowed the PLA to broaden its recruitment efforts by including contract civilians.[30] Despite these efforts, reports suggest that the PLA continues to face challenges in attracting skilled personnel, with many noting that

[25] US Department of Defense. 2023. 2023 Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China. Washington, DC: US Department of Defense. https://media.defense.gov/2023/Oct/19/2003323409/-1/-1/1/2023-military-and-security-developments-involving-the-peoples-republic-of-china.pdf.

[26] Gan, Nectar. 2024. "Xi Brought Down Powerful Rivals in the Military. Now He's Going After His Own Men." CNN, December 15, 2024. https://edition.cnn.com/2024/12/15/china/china-military-purge-analysis-miao-hua-intl-hnk/index.html.

[27] Business Standard, "China's Prez Xi Continues His Drive to Purify PLA, Instill Loyalty." Business Standard, June 25, 2024, https://www.business-standard.com/external-affairs-defence-security/news/china-s-prez-xi-continues-his-drive-to-purify-pla-instill-loyalty-124062500274.

[28] Indo-Pacific Defense Forum. 2023. "China's PLA Facing Talent Drain as Top Graduates Shun Military Service," Indo-Pacific Defense Forum, December 2023, https://ipdefenseforum.com/2023/12/chinas-pla-facing-talent-drain-as-top-graduates-shun-military-service/.

[29] Economist Intelligence Unit. 2023. "China's Demographic Outlook and Implications for 2035." Economist Intelligence Unit, December 2023. https://www.eiu.com/n/chinas-demographic-outlook-and-implications-for-2035/.

[30] Clay, Marcus, and Dennis J. Blasko. 2020. "People Win Wars: The PLA Enlisted Force, and Other Related Matters." *War on the Rocks,* July 8, 2020, https://warontherocks.com/2020/07/people-win-wars-the-pla-enlisted-force-and-other-related-matters/.

the incentives to leave often outweigh the benefits of staying.[31] Military strategist Edward Luttwak highlights a cultural factor contributing to this trend, citing that "bright young Chinese are possibly the planet's most civilian-minded population, least inclined to serve under the command of a military hierarchy."[32]

China's demographic challenges exacerbate recruitment difficulties and may pose long-term risks to the PLA's sustainability. The *Economist Intelligence Unit* forecasts that by 2035, nearly 35% of China's population will be over 60, with another 25% older than 65.[33] Other projections suggest that China's population could shrink by nearly half by the end of the century.[34] China's aging and declining population will significantly reduce the pool of eligible recruits, challenging the PLA's ability to sustain a robust and capable force.[35] Moreover, China's decades-long one-child policy and declining fertility rates have created financial and social pressures on single children, who are often expected to support aging parents.[36] These responsibilities, combined with the appeal of higher-paying opportunities in other sectors, make military service an increasingly unattractive option for many qualified candidates.

Finally, although China has strengthened ties with countries like Russia, North Korea, Iran, and BRICS nations, its lack of formal military alliances and reluctance to establish them may limit its global military influence. At the 12th Party Congress in 1982, the CCP adopted an "independent and self-reliant foreign policy of peace" and has since avoided joining formal military blocs, unlike the United States with NATO, AUKUS, and its bilateral alliances with South Korea and Japan.[37] Alliances are critical in modern warfare because, as British General Sir Rupert Smith suggests, they "increase military strength and legitimacy, expand territorial influence, distribute risk, and secure a role in crucial decision-making."[38] More specifically, alliances can grant access to foreign ports and bases, provide specialized capabilities from partner nations, and facilitate military and political burden-sharing during a conflict. While China maintains informal partnerships with many countries, political scientist Glenn Snyder argues that formal military alliances are a more effective and reliable form of multilateral security cooperation, as they offer "elements of specificity, legal and moral obligation, and reciprocity that are usually lacking in informal alignments."[39] Without formalized military alliances, China faces a heightened risk of military isolation, limiting its ability to project power globally and respond effectively to multilateral threats or conflicts.

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[31] Economist Intelligence Unit, "China's Demographic Outlook and Implications for 2035," *The Economist*, December 2023, https://www.eiu.com/n/chinas-demographic-outlook-and-implications-for-2035/.

[32] Luttwak, Edward, "The Myth of China's Military Might," *UnHerd,* March 7, 2023, https://unherd.com/2023/03/the-myth-of-chinas-military-might/.

[33] Economist Intelligence Unit. 2023. "China's Demographic Outlook and Implications for 2035." Economist Intelligence Unit, December 2023. https://www.eiu.com/n/chinas-demographic-outlook-and-implications-for-2035/.

[34] Rieffel, Lex, and Xueqing Wang. 2024. "China's Population Could Shrink to Half by 2100: Is China's Future Population Drop a Crisis or an Opportunity?" Scientific American, May 1, 2024. https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/chinas-population-could-shrink-to-half-by-2100/.

[35] Horta, Loro. 2021. "China's Military Modernisation: Constrained by One-Child Policy." S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, November 11, 2021, https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/chinas-military-modernisation-constrained-by-one-child-policy/CO21133.

[36] Horta.

[37] Zhang, Feng. 2012. "China's New Thinking on Alliances." *Survival* 54, no. 5: 129–148. https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2012.728350.

[38] Smith, Rupert, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World*. (New York: Knopf, 2005).

[39] Snyder, Glenn Herald, *Alliance Politics*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

Conclusion

In *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu warned of the perils of failing to understand oneself and the enemy. While China's military modernization efforts are undoubtedly impressive, it is critical for both China and its adversaries to recognize that the PLA still faces limitations in combat readiness, institutional capacity, and long-term sustainability. The PLA's lack of real-world combat experience, training limitations, and technological deficiencies will likely hinder its ability to respond effectively to operational demands during its first live combat scenarios. Additionally, the CCP's overemphasis on control, leadership shortcomings, and entrenched corruption pose risks to the PLA's ability to develop a flexible and dependable command structure. Finally, recruitment and retention issues, coupled with an aging population and China's reluctance to formalize military alliances, challenge its long-term sustainability and global power projection. Understanding these challenges, as Sun Tzu advised, can enable countries to develop strategies that exploit these vulnerabilities. Nevertheless, as China continues its military modernization, it has already begun addressing these challenges and is likely to prioritize overcoming them in its pursuit of achieving world-class military status by mid-century.

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Shadows of Death: Che Guevara and Guerrilla Doctrine in Multi-Domain Operations

Mitchell Walker

They stalked along the jagged coastline, slipping past sentries, unnoticed in the darkness. Unseen and unheard, the group reached their objective, lying in wait like a predator ready to close in for the kill. With a jolting roar, the torpedo impacted beneath the waterline, striking the aircraft carrier's hull, sending fire into the night sky. Cries for help echoed through the darkness as the submarine slithered away, unseen, as if it was never there…

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Whether deep in the jungle against an apex conventional force or at sea against large surface fleets, those with minimal resources often turn to unconventional means to meet their strategic objectives. The submarine is an innovation in this vein. While applied to a new context, its origins are far more primal and familiar: the humble guerrilla fighter.

The right-hand man of revolutionary Fidel Castro during the Cuban Revolution, Ernesto "Che" Guevara, was Argentinian by birth and became a household name in the 1950s.[1] He learned guerrilla tactics the hard way–in active combat–against the brutal dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista's conventional forces in the jungles of Cuba.[2] His book *Guerrilla Warfare*, first published in 1961, has served as a manual for would-be guerrilla fighters around the world ever since. He advocated for quick, hit-and-run guerrilla attacks by a core cadre of revolutionaries operating in the countryside to undermine a stronger opponent.[3] His lessons are straightforward and easy to apply at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of war and to domains as disparate as land, sea, and space.

In space, a domain whose barrier to entry decreases daily, assets are unknowingly susceptible to guerrilla attacks like those on land or at sea. Due to its status as an unregulated, enormous, and non-attributional area of operations, space allows quick, hit-and-run strikes with little to no repercussions. President Donald J. Trump's proposed "Golden Dome for America" will address this gap in homeland missile defense and interception of space-based attacks in the not-so-distant future.[4]

As guerrilla tactics are often used by a weaker force against a stronger opponent, attack submarines work in a similar way; by staying beneath the ocean's waves, striking when most opportune, and retreating to relative safety after striking, submarines preserve themselves to fight

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[1] "Che Guevara (1928-1967)," PBS, accessed March 4, 2025, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/castro-che-guevara-1928-1967/.

[2] "Che Guevara (1928-1967)."

[3] Ernesto "Che" Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare* (Hawthorne, CA: BN Publishing, 2014).

[4] Jen Judson, "Iron Dome for America Gets a Golden Makeover," Defense News, February 25, 2025, https://www.defensenews.com/pentagon/2025/02/25/iron-dome-for-america-gets-a-golden-makeover/.

another day. As Che's forces retreated to the Cuban jungles, submarines retreat to the ocean depths, and in space, assets may avoid detection entirely, with attribution to state or non-state actors nearly impossible to obtain. Che Guevara's three focal points apply just as well to submarines and to future space-based interceptors as they do to guerrilla bands: interdiction, psychological warfare, and sustainment.

Interdiction

Fighting against a dictator who had Cuba's conventional military at his fingertips, Che favored hit-and-run attacks upon enemy nodes of supply and communication, which amplified the impact made by his numerically inferior force. By striking these chokepoints, where men, supplies, and equipment frequented, he dictated the fight on the ground. While evident across history, one cannot discount the effect of a well-timed ambush against an opponent.

The maritime and space domains are just as susceptible to ambush as the land. The submarine was developed for this precise form of interdiction and has been used to great effect since before the First World War to disrupt lines of communication at sea, often sinking merchant vessels in times of war.[5] As space becomes more developed and countries expand into this uncharted domain, the potential for strikes upon space chokepoints, called Lagrange points, increases exponentially.[6] There are only so many ideal places for satellites and other assets, so guerrilla attacks against these critical nodes is guaranteed, not unlike shipping lanes at sea or key road networks on land.

The ocean depths or the abyss of space, like the Cuban jungle, are vast places – an attack could come from anywhere and at any time against any number of assets. While not only disrupting the flow of men, weapons, or crucial communication or information to faraway outposts or the frontline, the interdiction of sea lines of communication or space's Lagrange points, like Guevara's hit-and-run tactics, spread fear and uncertainty.

Psychological Warfare

The psychological effect of guerrilla tactics creates uncertainty through both action and deception in their respective domains. Che's use of propaganda, women integrated into the ranks of the "guerrilla band," and sabotage produced fear and confusion among his superiorly armed opponents.[7] When everything, including the local populace, the local newspapers, or even water sources, seems to be aligned against you, it becomes difficult not to shift your strategy to avoid a

[5] Greg Beyer, "The History of Submarines: From Science to Stealth," *The Collector*, May 4, 2023, https://www.thecollector.com/history-of-submarines/.
[6] Joel Eldo and Efstratios L Ntantis, "Review of Lagrangian Points and Scope of Stationary Satellites," vol. 2024 (H-Space, Budapest, Hungary, 2024), 2.
[7] Guevara.

crushing blow. Because Che leveraged these environmental advantages well, effectively forcing his opponent to withdraw from the jungles and restricting their movement to more secure areas.

Likewise, the ability of the submarine to sneak into territorial waters undetected presents an issue for an opponent: there only needs to be one submarine for there to be a threat. Julian Corbett's idea of a fleet in being applies to both submarine and Che Guevara's idea of guerrilla war; if there is a sole guerrilla fighter or submarine at large, uncertainty rules that contested battlespace.[8] Like the guerrilla coming from the darkest corners of the jungle or barest expanses of the desert, a submarine can rise from the ocean depths, strike, and then return to safety, leaving a trail of destruction and fear in its wake.

In space, the nature of conflict is known only to the future, but because attacks within the domain are non-attributional, disrupting an opponent's space assets has the same effect that modern cyber-attacks do–mass confusion and uncertainty. Furthermore, the inevitable impact from destroyed communications and position, navigation, and timing assets in orbit would have its own cascading ramifications on both the people and the government of a target state. By producing uncertainty, those waging unconventional war dictate the conditions of the fight by forcing their opponent to adapt to the changing situation on the ground; failure to do so results in complete exploitation by the unconventional way of war.

Logistical Needs

While they operate alone and unsupported, guerrilla fighters still require an outside base of support. Mobility is at the forefront of their strategy, but they cannot operate indefinitely. Throughout history, the guerrilla band has always turned to the local populace for recruits, supplies, and motivation to wage a true people's war. Similarly, the crew of a submarine periodically needs to return to home port or onboard supplies from a resupply ship before it becomes combat ineffective.

The question of logistics will largely shape the asymmetric battle for space as well. Like the jets, tanks, and ships of the air, land, and sea domains, space-based interceptors will not be able to operate indefinitely. Whether piloted by humans or by artificial intelligence, they will require a vector to get them to space and system to direct, resupply, and rearm them for continued operations. Like food, torpedoes and fuel are not indefinite, and neither are the guerrilla's bullets. Once resupplied, the guerrilla, submarine, and spacecraft of the future each regain their mobility, allowing them to continue waging asymmetric war either at sea, in space, or on land. However, the length of the space-based supply chain is long and exceptionally vulnerable to attack. This would suggest a next stage to guerrilla evolution: disposable platforms, or space-based logistics and manufacturing assets as the next stage of evolution beyond the Golden Dome.

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[8] John B Hattendorf, "The Idea of a 'Fleet in Being' in Historical Perspective," *Naval War College Review* 67, no. 1 (2014): 3.

Implications For the Modern Battlefield

Though 60 years old now, the multi-dominant relevancy of Guevara's doctrine touches on some enduring truths of the nature of warfare. Because they provide a relevant advantage, guerrilla strategies will maintain their status as the principal instruments of disadvantaged actors during their struggle to oppose stronger ones across every domain of warfare. While technological advancements, contested information spaces, and the prevalence of cyber have grown on the modern battlefield, Che's emphasis upon hit-and-run attacks has only grown more prevalent in asymmetric conflict. The last three years of the Russo-Ukrainian War have seen deceptive, hit-and-run attacks from both sides, often utilizing first-person view (FPV) drones carrying loitering munitions. At sea, Russian attack submarines are still interdicting lines of supply and communication in the Baltic Sea as their predecessors did during the World Wars, all to oppose the growing presence of a "NATO lake."[9] In the Pacific, Chinese submarines patrol the ocean depths in ambiguity just as United States' submarines do the same to maintain fleets-in-being in all corners of the globe.

Because of its barriers to entry, space has not yet seen much guerrilla warfare, but that will change in time. Because of this inevitability, space operations should be planned with Guevara's principles in mind to mitigate the threat these cheaper tactics will pose to expensive, near-irreplaceable platforms. Applicable today as they have been for the last six decades, Che Guevara's doctrine of guerrilla warfare, attack submarine strategy, and guerrilla tactics in space share the commonalities of interdiction, psychological warfare, and sustainment. To achieve these ends, each use surprise, deception, and mobility to exploit the weaknesses of their opponent and provide their users a relative advantage in an often uneven operational environment.

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[9] Chris Panella, "Russian Submarines Fought a Torpedo Duel in Waters Surrounded by NATO Allies," Business Insider, accessed October 21, 2024, https://www.businessinsider.com/russian-submarines-fought-torpedo-duel-in-sea-surrounded-by-nato-2024-7.

Ideology Matters: Why (And How) Terrorists Fight

Yousef Koborsi

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is an excerpt of cadet research conducted within the Defense and Strategic Studies program at West Point. The content below was heavily condensed from the original thesis to fit within publication guidelines and is presented here in a summarized format. The complete research is available from the author.

ABSTRACT: This paper challenges the conventional understanding of terrorism by examining how ideology—not just religious affiliation—shapes the tactical behaviors of violent extremist groups. Through a comparative analysis of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), the study argues that even ideologically similar groups within the same operational environment can diverge significantly in their methods of warfare. The paper introduces a binary classification system: literal-ideological groups aim to capture and govern territory, while figurative-ideological groups focus on symbolic or fear-inducing attacks to achieve political or psychological objectives.

Using the Global Terrorism Database and statistical analysis via Stata, the study finds a strong correlation between the literalness of a group's ideology and its choice of target type—military and police targets for literal groups, symbolic or civilian targets for figurative ones. While attack methods may overlap, it is the target selection that most accurately reflects a group's strategic aims. The findings provide actionable insight for policymakers and defense planners, who are urged to examine belief systems more closely than broad religious labels. The study concludes that ideology, when understood as a nuanced and dynamic variable, can serve as a valuable tool in forecasting terror group behaviors, as exemplified in both historical cases and emerging conflicts such as Hamas and Hezbollah's differing approaches toward Israel.

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Introduction

Terror organizations tend to adhere to the same overarching goal: destabilizing political powers by subjugating a civilian populace with violence and fear.[10] Despite a near identical end state, tactics vary from one organization to the next. So why do terror

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[10] CIA Factbook, https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/references/terrorist-organizations/.

groups fight differently from one another? Factors like geography and composition may dictate the tactical approach, and financing limits operational capabilities. For years, operational and tactical constraints may have explained the differing fighting styles of terror organizations. In turn, the strategic calculus behind terror operations has not undergone rigorous scrutiny.

The meteoric rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) from the ashes of Al-Qaeda Iraq (AQI) dispelled the notion that geographic and financial factors solely account for the disparity in fighting styles between different terror organizations. Despite both subscribing to a Sunni-Islamic doctrine and operating in Iraq, ISIL and AQI had vastly different approaches.[11] ISIL used conventional attack methods against military and police targets to dominate large swaths of territory throughout Syria and Iraq. Conversely, AQI relied on a non-conventional approach; they bombed, sabotaged, and attacked public targets to instill fear. In turn, AQI struggled to generate territorial gains in Iraq, while ISIL threatened control of the entire Levant. Could ideology, a strategic variable, explain the difference between these near-identical terror organizations?

The differences in warfighting style between ISIL and AQI[12] discredit the notion that these two groups would mirror each other's tactics simply because they belong to the same religious sect and operational environment. Typically, ideology has been no more than a blanket statement used to codify groups under the same religious sect as having the same goals and interests. For example, a Sunni-Islamic group will likely target a Shia-Islamic organization and vice versa. Ideology identifies in-groups and out-groups, where out-groups are the target of said terror organization. While that insight is helpful, one can glean the same conclusion when analyzing the religious sect of the terror group. Ideology has been largely relegated to a mere synonym of religious affiliation. I argue ideology is a far more complex variable, and that it can forecast more than generic target populations but actual specific target types.

Simply put, I contend that ideology can predict whether a threat group is more prone to attack a military command and control node or a voting booth. In this article, I examine ideology in a binary fashion; a threat group is either figuratively-ideologically driven or literally-ideologically driven. A figurative-ideological group concerns itself with spreading its religious message through terror attacks that incite and monger fear. However, a literal-ideological group is more focused on attacks that enable the gain of territory. By introducing this classification system, I enhance the capability to discern

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[11] Byman, Daniel, and Jennifer R. Williams, "ISIS vs. Al Qaeda: Jihadism's Global Civil War," 2015, *Brookings,* https://www.brookings.edu/articles/isis-vs-al-qaeda-jihadisms-global-civil-war/.
[12] Byman, Daniel, "Comparing Al Qaeda and ISIS: Different goals, different targets," 2015, *Brookings,* https://www.brookings.edu/articles/comparing-al-qaeda-and-isis-different-goals-different-targets/.

specific military and civilian targets of a threat group regardless of religious-sect.

Ideology and Why It Matters

Before making such a bold claim on the role of ideology in war-fighting style, it's necessary to peel back the proverbial layers of ideology to make a basis for my claims. To enter the conversation, I had to understand the three fundamental truths that scholars have laid out before me. First, ideology plays a role in fueling conflict duration and severity. Secondly, religious ideology affects war outcomes. Finally, religiously ideologically motivated groups with the same ideology can have different warfighting outcomes. In the context of these facts, two questions arose. Could a binary classification based on the literalness of the beliefs forecast likely targets and methods of attack for a terror group? Could how literally a threat group believes in their religious doctrine be an indicator of how they will wage war?

My research separates religious ideology into two distinct camps: literal and figurative religious ideologies. Threat groups with a literal religious ideology wage terror to gain territory. Alternatively, groups espousing a figurative ideology focus their terror efforts on psychological or political gains. Do groups with a literal religious ideology attack military and police targets (capacitive targets) more than figurative threat groups? Figurative threat groups are not expected to select capacitive targets since their doctrinal belief is not driven by the territory capture. Instead, figurative groups seek to spread their message by focusing attacks on non-capacitive targets like political and civilian targets. By attacking targets that do not pose a legitimate resistance, the figurative group accomplishes two tasks imperative to their belief doctrine. First, by facing little legitimate kinetic resistance from a capacitive target, the figurative group does not run the risk of taking needless casualties. Juxtaposed with a literal group that sees friendly casualties as an acceptable risk toward the acquisition of territory. Secondly, high-profile non-capacitive attacks garner public attention to the figurative group's ideological message. In turn, this spreads fear amongst the public and appeals to the fringe elements of society to buy into their religious movement. My results overwhelmingly point toward a correlation between religious ideology and target type. The ISIL and AQI case study demonstrates that even the smallest difference between ideologies of the same sect can lead to differing warfare styles.

Theory and Research Design

My research hypothesizes that threat groups driven by a literal religious ideology will employ warfighting styles that are more conducive for capacitive territorial gains. While threat groups that have figurative ideological goals will conduct attacks that inflict more

psychological harm to sow fear in citizens. I use two dependent variables, attack and target type, to capture this phenomenon. I expect literal-ideological groups to utilize more direct-action approaches tied to clear tactical objectives anchored in their desire for territorial expansion. Armed assaults, attacks targeting facilities and infrastructure, and bombings are the most effective for securing and controlling territory; hence, literal-ideological groups will conduct more of these attack types.

Figurative-ideological groups like Al-Qaeda-Iraq (AQI) will execute attack types like kidnappings, political assassinations, and hijacking to inflict fear without achieving considerable capacitive gains. Figuratively motivated groups do not wish to control territory but rather to subvert state governments.[13] Therefore, unlike ISIL and other literal-ideological groups, figurative-ideological groups desire to avoid kinetic engagements with military and law enforcement as they are only concerned with terrorizing the local populace for a political purpose. Therefore, this study will assign attack types as those that seek capacitive gains and those that do not. Both groups use varied attack types; however, this study believes that literal-ideologically motivated threat groups will use capacitive-targeting attacks more than those of a figurative ideological group.

Target types tell an incredibly detailed story about the goals of an ideologically driven threat group. Groups like ISIL with literal motives should target military and governmental targets to drive them out of their territory. Figuratively driven ideologically groups like AQI should target religious figures, private citizens, and symbolic locations to promote fear and political instability. Groups with capacitive goals will attack targets that will actively fight back, such as military or law enforcement, to assert ownership over a piece of land. However, literal groups will attempt to avoid damaging infrastructure (water lines, refineries, and telecommunication nodes) because they wish to use it when they become the ruling agency/party. Unlike literal groups, figurative groups might attack pieces of infrastructure to promote the most chaos and fear. Like attack type, this groups target types as targets that are conducive to capacitive gains and targets that are not.

To cultivate my theory and hypothesis into a statistical measure, I use the Global Terrorism Database from the University of Maryland, which outlines all terror actions in Iraq from 2003 to 2020.[14] I filter this dataset to include only terror attacks committed by ISIL and AQI. After cleaning the data for only ISIL and AQI actions in Iraq, the Excel was loaded into Stata for data analysis. These statistical tests split ISIL into a literal

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[13] Gunaratna, Rohan, "Al Qaeda's Ideology," Hudson Institute, 2005, https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/al-qaeda-s-ideology.
[14] Global Terrorism Database, START.umd.edu.

ideological variable and AQI into a figurative ideological variable. This data analysis, according to ideological variable classification, allows one to determine if the hypothesis is true: literal ideological groups prefer capacitive targets and attack methods, while figurative ideological groups prefer non-capacitive targets and attack methods.

Findings

For religiously motivated terrorists, religious ideology has a statistically significant effect on warfighting style. Most notably, religious ideology plays the largest role in determining the target type of an ideologically driven threat group. Literal-ideological groups like ISIL favor capacitive targets such as military outposts or private citizens protecting their property. Figurative-ideological groups like AQI will tend to target non-capacitive targets such as governmental buildings or symbolic property such as religious infrastructure, voting booths, and public squares. These findings provide policy makers and military planners with a new tool to proactively forecast targets of ideologically driven threat groups.

Despite its statistical significance, this research asserts that attack methods themselves cannot be capacitive or non-capacitive in nature, without the contextualization of the overall strategy of the threat group. Threat groups have limited attack methods available, so they align attack methods to their ideological objectives. For example, a bombing can have a two-fold purpose. Literal groups can use bombings the same way a conventional force can use preparatory artillery fires to make capacitive gains. A notable example is the 2022 ISIL Al-Sinai prison break.[15] Here, ISIL used a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBID) aimed at the prison gates to initiate an armed assault to free ISIL captives. However, for a figurative-ideological group, a bombing like this could also send a strong political message, such as an attack on an American embassy or a symbolic location like the World Trade Center. Therefore, this study strongly urges readers to first concern themselves with the intended target of an ideological group. If they are a literal-ideological group they will likely choose capacitive targets, and if they are figurative, then non-capacitive targets are more probable. In summation, attack types can achieve aims for both literal and figurative groups, but this strongly depends on target type.

Looking Forward

Armed with a new understanding of the complexity of ideology, the impetus is on the defense and security scholars to expound on the theories presented by this article. The dynamic nature of ideology pushes national security professionals to examine belief

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[15] Hassan, Mohammed and Samer al-Ahmed, 2022, "A closer look at the ISIS attack on Syria's al-Sina Prison," Middle East Institute, https://www.mei.edu/publications/closer-look-isis-attack-syrias-al-sina-prison.

doctrine (literal or figurative) rather than mere religious affiliation to surmise the expected target types of the threat group. Now, planners should focus on gathering intelligence regarding the specific beliefs of the two threat groups and assigning those ideological objectives to expected tactical, operational, and strategic approaches. Furthermore, by proving that even little differences between threat groups have differing outputs in war-fighting style, researchers can extrapolate the findings to assert that large differences in ideology will yield even larger disparities in war-fighting styles between terror organizations. In short, ideology is no longer a synonym for religion, but a complex and dynamic variable. One that the security community can use as an additional tool to predict the behavior of terrorist organizations.

Given that ideology is a malleable and evolving variable is not easily quantifiable for statistical analysis. The AQI and ISIL case study served a dual purpose as an excellent qualitative study. Where the vast difference in war-fighting style between two nearly identical threat groups could be explained by one variable. Ideology is worth further research. I completed this analysis before the Hamas attacks on Israel on October 7th, 2023. In this context, I challenge the reader to assess the importance of ideology in examining the target selection of Hamas and Hezbollah. Hamas did not center their attack on capacitive; they did not invade with the hopes of controlling Israeli territory. Instead, Hamas acted as figurative-ideologically driven actor focused on mass violence and chaos directed against the civilian populace. Hamas's Shia-Islamic peer in the north, Hezbollah, has a different approach to target selection. Hezbollah controls and governs vast territory in southern Lebanon. Why has Hezbollah not engaged in more large-scale attacks to support Hamas since both groups share Shia-Islam and a common enemy of Israel?

Could it be that Hezbollah as a literal-ideological motivated group does not want to risk their capacitive gains on helping Hamas, a figurative-ideological group, which has no territorial ambitions? The ideological argument explains not only Hamas' targets, but it also provides a possible explanation to Hezbollah's relative restraint. Hence, religious ideology is ever more pertinent to explain the world around us. With the interconnectedness of the world,[16] ideological movements with global security ramifications can evolve in mere days. Security professionals must use the news lens, evidenced by the AQI and ISIL case study, to quickly identify likely targets and decisively thwart attacks.

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[16] Votel, Joseph, and Christina Bembenek, Charles Hans, Jeffrey Mouton, and Amanda Spencer, "#Virtual Caliphate," CNAS, 2017, https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/virtual-caliphate.

Commercialized Conflict: Investigating the Relationship Between State Use of Private Military Companies and Conflict Intensity

Nathan Larson

ABSTRACT: This thesis examines the relationship between conflict intensity and the state use of Private Military Companies (PMCs) in modern warfare. Challenging existing literature that emphasizes economic efficiency, augmentation, state norms, and legal circumvention, this research posits that conflict intensity—rather than static state-level traits—best predicts when and how states employ PMCs. The central argument is that states are most likely to utilize PMCs during high-intensity conflicts that strain conventional forces or low-intensity engagements that do not warrant full military deployment but still require coercive action. Conversely, states tend to avoid PMCs in moderately intense conflicts where objectives are regionally limited and force control is paramount.

To test this theory, the study employs a comparative case study method analyzing US PMC use in Iraq (2003–2012) and Russian PMC involvement in Ukraine (2014–2024). Conflict intensity is measured using proxies such as troop levels, casualties, financial cost, and territorial changes. The findings support a U-shaped pattern of PMC usage: high in both low and high-intensity conflicts, but minimized in mid-intensity phases. This model advances the discourse on PMCs by introducing conflict intensity as a dynamic and predictive factor in their deployment. The study contributes to policy discussions on military outsourcing in the context of gray zone operations and great power competition, offering a novel framework for anticipating state behavior in the evolving landscape of privatized warfare.

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Introduction

The modern battlefield is a complex arena shared by state militaries and a variety of non-state actors, notably private military companies (PMC). This thesis investigates the conditions that cause states to use PMCs, and addresses the research question: *What explains when states use PMCs in war?* Previous research suggests cost-savings, legal circumvention, augmentation, and state-norm explanations for why some states are more likely to use PMCs than others. However,

I have identified several gaps in these collective schools of thought, with a general trend being that they do not explain variation in intra-state and intra-conflict use.

Furthermore, I argue that conflict intensity determines when and how states employ PMCs. Specifically, states use PMCs when a conflict is intense enough to necessitate the supplementation of warfighting capacity or lacks the intensity to warrant the deployment of state military forces, but where armed force is deemed necessary over the other levers of national power. They will refrain from using PMCs during mid-intensity conflicts. To test these hypotheses, I first quantify the intensity of conflicts based on several proxies: troops deployed, length of conflict, number of casualties, and the conflict's financial cost. Second, I analyze case studies of US PMC use in Iraq and Russia's use in Ukraine to examine the hypothesized causal mechanisms using these proxies. I find support for my hypotheses in these cases when conceptualizing conflict intensity using these proxies.

This topic is relevant to strategic and security studies as great power competition increasingly occurs in the Gray Zone, which encompasses state-sponsored coercive or subversive actions to achieve national security objectives in violation or absence of international norms, and at a level below direct armed conflict.[17] This thesis provides scholars and policymakers alike with a model for predicting when states are likely to intervene in an interstate conflict using PMCs. This thesis is divided into five sections. First is a conceptual framework that provides definitions of key terms and variables used in this paper. Second is a comprehensive review of contemporary literature that provides a diverse range of explanations for state PMC use in war, as well as critiques of the literature. Third is my argument, hypotheses, and methodology, as well as an alternative explanation for how conflict intensity is related to PMCs. Fourth are two in-depth case studies of Russian and US use of PMCs and how it relates to conflict intensity. Finally, I provide a conclusion of my key findings, address the limitations of my conclusions, and provide suggestions for future research on the topic of PMCs.

Conceptual Framework

Private military and security companies are a legally complex and categorically multifaceted group of organizations. Within this paper, PMCs are defined based on the definition offered in the Montreux Document by the International Committee of the Red Cross as private business entities that provide military services for monetary compensation, usually defined in a legal contract.[182] Furthermore, the dependent variable, the use of PMCs, will be limited based on this definition to mean the conduct of military services as defined by United Nations Human Rights Council Resolution 24/45 which describes them as primarily offensive actions or actions in support of offensive activities such as "strategic planning, intelligence, investigation, land, sea or air reconnaissance, flight operations of any type, manned or unmanned, satellite surveillance, any kind of knowledge transfer with military applications, material and technical support to

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[17] Director of National Intelligence, "Updated IC Gray Zone Lexicon: Key Terms and Definitions," *National Intelligence Council*, July 2024, 1, dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/NIC-Unclassified-Updated-IC-Gray-Zone-Lexicon-July2024.pdf.
[18] Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, "The Montreux Document," International Committee of the Red Cross, 17 September 2008, 9, icrc.org/en/download/file/135841/montreux_document_en.pdf.

armed forces and other related activities."[19] This more narrowed definition of PMCs and their services are intended to distinguish between armed PMCs who participate in or directly support combat, as opposed to PMCs that provide unarmed logistical support to state militaries.

The independent variable, conflict intensity, is defined as the attributes of a war that affect a state's capacity or will to continue fighting. Measurement proxies for intensity include troops deployed, wounded, and killed, troop activities, land controlled or captured, and the financial and material cost of the war. Additionally, it is not required for a conflict to satisfy every intensity proxy to be categorized at a certain intensity level because wars vary significantly in character, and not all indicators are equally relevant across cases. For example, a technologically advanced offensive war against a much weaker foe might involve fewer troops but incur high financial costs and casualty rates, still indicating high-intensity, like the early stages of the Iraq War in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Therefore, a holistic assessment of all factors allows for a more accurate classification, especially in these mixed or unconventional cases where strict binary classifications might obscure the true intensity of the conflict. Furthermore, not every proxy will be relevant for every war, requiring a contextual evaluation to determine which factors are most applicable based on the nature of the conflict.

This means that, in general, high-intensity conflicts are those that have high troop deployment counts conducting independent offensive operations, high casualty rates, large areas of land or places of strategic importance captured, high costs, and implications related to the survival of the state or national strategy policy objectives. Moderate-intensity conflicts are those with moderate levels of troops deployed performing combat advisor roles or limited independent operations, low levels of death and relatively higher rates of injuries, some territory or operationally important sites captured, moderate to high level costs but little to no domestic mobilization of the economy for war, and the conflict is related to regional-level state objectives. Lastly, low-intensity conflicts are those with little to no acknowledged troop deployments who perform limited training or deterrence tasks, little to no deaths or casualties, selective or no capture of locations or territory, low cost materially and financially, and an objective related to only regional influence or counterinfluence of a rival.

Argument

Based on the review of existing literature, I have identified several gaps and critiques of the different camps. Economic arguments overlook long-term state investment and complex webs of financing, force augmentation theories ignore variation across conflicts, constructivist approaches lack widespread applicability, and circumvention-based explanations overemphasize the ability for state officials to use PMCs unchecked and unnoticed. Overall, the existing arguments collectively do not differentiate between why a state might use PMCs in one conflict but not another. Rather, they only generally

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[19] United Nations Human Rights Council, "Annual Report of the Working Group on the Use of Mercenaries as a Means of Violating Human Rights and Impeding the Exercise of the Right of Peoples to Self-Determination," United Nations, 1 July 2013, 3, documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G13/153/72/PDF/G1315372 .pdf?OpenElement.

characterize states as more or less likely to use PMCs, which does not explain why, for example, the US would use more PMCs in Iraq versus Afghanistan. Instead, the existing schools of thought would only say that the US would or would not be likely to use PMCs as part of its war plan, not addressing the variation in the scale and scope of PMC utilization. I contribute to the conversation by arguing a holistic explanation that addresses this gap, using the method of agreement in a comparative case study to determine whether the intensity of a conflict will result in variation in the use of PMCs by a state. In other words, I will analyze each selected case for a common variable resulting in the same outcome, in this case, the commonality being high or low conflict intensity resulting in PMC employment. I argue that conflict intensity explains the variation in the scope and scale of PMC use by states in interstate war. From this, I have formulated three hypotheses, each followed by an explanation. They are followed by a corresponding null hypothesis.

H_1: States will utilize PMCs when a conflict is of high enough intensity to necessitate the supplementation of their own warfighting capacity.

High-intensity conflicts are costly monetarily, materially, and with regard to human life. Furthermore, high-intensity conflicts are large-scale and see a multitude of different missions and activities across all domains of war. This poses a challenge for belligerent states across multiple fronts, leading to a higher likelihood of PMC employment. PMCs have the potential to address many of these characteristics that make high-intensity war challenging, such as offering an immediately available force-for-hire, negating some of the challenge of recruiting and training citizens. Furthermore, though not conclusive, PMCs have the potential to save the government money with respect to certain areas of the defense sector. Finally, because large-scale war requires many different skillsets, PMCs offer one solution for states to achieve special mission sets they do not inherently have the ability to perform. An example of a high-intensity conflict is the early stages of the US-led invasion of Iraq, which saw over 20,000 armed contractors involved.

H_2: States will utilize PMCs when a conflict lacks the intensity to warrant the deployment of state military forces, but the use of armed force is deemed necessary.

Low-intensity conflicts, as defined in this paper, are often those where a state seeks a certain result but does not have the support or will to directly participate in hostilities. They might see no boots-on-the-ground, relying on only airstrikes, or in some cases, limited deployment to the rear of the battle area for training and advising. PMCs offer to states in this situation the ability to more directly influence the course of battle, while limiting involvement. At the furthest end of the spectrum, a state may covertly employ PMCs in low-intensity conflicts to maintain plausible deniability. An example of a low-intensity conflict is the annexation of Crimea, which saw the deployment of the Kremlin-backed Wagner Group.

H_3: States will refrain or limit PMC use in moderately intense conflicts.

Moderate-intensity/mid-intensity conflict is often seen when a larger state initiates hostilities against a much weaker state, usually for an important national goal, but which is regionally limited in effect. Because the outcome sought is of moderate to high importance, even if only

regionally, the state will send its national military force to achieve the objective. Because the opposition force is often much weaker, the state does not need to employ PMCs to augment its own force or save money. Additionally, the state may often seek to ensure control over the conflict to prevent escalation, and employing PMCs poses a risk to the state's control of the conflict. This is one key indicator that differentiates a moderate-intensity conflict between high and low, especially in cases that are mixed. Moderate-intensity conflicts generally see a level of state commitment high enough to accomplish the objective itself, that is, not high enough to rely on augmentation. In mid-intensity conflicts, limiting escalation to this level is often a key goal, and the unpredictability introduced by PMCs compared to state forces makes their use a risk that I predict many states will avoid. An example of a mid-intensity conflict, which, as expected, had low PMC involvement is the military operations in Iraq in 2008 after the Surge.

H_n: There is no relationship between the intensity of a conflict and states' probability of utilizing PMCs.

Lastly, my null hypothesis simply states that conflict intensity has no relationship to a state's use of PMCs in war. If the null is true, I expect to find inconsistencies between conflict intensities and the hypothesized PMC level. For example, in one case, there may be high PMC presence across all intensity levels, while in another, there is low PMC presence in the low and high intensities, and high presence in the moderate-intensity phase.

I contend that my argument is important because it fills a significant gap in the literature on PMC use by states, addressing multiple critiques and limitations I find in the existing schools of thought, with a notable lack of conflict intensity as an independent variable. Finally, the relevance of my contribution to this academic and practical topic is of high importance, with great power competition on the rise, regional and proxy conflicts occurring globally, and no end in sight to the use of PMCs by states, it is of great significance to policymakers to identify the driving force behind PMC utilization.

Alternative Explanation

If my hypotheses are true, it should follow that PMC presence in a conflict decreases as the conflict's intensity does and correspondingly increases if intensity rises. One existing counterargument to my first hypothesis is the reverse logic, with authors reasoning that when PMCs are used, the conflict becomes more intense because of their presence, rather than their employment resulting from a conflict's initial intensity.

Ulrich Petersohn theorizes that PMC implementation increases the state's military effectiveness, thereby increasing conflict severity.[20] This position is broadly supported by other scholars researching conflict intensity and duration, finding that PMCs often increase conflict intensity, such as Petersohn in a separate article, finding that "the presence of both

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[20] Petersohn, Ulrich, "Private Military and Security Companies (PMSCs), Military Effectiveness, and Conflict Severity in Weak States, 1990–2007," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 61, no. 5, 2017, 1046, doi.org/10.1177/0022002715600758.

mercenaries and private military and security contractors increases [conflict] severity."[21] However, others find that this is not the case, such as Samuel Hallhammar, who hypothesized that PMC introduction would result in increased conflict intensity; however, "[this] thesis involves a regression analysis which ultimately does not provide significant results for the proposed hypothesis."[22]

Additionally, others find that PMCs also do not increase conflict duration, suggesting that even if they do increase intensity, they may be more effective at ending conflicts sooner. For example, Seden Akcinaroglu and Elizabeth Radziszewski, using an empirical study, show that "as level of competition among government-hired PMCs increases, they are more likely to deliver optimal services and help bring an end to violence," and that resource extraction contracts in conflict zones "create an incentive for companies to deliver optimal service and terminate hostilities."[23] Taken together, these arguments present a possible alternative to my hypotheses, however, the findings are not conclusive and require further analysis. This paper presents an alternative view of the generalized position that PMCs increase conflict intensity, rather than PMCs being introduced into more intense conflicts.

Finally, if this argument is true, it does not necessarily negate my own. PMCs could be found to be introduced more often into conflicts that are more intense, in support of my argument, but could then go on to increase the conflict's intensity further, supporting the alternative view.

Case Studies

To test my hypotheses, this section will analyze two specific cases of state-employed PMC use in conflicts with varying intensities. First, I will analyze the United States' use of PMCs in Iraq in three distinct temporal phases, each with a differing intensity. And second, I will analyze the Russian use of PMCs in Ukraine. These cases were specifically chosen because the United States and Russia are two of the largest users of PMCs, despite being of different regime type, which allows this research to consider different governmental structures. Furthermore, both states' conflicts present a varied spectrum of conflict intensity. The case of the US in Iraq allows for an exploration of how PMC use evolved over time in relation to changing conflict intensity, from LSCO to Counterinsurgency (COIN) and stability operations. The case of Ukraine for Russia provides a similar perspective, offering insight into PMC use by another state across the conflict intensity continuum from hybrid warfare to large-scale combat operations.

For each case, I will first specify the time range being analyzed and then categorize each case into a conflict intensity level. After, I will analyze PMC presence during each delineated phase, assessing both the size of the force as well as the types of operations they are conducting. Together, these case studies will demonstrate whether there is a U-shaped

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[21] Hallhammar, Samuel, "Fighting for Profit in Modern Warfare: A quantitative analysis of the influence of Private Military and Security Companies (PMSCs) on conflict intensity in weak states," Department of Peace and Conflict Research, 2023, 3, diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1834316/FULLTEXT01.pdf.

[22] Hallhammar.

[23] Akcinaroglu, Seden and Radziszewski, Elizabeth, "Private Military Companies, Opportunities, and Termination of Civil Wars in Africa," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 57, no. 5, 2013, 795, doi.org/10.1177/0022002712449325

relationship between PMCs and conflict intensity when my hypothesis is applied to real-world conflict.

United States in Iraq

The Iraq War, under Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), spanned from March 2003 to December 2011, and saw combat across the entirety of the intensity spectrum.[36] I will break this conflict into three distinct phases for analysis, each with a distinct intensity level supported by proxy measures. Phase I is the initial invasion and US-led occupation and counterinsurgency operations, spanning from 2003 to 2008. This phase is high-intensity, and I predict there to be a correspondingly high level of PMC utilization relative to the rest of the conflict, especially the mid-intensity phase II. This second phase is characterized as moderately intense and spans from 2008 to the end of the US-led operations in 2011. I predict this phase to have the lowest levels of PMC use relative to phases I and II. Finally, the final phase is categorized as low-intensity, primarily being the withdrawal of US forces and handover of operations to the Iraqi security services. As a low-intensity phase, it follows from my hypotheses that this phase will see a higher PMC presence than phase II.

Analysis

The Iraq War followed a clear trajectory of shifting conflict intensity, transitioning from high-intensity warfare from 2003 to 2008 to a mid-intensity phase from 2008 to 2010 and ultimately to a low-intensity withdrawal phase from 2010 to 2012. This progression aligns with expectations of how large-scale conflicts evolve over time and provides a useful case study for examining troop and contractor deployment trends. The key variables of each of these phases are summarized in Table 3 below, with each phase having characteristics that align with the definition of each level from Table 1. Notably, land captured during OIF was not considered a significant factor in this analysis, as the US effectively controlled Iraq in the early stages of the war.

The findings support my hypothesis that states will more heavily use PMCs during both high and low-intensity conflicts, with a reduced reliance during mid-intensity conflicts. In the high-intensity phase of OIF, the US demand for PMCs was significant, driven by the large-scale operational requirements that necessitated additional support for combat-related services such as static security and specialized tasks like VIP protection. In the low-intensity phase, although the rise in PMC personnel is not as sharp, there is still a clear uptick in both scale and scope, representing both a quantitative and qualitative increase in PMC use. PMCs were tasked with the old tasks as well as traditionally military ones like EOD, medical evacuation, and QRF. The rhetoric surrounding these conflicts highlights the need for additional contractors to compensate for the absence or downsizing of military forces in a location where the US still wanted to ensure it had a presence. Conversely, during mid-intensity conflicts, the need for PMCs stabilizes as the demand for combat roles being filled by PMCs diminishes.

Comparing the phases using ratios and BOG troops, phase one saw six soldiers for every one contractor. Phase two saw eight soldiers for every one contractor. Lastly, phase three saw a

ratio of 3 soldiers for every one contractor. Overall, this ratio also demonstrates my hypothesis, as the moderate-intensity phase had the highest ratio of troops to PMCs, whereas the high- and low-intensity phases closed the gap more closely. This strongly supports my hypothesis that high- and low-intensity conflicts would see a lower ratio of troops to PMCs and would be further emphasized using the OR troop numbers.

Russia in Ukraine

Like the Iraq War, the Russo-Ukrainian War is characterized by multiple phases, each marked by differing intensity levels. This case study investigates the relationship between conflict intensity and the utilization of PMCs by Russia. The first phase of the war, spanning from February 2014 to February 2022, is low-intensity, with Russia using PMCs alongside unacknowledged state forces to support pro-Russian separatists in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. These two regions are geographically distinct, being two separate conflict areas with very different environments. Crimea was an almost entirely non-violent operation, with no battles or other direct combat engagements, whereas the conflict in the Donbas was a more traditional battlefield, with front lines and areas of control. Despite this, the two areas were linked to the larger Kremlin objective during this phase of covertly taking territory from Kyiv. Because of its low-intensity, the use of PMCs in phase I is therefore expected to be high, which would enable plausible deniability and limited escalation for the Kremlin while still achieving military objectives.

Analysis

The role of Russian PMCs in Ukraine has evolved alongside the war's own intensity levels. Early in the conflict, PMCs like the Wagner Group played a crucial role, enhancing Russian military capabilities and offering deniability during the annexation of Crimea and takeover of different regions in the Donbas. Wagner and other PMCs would expand in scale and scope following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, leading major battles independent of Russian support, such as the Battle of Bakhmut. However, after the capture of Bakhmut in May 2023 and the subsequent shift to a more static front, PMC use began to decrease, with a heavy influence being from the failed Wagner PMC rebellion. Overall, this case study, like the one on OIF, adheres to my theorized model for when PMC use is more likely to occur by a state in an international armed conflict.

In line with my hypothesis, PMC use in Ukraine confirms that as the war began in a low-intensity phase, PMC use was high, relative to the mid-intensity phase, having a soldier-to-contractor ratio of 10:100. As the conflict made a major increase in intensity during the Russian invasion in 2022, PMC use would again rise, with a soldier-contractor ratio of 16:100. Finally, as both sides' offensives stalled and a stalemate set in, the conflict would enter a mid-intensity phase, relative to phases I and II, which had a ratio of just 3 PMC fighters for every 100 Russians. These ratios support my hypothesis, with the high and low-intensity phases having a much lower ratio of contractors to soldiers. Furthermore, from a quantitative lens, PMCs conducted more operation types and with more independence during phases I and II; however, control over its PMCs, like Redut with the GRU and MoD. These

findings, like the OIF case study, have the familiar U-shape relationship when analyzing PMC numbers with conflict intensity.[24]

Findings

This paper hypothesized that the intensity of a conflict directly correlates with the scale and scope of PMC use by states, suggesting that high- and low-intensity conflicts will have more PMC use than mid-intensity conflicts. The case studies of the US in Iraq from 2003 to 2012 and Russia in Ukraine from 2022 to 2024 were compared to test this hypothesis. Both conflicts were analyzed through phases of differing intensity, the independent variable, and the findings demonstrate a connection between this variable and PMC use, the dependent variable.

This is exemplified when comparing the two cases across their intensities for the ratio of private military contractors to state forces. Both cases saw higher ratios of contractors to state troops in their high- and low-intensity phases relative to the mid-intensity phases. In the case of Iraq, the low-intensity phase saw the highest relative PMC presence of any intensity in either conflict, with 35 PMCs for every 100 US troops. OIF's high-intensity phase saw the second-highest ratio of the conflict at 16 contractors per 100 US troops. Lastly, fitting with my hypothesis, the mid-intensity phase saw the lowest ratio at 12 contractors for every 100 US servicemembers.

The Russo-Ukrainian war saw a similar overall pattern; however, unlike the Iraq case, Russia employed the highest relative number of PMCs during the high-intensity phase, rather than the low-intensity phase, also having 16 PMCs for every 100 Russian troops. The low-intensity annexation of Crimea and incursion into the Donbas saw the second-highest ratio, at 10 contractors per 100 Russian state fighters. Lastly, the mid-intensity phase saw the lowest ratio of the conflict, at just three contractors for every 100 Russian troops.

In both case studies, the results demonstrate that high- and low-intensity phases saw higher ratios of PMC usage compared to mid-intensity phases. These ratios are visualized in a hypothesized U-shape. The consistency of this pattern across both the US and Russian cases reinforces the argument that the intensity of conflict plays a crucial role in determining the scale and scope of PMC use. Finally, the results show a variation between high and low intensities. In Iraq, PMC use peaked during the low-intensity phase, whereas in Ukraine, it was highest during the high-intensity phase. Therefore, this study does not conclusively determine whether high or low-intensity conflicts will have higher PMC use. Instead, the findings highlight that both extremes of intensity are associated with increased PMC use, but the reasons for this variation likely depend on the specific needs and goals of the state in each unique conflict.

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[24] The European Union, "Council Decision (CFSP) 2023/2871," European Union, December 18, 2023, eur-lex.europa.eu/legal- content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:L_202302871.

Limitations

This study offers a novel approach to evaluating why states use PMCs, finding evidence using a comparative case study that conflict intensity affects PMC employment. However, there are inherent limitations in the available data and the complex political and operational environments of both case studies that must be acknowledged.

A primary limitation in analyzing the US's use of PMCs in Iraq stems from gaps and inconsistencies in reporting standards. For example, the DoD did not begin recording and releasing data on PMCs until 2007, meaning this study used third-party government estimates for armed contractors. Additionally, information regarding PMC missions is often limited, making the exact scope of PMC activities hard to assess fully. Furthermore, PMC scandals like the Nisour Square Massacre may have also created political incentives to obscure the extent of PMC involvement in the war. Finally, after the withdrawal of US forces, most PMCs in Iraq were employed by other government agencies like the State Department and USAID, which did not release in-depth reports on the number and type of contractors they used. Even so, it was the general trends in PMC presence that drove the analysis, and it is unlikely that any numbers were inaccurate enough to change the findings. Furthermore, a majority of the data used for OIF was well-documented from multiple government-affiliated sources. Therefore, while the lack of perfect data may obscure highly specific details, the overall patterns in PMC usage align with the varying conflict intensity in the three phases of the Iraq War. As such, this study offers a valuable contribution to understanding the relationship between intensity and PMC employment.

On the other hand, the Russo-Ukrainian War case presents three key challenges in analyzing the relationship between conflict intensity and PMC employment. First, because Russia shares a land border with Ukraine, it is difficult to determine how many troops are specifically allocated to the war versus those assigned to broader regional or strategic functions. Second, the recency of the war means that data collection is still ongoing and highly reliant on open-source intelligence or biased reports from the two belligerents. Furthermore, the nature of the battlefield as a highly dangerous place further obscures the reliable collection of data from any party. The third limitation stems from domestic political events within Russia that may have disrupted PMC operations for reasons unrelated to intensity. Chief among these is the Wagner Group Mutiny, which led to the group's formal disbandment and the partial reintegration of its members into the Russian MoD. The resulting decrease in PMC activity in the third phase of the war could be wrongly attributed to changes in conflict intensity when it may instead reflect internal political purges or structural shifts in how Russia uses PMCs.

However, despite these limitations, the broader trend of the wide scope of PMC activities during the low- and high-intensity phases and subsequent lack thereof in the mid-intensity phase is highly documented. Furthermore, the stagnation in territorial gains following the Battle of Bakhmut provides a compelling basis for classifying the later phase of the war as moderate in intensity, despite increased troop and casualty numbers. Lastly, the political factors that contributed to the decrease in PMC use, the Wagner Group Mutiny and its aftermath, do not fully account for the reduction in PMC scale and scope. Rather than

entirely end PMC use, the Kremlin instead only increased oversight over PMCs, acting more as PMCs do for the US in a supporting role rather than an entirely independent military force. Overall, the large trends of this study align with my hypotheses, indicating that conflict intensity likely influences a state's decision to use PMCs and the scope of activities they are employed to conduct.

Areas for Future Research

While this study lays the groundwork for understanding the relationship between conflict intensity and state PMC use, several options remain open for future exploration. First, this research is limited to two examples of interstate conflict. Expanding the case selection to include other types of conflicts, such as civil wars, insurgencies, or peacekeeping operations, could further test whether the hypothesized relationship between intensity and PMC presence is consistent across different forms of warfare. Conflicts like the Syrian Civil War, the Afghanistan War, or NATO missions in the Balkans could provide excellent cases for comparison and further refine the causal logic developed in this paper. Another area for potential study is expanding the analysis of PMC use by other states, such as China, the United Kingdom, and South Africa, offering potential insights into how other forms of government with differing norms and histories affect PMC use. Additionally, my hypotheses can be examined more deeply relative to each other with the goal of identifying whether high or low intensities tend to see higher PMC utilization. Another potentially interesting area to study further is the comparative disparity between the US and Russia, with the US having a higher or equal PMC to state troop ratio than Russia in all phases, potentially suggesting that there are additional factors at play. Finally, I recommend a revisitation of the Russo-Ukrainian War case after its conclusion, as the data is refined since it continues at the time of writing this paper and its future is uncertain. Given the extensive use of PMCs by Russia, this case remains an essential one for fully understanding how and why states employ PMCs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, PMCs have seen a dramatic reemergence since their decline in the nineteenth century, significantly shaping the modern battlespace. This paper endeavors to answer the question of why states use PMCs. A thorough literature review found that current explanations seeking to answer this question can be placed into four categories: cost-saving, force augmentation, state norms, and restraint circumvention. However, none of these arguments holistically explained why states might favor hiring a PMC to conduct war on their behalf, and there are several gaps in the existing positions. This research paper attempts to fill this gap, arguing that the intensity of a conflict is what determines if a state will contract a PMC. After conducting case studies comparing the use of PMCs by the US in the Iraq War and Russia in the Russo-Ukrainian War, I find evidence in support of my hypotheses that states use PMCs on a greater scale and scope during low and high-intensity conflicts, and less in mid-intensity conflicts. These findings provide scholars and policymakers alike a metric for predicting when a state will use PMCs in a war and in what manner, and leave many opportunities for future research to further test my hypotheses.

Nathan Larson is a 2025 graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point.

Decoding Chinese Strategy: Understanding the Intellectual Foundations of PLA Modernization

Daniel Overstreet

Editor's Note: This is academic undergraduate research conducted at the United States Military Academy at West Point. It was condensed in order to fit in the space allocated. The original research is available from the author.

ABSTRACT: This article investigates how the People's Republic of China (PRC) synthesizes classical Chinese military philosophy with contemporary Western military theory to articulate and execute its modern military strategy. Since the 1980s, the PRC has undertaken a sustained modernization of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), driven by technological advancement and geopolitical shifts. The study argues that this modernization is not merely technical, but deeply informed by a hybrid intellectual foundation. Through a content analysis of five key primary sources—the PRC Defense White Papers (1995–2019), Unrestricted Warfare by Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, the 2020 edition of the Science of Military Strategy, On Maritime Strategic Access, and China's Aerospace Security Strategic Concept—the article explores how each source integrates Eastern and Western traditions in conceptualizing ends, ways, and means. It finds that classical Chinese thought—especially Sun Zu's Art of War—dominates discourse at the strategic level (ends), while Western theories inform operational and tactical approaches (ways and means), particularly through concepts like deterrence, informatization, and Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA). The analysis reveals that PRC doctrine deliberately blurs philosophical boundaries to create a flexible, adaptive framework suited for complex modern conflicts. Ultimately, the paper underscores the importance for policymakers to understand the philosophical underpinnings behind PRC strategic concepts, whose ambiguity and hybrid origins obscure their full intent and application. This understanding is crucial for interpreting China's military posture and anticipating how it may employ force within its broader foreign policy strategy.

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Introduction

Since the early 1980s, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has invested substantial resources into the modernization of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and its subsidiary branches. These modernization programs address many elements of the PLA's force structure and capabilities, such as the development and implementation of advanced weapons and technologies, command and control reform, and the development of expeditionary global force projection.[25] As the PLA has implemented these reforms and

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[25] Defense Intelligence Agency, "China: Military Power: Modernizing a Force to Fight and Win, " Defense Intelligence Agency, 2019.

adapted new technologies, it has also been required to develop new doctrines to instruct its officer corps on how to leverage these capabilities.[26]

These programs have also continued unceasingly throughout the myriad geopolitical changes that have transpired over the last four decades, including the end of the Cold War, China's economic integration into global markets, and increasing tension with the United States over the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region. Furthermore, the PRC's continued investment in PLA modernization has strongly correlated with an increasingly aggressive foreign policy since the beginning of Xi Jinping's Chairmanship of the Central Military Commission (CMC) in 2012. While some believe that the PRC's revisionist foreign policy objectives are causing the continued investment in expanding PLA capabilities,[27] others argue that the heightened status of the PLA within the CCP political structure as a result of modernization has caused an increased willingness among key political leaders within the PRC to employ military force to achieve foreign policy objectives.[28]

Regardless of which phenomenon caused the other, the expanding military capabilities of the PLA, the updated doctrines that articulate how to direct those capabilities, and the foreign policy objectives that inform where and when to employ military capabilities together constitute the ends, ways, and means of the PRC's military strategy. For American policymakers who must address the military dimension of the competition between the US and PRC, it is necessary to develop a nuanced understanding of this strategy. Part of developing that understanding is deciphering the philosophical traditions that inform how strategists within the PRC and PLA conceptualize the elements of strategy, mechanisms of war, and utility of military force.

There are two competing philosophical traditions that inform modern PRC military strategy: traditional Chinese military philosophy and contemporary Western military theory. China's longstanding military tradition dates back to antiquity and has produced many influential works that continue to inform how the PRC frames strategic problems; However, these works remain few in number due to political persecution, while their antique nature is far removed from the technical realities of the modern battlefield.[29] Sun Zu's *Art of War*, for example, is still frequently cited by PRC authors despite dating back to the Warring States Period. Contemporary Western theories, meanwhile, have the potential to educate strategists on the practical application of modern technologies across multiple domains of war. Given that both philosophical traditions have been observed at various times in PRC literature, it is the goal of this project to describe how the PRC's strategy, to include ends, ways, and means, synthesizes the longstanding tradition of classical Chinese military philosophy with the utility of contemporary Western military theories.

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[26] Marcus Clay and Roderick Lee, "Unmasking the Devil in the Chinese Details," *China Aerospace Studies Institute*, January 2022.

[27] Ibid.

[28] James Char and Richard A. Bitzinger, "A New Direction in the People's Liberation Army's Emergent Strategic Thinking, Roles and Missions," *The China Quarterly* 232 (December 2017): 841–65.

[29] Ralph D. Sawyer, *The Seven Military Classics of Ancient China*, History and Warfare (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press Inc., 1993).

This phenomenon, where the ideas of both Chinese and Western military traditions have become intermixed, is even explicitly defined in the opening chapter of the 2020 edition of the *Science of Military Strategy* (SMS), where it is explained that China produced a large body of strategic theory in ancient times, and that "after entering modern times, the development of China's strategic theories has been relatively slow and there are few theoretical works," that since "the beginning of the 20th century…other Western strategic masterpieces gradually spread to China, which had a greater impact on China's modern strategic theories.[30]" The fact that a source as authoritative and doctrinal as the SMS to commented on this phenomenon within the strategic discourse of the modern PLA is indicative that it had a substantial impact on the PRC and PLA's conceptualization of military strategy.

Argument

The expansion of the PRC's global influence necessitates a nuanced understanding of its ambitions and capabilities. Part of developing that understanding is deciphering the philosophical origins of the strategic concepts articulated by PRC policymakers and strategists in order to identify distinctions in the connotative implications. This project will argue that the foundational concepts of PRC strategy originate from a combination of both traditional Chinese military philosophy and the adaptation of Western military theories. This project will also attempt to describe the degree of influence of both of these intellectual traditions on modern PRC strategic thinking at different levels of strategy.

Many of the foundational authors in the field of analyzing Chinese strategic culture, notably Johnston and Scobell, have illustrated the influence of traditional Chinese military philosophy on modern Chinese strategic culture. Elements of the seven military classics of ancient China, particularly Sun Zu's *Art of War*, continue to inform how the PRC defines the elements of strategy and warfare and continue to have a tremendous influence on the strategic culture of the PLA and PRC.[31] However, the foundational texts of traditional Chinese military philosophy remain relatively few in number and lack applicability to the modern battlefield.[32] As a result, many instances of traditional Chinese thought's influence in modern PRC strategy remain confined to the more abstract higher levels of strategy, such as strategic culture, grand strategy, or ends. Modern military domains that are now critical for states to leverage to employ military force were completely inaccessible at the time that the Seven Military Classics were written, thereby creating a gap between the classical Chinese military philosophy that informs strategic culture and the practical understanding of the modern domains of war. This gap, however, can be closed by adapting contemporary Western theories that have developed alongside the technologies necessary to exploit those domains.

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[30] Xiao Tianliang, *2020 NDU Science of Military Strategy* (Beijing: Military Sciences Press, 2013). Pg. 2.
[31] Ghiselli, "Revising China's Strategic Culture."
[32] Ralph D. Sawyer, *The Seven Military Classics of Ancient China*, History and Warfare (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press Inc., 1993).

Many analysts have noted particular instances where PRC, CCP, or PLA discourse either directly cites these Western authors or seems to adapt Western concepts and methods.[33] The full extent to which the PRC has adapted Western theories remains unexplored, and many authors only mention the adaptation of Western theories as tangential references and not as a separate topic of inquiry. However, it stands to reason that access to the abundance of knowledge and theory developed by Western military theorists allows the PLA to adapt Western concepts into their strategic theory and military doctrine in a similar way to how the PLA adapted Western military technologies.[34] The direct applicability of Western theory to understanding the utility and the limitations of modern technologies, which did not exist at the time that most Chinese literature was written, implies that Western theory can inform the material levels of strategy–ways, and means–better than Chinese military philosophy.

However, every attempt at researching Chinese strategic culture or deciphering the PRC's strategic ambitions must simultaneously contend with the influence of both traditional Chinese military philosophy and Western military theories on the modern Chinese conceptualization of strategy. While the relationship between traditional Chinese military thought and modern Chinese strategic culture is relatively well-explored, most authors who notice a connection between Western theories and modern Chinese strategy do not fully investigate the degree of Western theory's influence. Furthermore, there is an insufficient body of literature that compares the level of influence of these two competing intellectual traditions.

Given the above, this project will add to the existing literature by examining several translated documents published by various organizations in the PRC to describe the degree of influence of both Western and Chinese military philosophy on the ends, ways, and means of PRC strategy in its current state. To do this, this project will conduct a content analysis of China's *National Defense White Papers*, Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui's *Unrestricted Warfare*, the 2020 *Science of Military Strategy*, and a handful of doctrinal publications from China's National Defense University translated by the China Aerospace Studies Institute. The ultimate goal of this project is to describe the level of influence of both Western military theory and Chinese military philosophy on PRC strategy and doctrine. While the final product of this project is descriptive in nature, any insights into how the Chinese define strategy and how they perceive the utility of military force can have predictive implications for how the PRC plans to employ its military assets as part of a cohesive foreign policy strategy.

Methodology

The phenomenon explored in this project is the PRC strategy, which is defined as (1) foreign policy objectives (ends), (2) military capabilities (means), and (3) methodologies for employing military capabilities (ways). PRC strategy will be represented by a survey of five publications that originate from the PRC. This sample includes a collection of official releases, one academic project, and a collection of military doctrines that address multiple

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[33] "China: Military Power: Modernizing a Force to Fight and Win."

[34] William T. Tow and Douglas T. Stuart, "China's Military Turns to the West," *International Affairs* (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-) 57, no. 2 (1981): 286–300, https://doi.org/10.2307/2619165.

domains of war.[35] The primary source literature included in the sample is: The *Defense White Papers* from 1995 to 2019, *Unrestricted Warfare* by Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, the 2020 *Science of Military Strategy*, China's *Aerospace Strategic Concept*, and *On Maritime Strategic Access*.

The first influence on PRC strategy under consideration is the influence of classical Chinese military philosophy. This includes concepts borrowed from any of the Seven Military Classics of ancient China or other classical Chinese literary works, as well as references to events in Chinese military history. Markers that indicate the use of classical Chinese concepts include direct citations of classical Chinese works or adaptations of classical Chinese idiomatic phrases (成語, Chéngyǔ).

The second influence on PRC strategy under consideration is the influence of contemporary Western military theories. Instances where the sample literature adapts concepts from contemporary Western military theory will be described categorically. This includes concepts adapted from renowned Western military theorists, such as Mahan, Corbett, or Douhet, academic citations of Western authors, or references to contemporary military events involving Western militaries. Markers that indicate Western influence include direct citations, keywords, and the use of contemporary Western concepts such as "revolution in military affairs."

After discussing the similarities between classical Chinese military philosophy, contemporary Western strategic theory, and the primary sources in question, this project will then synthesize the concepts expressed in these works into a comprehensive strategic framework that organizes doctrinal concepts by how they relate to ends, ways, and means. The purpose of this secondary review is to determine which components of PRC strategy are more heavily influenced by a particular tradition and connect the concepts expressed in one primary source with the concepts expressed in another. For example, in some cases, multiple sources discuss doctrines such as active defense and deterrence, but will define and explain these concepts in different ways that are more akin to different philosophical traditions.

This methodology assumes that there is no preexisting relationship between traditional Chinese military philosophy and contemporary Western military theory. This assumption is informed by two underlying principles. First, the limitation of traditional Chinese military philosophy's practical modern application makes it highly unlikely that it has had a substantial influence on the formation of contemporary Western continental theory, maritime theory, or air power theory. Second, it is impossible for contemporary Western military theory to have directly influenced the formation of classic Chinese military philosophy due to the substantial time difference between the writing of most classical Chinese literature and the publication of Western theories. For example, the Tang Taicung, the last of the Seven Military Classics, appeared around 640 CE,[36] whereas the foundational works of Western military theory, such as Clausewitz's *On War* and Mahan's *Influence of Sea Power Upon*

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[35] All translations provided for the 2020 *Science of Military Strategy, China's Aerospace Strategic Concept*, *On Maritime Strategic Access*, and *Service and Arms Application in Joint Operations* are provided by the China Aerospace Studies Institute (CASI), https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/CASI/In-Their-Own-Words/.
[36] Ralph D. Sawyer, *The Seven Military Classics of Ancient China*.

World History, were both published in the 19th century. While it is possible that contemporary Western sources could influence the interpretation of the preceding Chinese philosophy, this second assumption is predicated on the thought that the original Chinese understanding of classical works is more salient within the Sinophone horizon of understanding than retroactive Western reinterpretations.

These assumptions, however, do not apply to the use of Maoist theories. Whereas classical Chinese military philosophy and contemporary Western military theory are two distinct intellectual traditions, many of the concepts articulated by Mao Zedong blend elements of classical Chinese thought, Western thought, and Marxist-Leninist doctrines.[37] As a result, the adoption of Maoist theories in PRC strategy could be indicative of either Chinese or Western influence, depending on which tradition informed Mao Zedong's thought on any particular military topic. That process then makes Maoist theory another potential mechanism of influence that applies to both the influence of Chinese and Western military thought on PRC strategy, which is still subject to the same phenomenon. In order to simplify this methodology, instances where primary source doctrines reference Maoist theory will be catalogued as a topic of future inquiry, but the antecedent relationship between either philosophical theory or Maoist theory will not be explored. This methodology, however, could be applied to sources written by Mao Zedong to further explore another dimension of interaction between competing traditions of military philosophy.

Another limitation of this design is that it excludes the potential influence of other cultures and military traditions on PRC strategy, particularly the potential influence of Russian military thought. It is already known that Leninist theory influenced Maoist theory, including military affairs.[38] Furthermore, the relationship between the PLA and the Soviet Army prior to the Sino-Soviet split[39], as well as the relationship between the PRC and Russia, makes it extremely likely that the Russian military tradition has impacted PRC strategy and military doctrine. However, the impact of Russian military thought on PRC strategy will not be explored in order to limit the scope of this project and reduce the number of intermediary relationships between Chinese, Western, and Russian military philosophies. Similar to Maoist theory, instances where Russian sources are mentioned in primary source doctrines will be catalogued as points of future inquiry.

The final limitation of this methodology is that the philosophical origins of a work may not be explicitly stated. For example, although the strategic concepts outlined in a work may closely resemble a similar concept in Western theories or resemble a concept expressed in one of the Seven Military Classics, the work's author may not explicitly quote or cite another piece of literature that informed their thought. In cases such as this, this project will be able to illustrate instances where the ideas expressed in the primary sources parallel similar ideas in either philosophical tradition, however, this project will not be able to definitively prove a causal relationship between either philosophical tradition or primary source doctrines.

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[37] Edward N. Smith, "Classical Methods: The Influence and Use of Chinese Classical Military Philosophy in the Writings of Mao Zedong," *Journal of Chinese Military History* 3, no. 1 (May 14, 2014): 47–70.
[38] Smith.
[39] Thomas W. Robinson, "The Sino-Soviet Border Dispute: Background, Development, and the March 1969 Clashes," *American Political Science Review* 66, no. 4 (December 1972): 1175–1202.

Therefore, this project and its methodology heavily depend on the primary source doctrines' quality and quantity of citations, references, and quotes to illustrate any relationship between Chinese philosophy, Western theory, and PRC strategy.

PRC Defense White Papers

Since 1995, the PRC has biannually published the *Defense White Papers* in both English and Chinese for international and domestic audiences. The PRC's intention in publishing the White Papers is still a subject of debate. Some scholars argue that the PRC's intention is to provide more transparency to the international community in regards to its foreign policy objectives and military programs, whereas others argue it is to promote the CCP's foreign policy agenda and defense narrative. The foreign policy objectives expressed within the *White Papers*, therefore, inform the ends of the PRC's foreign policy. As a result, it is of particular interest to this project to analyze the content of the *White Papers* over their 12 iterations from 1995-2019 to investigate how classical Chinese military philosophy and Western military theory influence the desired end state of the PRC's military strategy.

Some readers of the *White Papers* argue that they are generally devoid of relevant content and do not adequately illustrate the PRC's foreign policy objectives. Other analysts claim that the limited content of the *White Papers* is the result of two competing pressures. On one hand, the PRC chooses to publish the *White Papers* and expound its security disposition to conform to the international norms established by Western nations. Conversely, the PRC's strategic culture values traditional concepts of secrecy, thereby restricting the amount of information that the writers of the *White Papers* are either willing or able to disclose.[40] These two factors force the writers of the *White Papers* to carefully consider what information to disclose to appease the international community and what information to keep hidden. Regardless of the White Paper's transparency towards the PRC's foreign policy objectives, they are nonetheless the only officially published document that articulates any of the PRC's military objectives.

The first of the PRC's *Defense White Papers,* published in November 1995 and titled "China: Arms Control and Disarmament," is the most limited in terms of meaningful content. Unlike later papers, this early document does not comprehensively discuss the PRC's overarching security goals. Instead, it focuses on the PLA's personnel reduction policies, budget limitations, and controls over the transfer of military equipment. It also outlines China's official stances on international arms control, disarmament, and the promotion of "peaceful uses of military-industrial technologies." It was not until the publication of the 1998 *Defense White Paper*, titled "China's National Defense in 1998," that the PRC codified the structure and major security issues that would inform the content of later *White Papers.* This document introduced a format that would be followed in later papers, outlining China's evolving defense posture and national security goals.[41] This section will analyze how classical Chinese philosophy, Western neoliberal-institutionalist theory,

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[40] Zhang, "China's Defense White Papers."
[41] For a comprehensive list of the content of each of the Defense White Papers, see Appendix B: Content and Purpose of the PRC Defense White Paper's Over Time.

and Marxist-Leninist theory all contributed to the articulation of the PRC's security policies expressed in the 1998 Defense White Paper.

Six of the PRC's eleven Defense *White Papers* were published from 2000-2010, during the post-Unrestricted Warfare era. These six documents generally followed the structural and thematic precedent set by the 1998 *Defense White Paper*,[42] discussing topics such as the PRC's perspectives on international security, its national defense objectives, the structure and development of the PLA's various branches, military modernization programs, and the PRC's stance on international security cooperation and disarmament.[43] The 2000 *Defense White Paper* introduced several new strategic concepts, including "active defense," "local wars under high technology conditions," (2002) and "people's war under modern conditions." These ideas were not present in the 1998 *White Paper* and represent a significant evolution in the PRC's military strategy. The term "revolution in military affairs (RMA) with Chinese characteristics" would also be introduced later in 2004, becoming the fourth and final critical concept of the period. These four concepts became foundational not only in subsequent *White Papers* but also in military doctrines such as the Science of Military Strategy. This section will explore the effect of Unrestricted Warfare and its ideas on the content expressed in the *Defense White Papers*, the impact of Chinese, Western, and Marxist theories on the content of the *Defense White Papers*, and how the synthesis of all three traditions produced the four primary concepts that continue to inform PRC strategic and military documents: Active defense, limited wars under high-technology conditions, people's war under modern conditions, and RMA with Chinese characteristics.

The Xi Jinping era of the Defense *White Papers* applies the same strategic principles as the post-*Unrestricted Warfare* era. However, these strategic principles are reinterpreted in the context of Xi Jinping Thought,[33] which prioritizes the ultimate goal of "building a modestly prosperous society in all respects."[34] Certainly, the prioritization of domestic socioeconomic development is nothing new, with every previous White Paper outlining similar priorities detailing the PRC's economic development. What is new is how the military concepts of Active Defense, Local Wars under High-Technology Conditions, and RMA with Chinese Characteristics become subordinated to this goal.

Generally speaking, Chinese philosophy, Western military theory, and Marxist language all serve a distinct role within the narrative of the PRC *Defense White Papers* across all eras. The *White Papers* appeal to Chinese classical philosophy, particularly Confucianism and Sun Zu's *Art of War*, to emphasize benevolent and harmonious international relationships, defensive strategies, and measured responses.[44] These classical ideas are used by the PRC to articulate and legitimate its strategic narrative of Active Defense, though they do not contribute to the concept of Active Defense itself. Western theories of political science, particularly neoliberal-institutionalism and economic interdependence theory, frame the PRC's narrative for engaging with the international community, particularly regarding security cooperation and trade. Marxist theory, while present across all *White Papers*, serves

[42] Yang, Keller, and Molnar, "An Operational Code Analysis of China's National Defense White Papers."
[43] See Appendix B: Content and Purpose of the Defense White Papers Over Time for a complete description of each white paper and the topics it discusses.
[44] "China's National Defense in 1998." Pg. 6.

a more rhetorical role that reinforces the CCP's legitimacy, stressing the relationship between the party and military, and maintaining ideological continuity through the adaptation of terms like "people's war"[45] and "socialist modernization drive."[46] When synthesized, Chinese classical philosophy provides a framework for militarily defensive strategic thinking, Western military theory informs modernization and international engagement, and Marxism grounds the political legitimacy and role of the military in supporting the CCP's broader socioeconomic goals.

Unrestricted Warfare

Unrestricted Warfare was written in 1998 by two PLA Senior Colonels, Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, and published through the PLA Literature and Arts Publishing House in Beijing in February 1999.[47] The book was initially written in response to a series of military events in the 1990s, including the 1991 Gulf War and the 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis. The release of *Unrestricted Warfare* coincides with the release of the PRC's 2000 Defense *White Papers,* which systematically articulated the PRC's, national defense framework, military defense policies, and outlook on security.[48] The PRC's military and national defense narrative circa 1998 and 1999 focused on "subordinating national defense work to the nation's overall economic construction,"[49] and the reduction of military personnel in favor of developing a modernized, professional force.[50] These general themes in the PRC's internal politics reflect the strategic framework presented by the authors, which stresses synergizing military activities with non-military levers of national power to produce greater political effects that will challenge the will of Western nations to pursue open conflict with the PRC.

Unrestricted Warfare argues that to effectively compete with the United States in the 21st century, the PRC must adopt a comprehensive, multi-dimensional approach to warfare that goes beyond traditional military conflict. The authors contend that warfare has evolved to encompass not only the application of military force but also the economic, technological, psychological, and political dimensions of interstate competition. The book proposes that the PRC should use all available means, to include cyberattacks, media manipulation, financial destabilization, and more, to asymmetrically combat a militarily superior United States. The book presents the concept of "unrestricted warfare"[51] as a new strategic framework for the PRC's military strategy, advocating for a shift from reliance on traditional military force to a broader, asymmetric strategy that integrates various levers of national power.

Since its initial publication, *Unrestricted Warfare* has received a significant amount of attention from Western audiences, who have developed contrasting perspectives on the efficacy of the book's argument and strategic framework, Some readers adamantly claim that

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[45] "China's National Defense in 2002." Pg. 6.
[46] "China's National Defense in 2000." Pg. 4
[47] Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare*.
[48] Yang, Keller, and Molnar, "An Operational Code Analysis of China's National Defense White Papers."
[49] "China's National Defense in 1998."
[50] Char and Bitzinger, "A New Direction in the People's Liberation Army's Emergent Strategic Thinking, Roles and Missions."
[51] *Unrestricted Warfare* (italicized) refers to the book. "Unrestricted Warfare" (quoted) refers to the strategic framework presented within the book. Later, the quotations are dropped as the concept is further expounded.

the thorough analysis that the book provides of modern warfare and the strategic framework that it presents make it a key text for understanding modern interstate competition, and that "any serious student of modern warfare would be well advised to become acquainted with this influential work.[52]" Other readers are more skeptical, pointing out that while the book presents a broad and flexible approach to warfare that offers some interesting insights and provides a rare glimpse into Chinese strategic thinking, it should be read with caution due to its sensationalized claims,[53] inclusion of unoriginal ideas that are similar to existing Western concepts,[54] and questionable connections with numerology to identify patterns in historical battles.[55] Furthermore, its emphasis on unlimited means to achieve limited objectives could reflect a misunderstanding of the broader political context of war, thereby highlighting potential vulnerabilities in China's strategic approach.[56]

Although the book remains a key text for understanding Chinese views on global competition, its actual influence within China is debated. Some Westerners completely reject *Unrestricted Warfare*, arguing that it should not be considered an authoritative or definitive source on Chinese military strategy. The book is criticized for being unoriginal, not providing a clear or applicable plan for military action and lacking practical utility. While it discusses the evolution of warfare and the integration of non-military means, much of the content is derived from US military theorists and documents, making it less of a groundbreaking text and more of a commentary on historical military trends.[57]

In regard to this project, however, analyzing *Unrestricted Warfare* does not serve to evaluate the efficacy of the strategic framework that it presents. Rather, this project assumes that, despite any potential flaws, the existence of *Unrestricted Warfare* and its theoretical strategic framework has influenced the way the PRC and PLA strategists and policymakers conceive of the utility of military force in pursuing political objectives. Furthermore, *Unrestricted Warfare* exemplifies the synthesis of Chinese military philosophy and Western military theory, as the authors cite not only Sun Zu's *Art of War* and *Questions and Replies Between Tang Taizong and Li Weigong*, but also Clausewitz's On War, J.F.C. Fuller's *Military History of the Western World*, and Machiavelli's *The Prince*. The goal of analyzing *Unrestricted Warfare*, therefore, is to describe how both philosophical traditions influence the strategic framework that it presents.

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[52] "Précis: Unrestricted Warfare," *Military Review*, October 2019, https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/SO-19/Precis-Unrestricted-Warfare.pdf.

[53] Marshall, "The hyperbolic tagline of this edition, China's Master Plan to Destroy America, and the introduction by Al Santoli accusing China of having a hand in the September 11 attacks are illustrative of the exaggerated reactions Unrestricted Warfare has too often generated. Such analysis tends to overestimate both the ongoing influence of Unrestricted Warfare within the Chinese establishment and the quality of the ideas it contains."

[54] Marshall argues that *Unrestricted Warfare's* analysis of the 1991 Gulf War provides no new insights beyond existing Western military theories.

[55] The authors of *Unrestricted Warfare* use the Pythagorean Theorem to explain the ideal distribution and of forces and logistics.

[56] Marshall Lawrence, "Book Review: Unrestricted Warfare."

[57] Josh Baughman, "'Unrestricted Warfare' Is Not China's Master Plan," *China Aerospace Studies Institute, Air University*, April 25, 2022.

This analysis argues that the strategic framework of *Unrestricted Warfare* is equally influenced by both Chinese military philosophy and Western military theory. While Western military theory provides the majority of contemporary evidence in regard to the character of modern warfare, Chinese military philosophy informs how the authors articulate strategic concepts that are similar to existing Western ideas but are distinctly Chinese. To argue this point, the analysis is divided into two sections. The first section analyzes Part One of *Unrestricted Warfare*, which analyzes the US' experience in the 1991 Gulf War to ascertain the character of modern warfare. The second section analyzes "Part Two: A Discussion of New Operational Methods," which develops concepts such as the "Side-Principal Rule," "Supra-Domain Combinations," and other ideas that influence the strategic framework of *Unrestricted Warfare*.

As Colonels Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui develop their concept of unrestricted warfare, they synthesize a mix of Chinese and Western sources into a conceptual strategic framework that is, simply put, unique. Quantitatively, Western sources receive the majority of attention, with over 100 citations compared to just 39 citations of Chinese sources. Qualitatively, however, Chinese sources provide a deeper conceptual framework for understanding the mechanism of war, while Western sources provide more details regarding the character of warfare on the modern battlefield. Beyond the case study of the Gulf War, the authors reference multiple historical figures from both cultures as evidence in support of the utility of their framework in understanding the rules of war.

Science of Military Strategy, On Maritime Strategic Access, and China's Aerospace Security Strategic Concept

The 2020 *Science of Military Strategy* (SMS) is a textbook published by the PLA Academy of Military Sciences that contains a collection of doctrines that instruct PLA officers on how to plan and execute campaigns. Whereas *Unrestricted Warfare* addresses the theoretical mechanisms of war that determine victory beyond just military means, this source focuses the discussion away from overarching political objectives and instead informs the practical application of military force.[58] In the opinion of some prominent analysts, the *Science of Military Strategy* is the superior source for understanding the PRC's approach to warfighting. These analysts argue that *Unrestricted Warfare's* use of abstract concepts like the golden ratio, vague references to undefined "rules of victory," and the embrace of "fuzziness" as a critical aspect of the ill-defined nature of Chinese strategic and philosophical thought do not provide clear guidance for the application of military force in the modern security environment.[59] PRC analyst Peter Mattis, for example, argues that relying on *Unrestricted Warfare* gives a poor insight into the PRC's thinking on war. He further explains that updated versions of the *Science of Military Strategy* are, however, much harder to obtain in well-translated English, and this likely contributes to the impact of *Unrestricted Warfare* being greater outside of the PRC than inside.[60]

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[58] Clay and Lee, "Unmasking the Devil in the Chinese Details."
[59] Marshall Lawrence.
[60] Marshall Lawrence.

On Maritime Strategic Access (OMSA) and *China's Aerospace Security Strategic Concept* (CASSC) apply the same concepts as the *Science of Military Strategy*, but focus on the same strategic principles in the maritime and aerospace domains. The former document was published by the Current Events Press in Beijing in September 2011, while the latter document was published in 2016 by the People's Liberation Army Press. Combined with the SMS, these three sources holistically describe the ends, ways, and means of the PRC's military strategy in support of the broader social, economic, and political objectives defined in the *Defense White Papers.* All three of these documents were translated by the China Aerospace Studies Institute of the Air University and were never published by the PRC in English. This is important to consider, as the opinions expressed in these documents are authoritative and accurately reflect the discourse taking place among PLA military officers who look to these documents for guidance.

Influence on Military Strategy

This section will explore how the PRC's military strategy, as outlined in the SMS, the OMSA, and CASSC, articulates the concepts of Active Defense and deterrence as a strategic end. The PRC's current conceptualizations of Active Defense and deterrence theory evolved from the operational-level into a strategic disposition that reflects a combination of traditional Chinese concepts, communist doctrine from the Chinese Civil War, and Cold War era Western deterrence theories. In support of this strategic end, the PLA's modernization efforts, notably through the emphasis on integrating information technologies to be able to fight and win local wars under high-technology conditions, demonstrate the PRC's dependence on Western military experience to inform the means and ways of its military strategy.

Each of the three doctrinal sources interacts with Chinese and Western concepts in distinct ways. CASSC's content provides the least substantive description of the application of military force in the air domain. This source overwhelmingly relies on a handful of Chinese works relating to air power, such as Li Xuezhong and Tian Anping's *Theory of National Aerospace Security*, which it cites on numerous occasions.[61] Meanwhile, CASSC cites only four Western sources outside of its bibliography, none of which were substantial air power-specific theorists. Meanwhile, OMSA draws provides in-depth analysis of numerous case studies in the field of maritime security, such as a historical review of American, British, Russian, Chinese, and Indian maritime histories. Although contemporary Chinese sources outnumber the sum of Western and non-Western sources, the two most frequently cited works are Alfred Thayer Mahan's *Influence of Sea Power Upon World History* and Hans Morgenthau's *Politics Among Nations.* This indicates that Western thought on continental vs. maritime strategies provides the majority of the PRC's framework for thinking about maritime strategy.

The SMS is the most balanced between Chinese and Western military thought, citing a mix of classical Chinese sources like Sun Zu and the Wei Liao Zi, contemporary Chinese academic sources, political sources such as Xi Jinping and the PRC *Defense White Papers*, along with Western authors such as Clausewitz, Jomini, and Liddell Hart. This mix of

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[61] Tian Anping is also the primary author of CASSC.

philosophical traditions is even explained in the opening chapter of the SMS, where it is explained that China produced a large body of strategic theory in ancient times, that "after entering modern times, the development of China's strategic theories has been relatively slow and there are few theoretical works," that since "the beginning of the 20th century…other Western strategic masterpieces gradually spread to China, which had a greater impact on China's modern strategic theories.[62]"

Ends

The *PRC Defense White Papers* often refer to broader socioeconomic goals such as domestic stability, security, and economic development. In support of these grand-strategic objectives, the *Science of Military Strategy*, *On Maritime Strategic Access*, and China's *Aerospace Security Strategic Concept* each expound the PLA's military strategy and how it contributes to the PRC's broader political objectives. According to these texts, the primary goal of the PRC's military institutions is to engage in Active Defense and deter any actions by foreign nations that undermine the PRC's interests. While deterrence and Active Defense are often discussed separately within both these sources and Western analysis of the PRC's behavior, they are actually inseparable elements that explain the end goal of the military dimension of the PRC's foreign policy strategy.

The SMS defines Active Defense as "[within an] overall defensive situation, using active and powerful offensive operations to achieve the established political goals.[63]" This term was first used by the PRC to describe its military disposition in the 1995 and 1998 *Defense White Papers*, where it simultaneously explained the doctrine as "gaining mastery by striking only after the enemy has struck.[64]" While this exact phrase has not used by the PRC to explain Active Defense since 1998, the 1995, 1998, and 2019 *Defense White Papers*, along with the 2020 SMS[65] all relate the idea of Active Defense to the idea that "[China] will not attack unless we are attacked, but [China] will surely counterattack if attacked.[66]" The reuse of the same phrase after 20 years indicates intellectual consistency in the interpretation of Active Defense over time. The 2022 SMS also provides details into the philosophical origins of Active Defense. According to the SMS, the concept of active defense was first developed by the Chinese Communists as an operational-level doctrine that preserved combat strength when engaging in guerilla activities. This operational-level concept was later elevated to the strategic level to define how the PRC would employ its military in the political realm of international affairs.[67]

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[62] Xiao Tianliang, "2020 NDU Science of Military Strategy" (Beijing: Military Sciences Press, 2013). Pg. 2.
[63] "In Their Own Words: 2020 Science of Military Strategy," Air University (AU), January 26, 2022, https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/CASI/Display/Article/2913216/in-their-own-words-2020-science-of-military-strategy/https%3A%2F%2Fwww.airuniversity.af.edu%2FCASI%2FArticles%2FArticle-Display%2FArticle%2F2913216%2Fin-their-own-words-2020-science-of-military-strategy%2F.
[64] "China's National Defense in 1998."
[65] *Science of Military Strategy,* pg. 31 and133.
[66] The 1998 and 2019 White Papers both use this exact quote as a part of their explanation of Active Defense. In 1995, this term is used separately without the mention of the Active Defense doctrine.
[67] *Science of Military Strategy,* Pg. 31.

As Active Defense was elevated from an operational-level to strategic-level framework, the PRC needed to revitalize the concept to account for the political complexity of international relations. In this new context, the PLA needed to understand how states, and not just armies, would respond to a simultaneously defensive disposition mixed with limited offensive shaping operations. This is where the PRC and PLA began to adopt Western concepts of deterrence theory. According to research by CNA's China and Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Division, "PRC writings about deterrence, strategic stability, escalation control, and related concepts draw heavily from, and frequently cite, foundational Western international relations theories, particularly those developed during the Cold War. Thus, these discussions are not original to China; rather, PRC authors are taking concepts and debates that arose in an earlier Western context and grappling with what they mean for the PRC today.[68]" The SMS confirms this analysis by attributing the PRC's current understanding of strategic deterrence to Western deterrence theory developed after the Second World War.[69]

While the Western influence on the PRC concept of deterrence theory is evident, it is also important to note that there are significant differences in Western and Chinese conceptualizations due to classical Chinese and Marxist influence, as well as the lexical ambiguity that occurs when translating the concepts of deterrence, competence, and coercion between English and Chinese. The Chinese term commonly used to represent deterrence, weishe (威慑), can also represent coercive acts that force another nation to take an action rather than discourage that nation from taking action, or compellance.[70] This lexical ambiguity, combined with China's distinct history of deterrence in interstate affairs and the Communists' employment of offensive guerrilla actions when active defense was an operational-level concept, creates a Chinese concept of deterrence that is distinct from Western conceptualizations of the same phenomenon. To the PRC, deterrence and coercion are not distinct concepts. Chinese deterrence constitutes the "active" component of Active Defense, where both deterrent and coercive actions act as shaping operations to set conditions for a defensive military conflict.

Whereas Active Defense and deterrence are mutually supporting concepts, the PRC's newfound appreciation for maritime strategic access is an independent objective of military strategy. While the term has never been used in the *Defense White Papers*, the 2015 *White Paper* first mentions the overseas projection of military power to protect overseas interests.[71] According to the *White Paper*, these overseas interests include protecting access to "overseas energy and resources" and "strategic sea lines of communication." The release of this white paper in 2015 likely correlates with the early stages of the PRC's Belt and Road Initiative. OMSA provides more context to the military dimension of the PRC's overseas security interests. Ensuring freedom of movement through sea lines of communication, protecting overseas infrastructure investments, and maintaining a presence near strategic resource

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[68] Kaufman and Waidelich, "PRC Writings on Strategic Deterrence: Technological Disruption and the Search for Strategic Stability." Pg. 5.
[69] *Science of Military Strategy*, Pg. 126.
[70] Kaufman and Waidelich, "PRC Writings on Strategic Deterrence: Technological Disruption and the Search for Strategic Stability." Pg. 11.
[71] "The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces" (Beijing: Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, April 2013), https://www.andrewerickson.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/China-Defense-White-Paper_2013_English-Chinese_Annotated.pdf. Pg. 29.

reserves all support the ultimate goal of the PRC's domestic economic development, while simultaneously being the biggest vulnerabilities to the PRC if their access were denied. OMSA also provides context for why this dramatic strategic shift towards overseas power projection occurred. Although Chinese history has many examples of advanced seafaring and maritime activities, the overseas activity of trade was always secondary to the overland activity of farming. Similarly, with the notable exception of Zheng He's expeditions during the Ming dynasty, naval power was never prioritized by Chinese dynasties. This is in direct contrast to Western civilization, whose theories of maritime power, notably Alfred Thayer Mahan, would not diffuse into Chinese strategic thinking until after the dynastic periods.[72] Given these competing historical traditions, the PRC's relatively recent emphasis on overseas power projection can be explained as an adaptation of Western strategic thinking.

Ways

Militarily, the PLA and its constituent branches plan to contribute to Active Defense by planning to fight and win "local wars under high-technology conditions." While the focus of this doctrine is to concentrate military force on a local area to achieve relative overmatch, PLA strategists also recognize that local conflicts have broader implications that impact other levers of national power. If exploited correctly, military efforts in limited local wars, economic efforts, and information efforts can be synergized into "supra-domain combinations[73]" that will collectively produce stronger political effects on the enemy.

The term "local wars under high-technology conditions" was first mentioned in the 2002 *Defense White Paper,* which was published within one year of *Unrestricted Warfare.* While the *Defense White Papers* do not define or explain the concept, the SMS, OMSA, and CASSC all discuss the implications of modern technologies, particularly information technologies, on the modern battlefield. Interestingly, the exact term "local wars under high-technology conditions" is not explicitly stated in any of the three documents, although variations of the term, such as "local wars under conditions of informatization," "people's war under modern conditions[74]" are also used in the *Defense White Papers* on numerous occasions. Regardless of the variation in terminology, the fundamental principle that the concept is trying to illustrate is that highly maneuverable mechanized formations that are well-integrated with information-sharing systems have allowed modern armies to concentrate more force into smaller theaters.

While the PRC perceives the scale of the modern battlefield to be shrinking in military terms, what can be considered a "battlefield" is paradoxically expanding in political, economic, and informational terms. This concept is deeply expounded throughout *Unrestricted Warfare,* which proposes the concept of "supra-domain combinations" that combine military, economic, diplomatic, and ultimately psychological means to produce

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[72] *In Their Own Words: On Maritime Strategic Access* (Montgomery, Alabama: China Aerospace Studies Institute, 2024), https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/documents/Translations/2024-02-12-3%20ITOW%20-%20On%20Maritime%20Strategic%20Access.pdf.

[73] Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare*, FBIS Translated Version (Beijing: PLA Literature and Arts Publishing House, 1999), https://www.c4i.org/unrestricted.pdf.

[74] "China's National Defense in 2002."

maximum leverage over an enemy.[75] The term "supra-domain combinations" is never used in official literature such as the SMS, OMSA, or CASSA; However, both the SMS and OMSA explain the connection between efforts in the military domain with diplomatic, economic, and informational policies.

While Western academics continue to debate the substantive influence of *Unrestricted Warfare* on the PRC's understanding of modern warfare and how it factors into international politics, there are obvious parallels in the concepts expressed in *Unrestricted Warfare* and officially published doctrine. Therefore, understanding the philosophical origins of *Unrestricted Warfare* can also provide insight into how the PRC understands the utility of military force that may not be explicitly stated in doctrine. Throughout *Unrestricted Warfare*, the authors synthesize a mix of Chinese and Western sources to establish their theories. Quantitatively, Western sources receive the majority of attention, with over 100 citations compared to just 39 citations of Chinese sources.[76] Qualitatively, however, Chinese sources, such as Sun Zu's *Art of War*,[77] Lao Zi's *Tao Teching*,[78] and Li Shimin,[79] justify many distinctions from the Western style of strategic thinking, while the authors' analysis of the US's experience in the 1991 Gulf War entirely informs the authors' assumptions about the character of modern warfare.

Similarly, the SMS, OMSA, and CASSC all analyze the experiences and dispositions of other nations to inform. The SMS, which was published as late as 2020, frequently cites US sources discussing the Gulf War, Kosovo, and Iraq,[80] while OMSA dedicates an entire chapter to reviewing the historical experiences of the US, Great Britain, Russia, India, and Japan to understand the historical and contemporary nature of naval warfare.[81]

Means

Neither the SMS, OMSA, nor CASSC explicitly enumerates the capabilities of each of the PLA's branches. Similarly, while the 2013 and 2015 *Defense White Papers* do provide some information regarding the PLA's structure[82] and the disposition of some of its units,[83] they do not disclose any specific details regarding the PLA's military capabilities. What can be discerned, however, is the PRC and PLA's commitment to military modernization. In both the *Defense White Papers* and *Science of Military Strategy*, the two most-frequently used terms that describe the nature of the PLA's modernization are RMA with Chinese Characteristics and Informatization. Within PRC strategic discourse, the integration of information technologies, which underpins both concepts, is a fundamental part of

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[75] Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare*.
[76] Refer to Appendix C: *Unrestricted Warfare*: Number of Citations by Chapter and Origin.
[77] *Unrestricted Warfare,* Pg. 114.
[78] *Unrestricted Warfare,* Pg. 119.
[79] *Unrestricted Warfare,* Pg. 152.
[80] *Science of Military Strategy*, Pgs. 145, 150, 156, 182, 332, 342, 372.
[81] *On Maritime Strategic Access*, Chapter 3.
[82] "China's Military Strategy" (Beijing: Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, May 2015).
[83] "The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces" (Beijing: Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, April 2013).

developing a modern PLA with the capability to prosecute local wars under high technology conditions in support of a policy of active defense.

The term "RMA with Chinese Characteristics" was first introduced in the 2004 *Defense White Paper*.[84] While it has been cited in every *Defense White Paper* since then to justify the modernization of the PLA to meet the demands of modern warfare, none of the SMS, OMSA or CASSC uses this term in a technical capacity. The concept adapts the Western definition of "revolution in military affairs," an event where technological innovation fundamentally changes the character of war, into "RMA with Chinese characteristics." The PRC combines the Western concept of RMA to justify the need to modernize the PLA while also applying the term "Chinese characteristics" to encapsulate the connection between kinetic and information technologies, as well as a willingness to demonstrate capabilities to produce psychological effects.[85] While the concept of RMA is Western in origin, and Chinese strategic discourse does uniquely discuss the role of information technology on not only battlefield formation but also on producing psychological effects on the enemy's domestic politics, the lack of further substantive definition of the term in doctrinal publication like the SMS indicates that the term lacks any distinct depth as a strategic concept and could simply be replaced with a more generic "modernization."

What is unique to PRC strategic discourse is the discussion surrounding the role of information technologies. The term "informatization" encompasses the ideas of integrating battlefield maneuver formations to provide prompt intelligence and leveraging information networks and social media to combat enemies in the cyber and psychological realms. The concept of Informatization is integrated into almost every chapter and discussion within the SMS, OMSA, and CASSC. The idea that information technology, and the integration of maneuver formation into that system, has become the most decisive technology on the battlefield can be traced back to *Unrestricted Warfare*, which immediately predates the introduction of the concept in the *Defense White Papers* of the early 2000s.

Conclusion

This project began as an examination of the modernization of the PLA since the 1980s and the resulting evolution of the discourse used by the PRC to articulate the objectives, procedures, and capabilities of its military strategy. The PLA's modernization, which has included advancements in weapon systems and the integration of information technology, has coincided with the publication of updated doctrine. This modernization also aligned with a more assertive foreign policy, leading to widespread debate over the changing intentions of the PRC's foreign policy.

This project focused on understanding the strategic framework employed by the PRC by exploring the two primary philosophical traditions that inform Chinese military thought:

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[84] "China's National Defense in 2004" (Beijing: The Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2004), https://www.andrewerickson.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/China-Defense-White-Paper_2004_English-Chinese_Annotated.pdf.

[85] Jacqueline Newmyer, "The Revolution in Military Affairs with Chinese Characteristics," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 33, no. 4 (August 1, 2010): 483–504, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2010.489706.

traditional Chinese military philosophy and contemporary Western military theories. The ultimate goal was to describe how the PRC's strategy, which includes its foreign policy objectives (ends), military capabilities (means), and the methodologies for employing those capabilities (ways), incorporates these two intellectual traditions. To achieve this, the study analyzed a selection of five primary source strategic documents: the PRC *Defense White Papers* from 1995-2019, *Unrestricted Warfare* by Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, the 2020 *Science of Military Strategy*, *On Maritime Strategic Access,* and China's *Aerospace Security Strategic Concep*t.

The content analysis of these documents assessed how classical Chinese military philosophy and Western military theory were both integrated into the source's subject matter and how the two traditions influenced distinct strategic concepts that relate to different levels of strategy. Ultimately, each of the sources intermixed concepts from both traditions into a discursive model and strategic framework distinct from both traditions. Interestingly, the following quote from the authors of *Unrestricted Warfare* regarding the lack of clarity in their own theory provides the best insight into how the PRC might perceive the intellectual origins of its military strategy.

While the output of this project might appear niche, the nuanced understanding of how competing intellectual traditions have influenced the development of the PRC's current military strategy completely recontextualizes the intent of the PRC's grand foreign policy intentions in a way that is critical for Western policymakers to understand. Policymakers who only know the terms that the PRC uses in its strategic documents have only a limited understanding that will fail to recognize how those terms have developed over time and, therefore, also fail to fully comprehend the implications of their denotative and connotative meanings. The connotative meaning and implications of each strategic concept draw from the evolving meaning and ideas within a philosophical tradition over time. By understanding the evolution of the meaning of various strategic concepts within PRC military discourse – a phenomenon which is influenced by the adaptation of competing intellectual traditions – the policymaker becomes more aware of the intentional ambiguity of the PRC's military strategy in contrast to their own. This understanding provides the policymaker with additional insights into the adversary's intentions that are not immediately apparent from the adversaries words, spoken and written, or actions.

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Enablers of Victory: Nonprofits on the Emerging Battlefield

Uriel Epshtein

Victory on emerging battlefields will not be defined solely by firepower, but by partnerships, resilience, and the capacity to shape the battlespace before a shot is ever fired.

It's borderline trite to say, but today's battlefield is no longer confined to kinetic engagements between state actors. It is transnational, asymmetric, and increasingly hybrid, encompassing cyber operations, information warfare, humanitarian crises, and gray zone conflicts. As the US military adapts to these shifting realities, it must increasingly view non-state actors in a different light, not just as mere nuisances or potential threats, but as strategic partners. Among the most overlooked allies in this fight are nonprofit organizations.

Historically relegated to the "humanitarian aftermath" of conflict, nonprofits now operate on the left, right, and deep flanks of the modern battlefield. From disaster response and civil-military liaison functions to counter-extremism, local capacity-building, and influence operations, nonprofits serve as force multipliers that extend the reach, legitimacy, and adaptability of military campaigns in increasingly complex operational environments.

In theaters such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and Africa, the US military has long collaborated with NGOs and INGOs (international nongovernmental organizations) under the framework of "civil-military cooperation." However, these partnerships have traditionally been tactical, limited, and—at times—adversarial. That must change.

Consider the following areas where nonprofits serve a shaping or enabling role:

- *Democracy Promotion*: A key goal of many US military actions is promoting, creating, or restoring democratic forms of government. Nonprofits that specialize in that space may be uniquely positioned to support not only the citizens of those countries but US national interests as well, offering substantive depth, cultural context, and insight that the military might otherwise lack.

- *Understanding the Human Terrain*: Nonprofits often possess granular cultural, social, and linguistic insights long before US personnel arrive in theater. Their continuity of presence and community trust often surpass that of uniformed forces, offering a persistent information advantage.

- *Stabilization and Counterinsurgency:* Development-focused nonprofits are often the first NGOs to restore essential services—healthcare, education, water, and governance—undermining insurgent narratives and denying the enemy freedom of movement among the population.

- *Education and Advocacy*: In contested information environments, nonprofits offer a variety of messengers capable of breaking through the noise and serving as credible, apolitical voices that amplify US messaging or counter hostile propaganda—particularly in humanitarian or disaster-struck areas.

- *Irregular Warfare and Action in Great Power Competition*: From the Indo-Pacific to Africa, US-aligned nonprofits can expand strategic presence without provoking escalation. Their work in the information space, health, education, and capacity-building serves as soft-power scaffolding that aligns with US interests and values.

- *Disaster Response and Community Building*: As climate instability and urban density create more frequent and devastating disasters, nonprofits' logistical networks, disaster expertise, and local ties become indispensable for Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) missions, often before DoD assets can be mobilized.

If the US military is to maximize efficiency and truly harness nonprofits as force multipliers, it must move beyond ad hoc engagement and toward institutionalized integration. This includes:

- *Expanding the Role of Civil Affairs*: Civil Affairs units should routinely conduct NGO terrain mapping and establish persistent liaisons with key organizations, both domestic and international.

- *Cross-Sector Exercises*: Include NGOs and nonprofits in joint exercises such as Pacific Partnership or DEFENDER-Europe—not just as scenario injects, but as cooperative actors with meaningful roles.

- *Interagency Coordination*: Integrate USAID, DOS, and key nonprofits into Theater Campaign Plans (TCPs) and Country Cooperation Frameworks (CCFs), aligning developmental objectives with security goals without militarizing the civilian space.

- *Operational Flexibility*: Recognize that nonprofits cannot be ordered—they must be persuaded. Cultivating enduring trust and understanding their constraints (financial being chief among them) is vital for operational success.

Of course, partnerships with nonprofits carry friction points. Differing mandates, political sensitivities, and security risks must be carefully managed. Nonprofits should not be perceived as tools of US military policy, lest their neutrality and operational integrity be compromised. But these challenges are manageable, and the strategic payoff is immense.

As the US military confronts a world of blurred boundaries—between war and peace, soldier and civilian, physical and digital—its toolkit must expand. Nonprofit organizations, far from being peripheral actors, are often the first in and the last out. In places where the US cannot—or should not—project uniformed presence, nonprofits fill the vacuum.

It is time to recognize and operationalize this reality: nonprofits are not just partners in peace—they are enablers of victory.

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Maneuvering Through Professional Decline in the Military
Samuel Yudin

The Atlantic published an article by Arthur Brooks in its July 2019 issue titled *Your Professional Decline Is Coming (Much) Sooner Than You Think.* In the article, Brooks states he works "like a maniac" and has a successful career, but he wonders if he can keep it up, what comes next, and whether he would look back and be miserable when it ends. What could he do during his career, he wondered, to ensure happiness when it all ended? In answer to this question, he offers some profound insights on how to frame success and satisfaction in one's career and ways to carry that forward into whatever comes next. Reading the article, I immediately saw the parallels in my military career and thought this topic must be discussed among all who serve. It is an important and useful piece not only because of how relatable it is, but also how to carry that joy forward after our careers end.

As military professionals, we all know that everyone slows down at some point. We must understand that our peak achievement is not the source of our self-worth and navigate to ensure that we have meaning at all stages of our careers and beyond. Brooks introduces us to what he calls the "Principle of Psychoprofessional Gravitation" to describe the profound sadness experienced when previously high performers' careers end and their emotions are attached to that prestige. This phenomenon is most evident in athletes who one minute are winning championships and the next are in trouble with substance abuse or the law. After the highs of their careers, they could not cope with not having the attention and prestige. For many athletes, this happens at a young age. Gymnasts are seen as past their prime before they reach their 20s, and professional athletes by the time they reach their 30s.

That said, Brooks points out that this phenomenon is not just relegated to athletes and the performance of our bodies, but also to the performance of our minds. The interval from peak career performance to decline with physical attributes might be more dramatic earlier in life, but it happens in more intellectual fields as well. There are similar patterns with authors, entrepreneurs, and scientists… and with soldiers.

In a military career, we fuse physical ability with cognitive performance, and so we must understand how to navigate the decline of each. Some ways that the military itself compensates for servicemembers' decline are age-based physical fitness standards and levels of leadership paired with retention control points and separation cutoffs based on how long a servicemember has stayed stagnant in their career progression. At the same time, the Army in particular has a "lead from the front" culture for all of its leaders that seems to ignore the reality of persistent decline, demanding instead that a leader give all they have in all they do, all the time. As Brooks states, "The biggest mistake professionally successful people make is attempting to sustain peak accomplishment indefinitely." The professional toolkit for decline management is clearly incomplete.

How does one then begin to navigate professional decline in the military?

In his article, Brooks refers to the work of psychologist Raymond Cattell and the concepts of fluid and crystallized intelligence. Fluid intelligence, the ability to quickly think and act to solve

problems and get the job done, is important earlier when we are doing the work and gaining experience in our careers and diminishes after a decade or two. Crystallized intelligence, gained from knowledge, experience and judgement, is used later in our careers and continues to grow even as our fluid intelligence atrophies. This model closely replicates what takes place over the course of a soldier's professional career.

The Roles of the Noncommissioned Officer (NCO) as an Example

A military career is sequenced to capture the ideal fluid and crystallized intelligence synergy at each level of responsibility. At lower levels, decision-making patterns are learned through repetition of basic tasks, and that learned knowledge is adapted and applied to successively more complex leadership issues over time. The Army's *Training Circular 7-22.7: The Noncommissioned Officer Guide*, devotes considerable space to defining the roles of the NCO at each rank within the framework of the NCO Common Core Competencies (NCO C^3). The fluid intelligence-dominant phase aligns with the junior enlisted ranks, where soldiers learn how to do their jobs. The second phase is that of the sergeant, who, as a junior leader, leads, inspects, and trains. The next sequence, incorporating the start of crystallized intelligence, begins with the staff sergeant who can be entrusted to track, plan, and execute critical mission tasks. Next, the sergeant first class supervises, integrates, and coordinates subordinate units led by those staff sergeants. Then the first sergeant manages, mentors, develops, and plans for longer-term planning considerations and is the transition step away from direct leadership to organizational leadership, where crystallized intelligence is prioritized. Finally, the command sergeant major shapes, influences, and drives people and organizations starting at an organizational level and progressing to a strategic level. These roles and responsibilities break down cleanest for NCOs, but the logic still applies to officers.

For optimal career performance, we should aim for promotion at the apogee of knowledge conversion from fluid to crystallized. Said a different way, each level of responsibility reaches a point of diminishing returns where individuals are learning less and are already capable of more. Ideally, we would know where that point is and plan a successful transition accordingly. We would focus on different competencies and characteristics in the Army leadership requirements model to help us build those bridges. Then, using the listed responsibilities of each role as guides, know when we were ready to jump into a new role with new responsibilities. We cannot jump too early before we are ready, and jumping too late on a declining curve could be just as detrimental. We must make the leaps at strategically placed positions, based on performance, accomplishment, and merit, before the slope of the decline causes performance to slide to an unmanageable level.

Professional Decline in Organizations

Professional decline is not only an individual inevitability, it is an organizational inevitability. The organization will decline when those in it wane, but also when the culture does the same. How an organization adapts to the professional decline of individual members and itself is more impactful to long-term success and survivability.

One might be successful on the earlier performance-driven arches and successful in the middle stewardship arches, but not show potential for advancement. That is okay and must be honestly identified and assessed by the individual team members and supervisors who are stewards of the organization.

It is important to understand, recognize, and act intelligently on this. If somebody demonstrates that they are not going to perform in the next sequence, it might be better for them to go do something else before they slide and bring the organization down with them. Some organizations strive to retain everyone despite the value to themselves and the organization. It is better for the organization to have most of its workforce operating on the incline and apex of multiple phases than to have all members on the apex of any single one. It is also better to have most members operating on the inclines and apex than on the declines. When a critical mass of members are beyond the apices, the organization suffers great harm.

The organization also suffers great harm when the stewards of the organization allow the organization to be complacent and not progress through the ranks by not developing their team members and allowing them to be stagnant. The organization fails to navigate decline when the culture has a fixed mindset, does not adapt, fails to enforce standards, does not demand accountability, fails to foster a climate of trust, and does not demand that members perform at the levels required for each role. Stewards of the organization are entrusted with helping the organization navigate these issues, just as we must in our individual careers.

We all have the tools to navigate professional decline

Fortunately, the Army has given us all the tools to navigate professional decline. By progressing through the different leadership levels, applying the Army leadership attributes and competencies in fulfilling the roles and responsibilities, and mastering each level is the tried-and-true path. This will ensure we not only navigate through professional decline but thrive along the way and on the other side.

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Lead in Order to Serve: West Point's Vanguard Initiative

by Colonel Mark Federovich, Major James Fiser, and Captain Scott Filbert

The United States Military Academy (USMA) at West Point has focused for decades on three pillars of development for its cadets: military, academic, and physical. USMA has traditionally centralized developmental military training in the summer, maximizing dedicated time and focused efforts on realistic and rigorous training during one-to-two-month blocks. A longstanding byproduct of focused summer training, however, is a gap in military training during the academic year (August to May). This exposes itself each summer as the Department of Military Instruction (DMI) at USMA has to build in significant time to remind cadets of their previous summer's training. More important to the cadets' development as Army leaders, the transfer of military knowledge and skills by upper-class to lower-class cadets has been observed to be inconsistent in quality. There has been a significant demand signal from cadets for more military training during the Academic Year, with several individuals presenting plans and proposals to accomplish this goal. In response to this need, and aided by donor funds, DMI developed the Vanguard Initiative, a selective program designed to identify intrinsically motivated and naturally skilled soldier-leaders, with the explicit goal of producing capable junior officers who can proliferate their knowledge in military tactics and training to the rest of USMA's Corps of Cadets and raise the bar of competency of graduating second lieutenants.

The program is led by a DMI cohort of four US Army officers and non-commissioned officers, all Ranger or Sapper-qualified, most with deployment experience, and some with time in special operations units, including the 75th Ranger Regiment and the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment. The training population consists of two US Army platoons' worth of cadets and two opposition force squads, for a total of 100 cadets. Academic year training takes place every other day after classes for approximately two hours. Training focuses on the three pillars of Vanguard: *Small Unit Tactics*, *Junior Officership*, and *Scholarly Exposure*. In a week, cadets might rehearse an ambush (small unit tactics), receive a class on how to conduct an inventory (junior officership), and meet with all of a division's brigade command teams for a seminar discussion (scholarly exposure) as those teams pass through USMA.

Academic-Year Training

Tactical training at the small unit level within Vanguard focuses directly on resolving the identified shortcomings/disadvantages of the USMA military developmental model and complementing its strengths. Cadets deliberately follow the Army's 8-step training model as they learn the importance of unit standard operating procedures, rehearsals, and after-action reviews. Training throughout the semester builds through individual, team, squad, and platoon-level tasks in preparation to accomplish a collective training event, quite like the way an operational unit builds training from annual or quarterly training guidance. In the last academic year, Vanguard

executed two complex air assault situational training exercises with a focus on night operations, employment of triggers, radio communications, and mechanical breaching.

Every officer is familiar with the list of essential skills that are rarely, if ever, touched on in their initial training pipeline. Property management, training management, and maintenance often come to mind in this area. This is a gap that Vanguard directly addresses, with the majority of these areas addressed in the context of the tactical training objectives for the semester. Over the last year, cadets have developed proficiency in executing preventive maintenance checks and Services, maintaining accountability for various classes of equipment, and utilizing related Army forms. Select cadet leaders were trained, trusted, and empowered to plan and execute developmental training, overnight situational training, and a night rifle marksmanship range.

Officers have an intrinsic requirement to be able to understand and articulate military operations at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of war. Whether it is to explain the purpose of a CTC rotation to a junior Soldier or to understand the requirements and effects of an ongoing operation, officers have a responsibility to understand the fight–and the world at large–at a high cognitive level. USMA's Modern War Institute (MWI) has partnered with DMI leaders to provide exceptional training in this area, as well as exposure to ungraduated and graduate students at US and international colleges and universities. Cadets have been able to converse with veterans and subject matter experts from ongoing conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine, speak with operational battalion and brigade commanders, and have participated in the development and delivery of open-source intelligence briefs on threat areas across the globe.

Program Results

The Vanguard Initiative has demonstrated itself to be of service to its participants and the Corps of Cadets as a whole over the entire span of military training at USMA. The program's leadership is committed to solidifying and expanding this success in the immediate future, with plans to double the participating population in the next academic year. In line with the program's stated goal, Vanguard cadets have quickly leveraged the training they have received within the program to serve as force multipliers within their cadet companies, providing numerous training opportunities for interested cadets in a disjointed fashion. With the assistance of the USMA Brigade Tactical Department, program participants were intentionally placed into summer leadership positions where their training and skills will be a valuable addition to underclass cadet development. As the institution enters another period of focused military training, DMI leaders anticipate that these young leaders will raise the bar of performance across the institution in a powerful way. The development of this initiative has furthered military training elsewhere in academic and military training, with advanced-course options now being offered for the latter two Military Science courses, most of which are primarily attended by Vanguard cadets. Due to the program's selective nature and in-depth mentorship, DMI leaders have been able to secure

additional summer military training opportunities for almost 200 cadets, each chosen deliberately to maximize their individual development.

Conclusion

US military doctrine calls for officers to practice "servant leadership," and perhaps the greatest success of the program thus far is the development of the Vanguard Initiative motto. When cadet leaders were tasked with developing a motto for the program independently, they quickly selected "Praesis ut Prosis." Despite the great predictability and potential overuse of Latin in unit mottos, it is the meaning that matters. Vanguard's Latin motto translates to "lead in order to serve," and was the focusing guidepost selected by the team of cadet leaders with representatives across each of the four classes, an impressive testament to the quality of these exceptional future leaders and excellent motivation to provide each of them with the best training and preparation possible on their path of service to the nation.

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Officer Ethics and the Emerging Battlefield

Almeida Betancourt

Editor's Note: This commentary was written as an assignment for the Officership capstone course at West Point and was recommended for publication by the course director. It was edited for clarity and flow and is presented here as an opinion piece. It originally contained citations and footnotes.

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I came to the United States as a Cuban refugee at the age of twelve, and I still remember the mixture of awe and uncertainty. On the one hand, I got a chance to grow up in a society that placed enormous value on individual rights and liberties; on the other hand, it was a world I did not fully understand yet. Over time, I came to see that the stability and freedoms in the United States are not guaranteed; they are constantly renewed by the people who defend them. Years later, as a West Point cadet preparing to become an Army officer, I reflect on how my background intersects with the solemn pledge I will take upon commissioning to become an officer. That pledge is the Oath of Commissioned Officers, and to me, it is more than a simple tradition. It is a deep moral commitment and a professional promise at the Army's core.

Though often recited quickly in ceremonies, the Oath of Commissioned Officers carries profound meaning. It begins by acknowledging one's new role and continues with the phrase, *"…do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic.*" The term "*support and defend*" is a call to actively preserve the American constitutional framework, a commitment that resonates deeply with me, coming from an environment where institutional stability and personal freedoms were precarious. By taking this oath, I pledge to use my leadership, knowledge, and moral judgment to uphold the rule of law, democratic principles, and the rights of fellow citizens.

The Oath then states, "*that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same.*" This asserts my loyalty to the Constitution, not to individual leaders or shifting political trends, ensuring that our military remains a neutral, nonpartisan institution for the common good. Another crucial segment reads, "*that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion.*" This clause reinforces that my service is a personal, unreserved commitment, much like my family's pursuit of a better future when we came to the United States.

Finally, the oath concludes with, "*and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office upon which I am about to enter; So help me God.*" For me, this final phrase is a solemn reminder of the heavy responsibility and integrity required of every officer. While people can interpret this last clause differently depending on their spiritual beliefs, for some, it could be a profoundly religious commitment, but for me, it is a solemn acknowledgment that officership is

not to be taken lightly. Regardless, it reflects the gravity of the obligation an officer is pledging to when reciting this oath.

In my West Point education, I learned that the Army is more than a collection of skilled warfighters. It is a profession rooted in core values and a moral imperative. John Mark Mattox, who examines this issue in *The Moral Foundations of Army Officership*, explains that the Army has the practical function of defending society and a moral duty to do so in a way that upholds human dignity and fosters a flourishing society. This idea resonates with me because it suggests that if the Army loses sight of its moral grounding, it risks becoming just another armed group rather than a professional institution that truly serves the nation.

Mattox's view also intertwines how we at West Point learn about the five essential characteristics of the Army Profession: trust, military expertise, honorable service, stewardship, and esprit de corps. These characteristics may initially sound abstract, but I see them as the building blocks keeping the Army strong and respected. The Army cannot effectively accomplish its missions without trust, both within the force and with the larger public. Without a guiding ethic, expertise can drift toward cold technical efficiency, ignoring the greater good. Furthermore, without stewardship, we can forget that we inherit the profession from those who came before and must pass it on effectively to those who come after. The stewardship of the profession is embedded within the oath as officers swear to bear true faith and allegiance to the Constitution and the Army profession.

Due to the recent events within the Army where leaders have failed to uphold the stewardship of the profession, the Army faces challenges in maintaining the trust of the citizens they swore to protect. The data shows a critical drop in Americans' confidence in the military, declining from 70 percent in 2018 to just 45 percent in 2023. According to Lieutenant Colonel Luke High, part of the problem is the perception that high-level misconduct and politicization have compromised the military's integrity. This shortfall in public trust is not just about image; it threatens recruitment and, more importantly, the profession's ability to govern itself. If the public and its elected representatives believe the Army cannot maintain ethical standards internally, they will impose outside oversight, such as the current removal of Army authority on the adjudication of SHARP cases, further undercutting our autonomy as a profession.

This ties directly back to the Oath of Commissioned Officers. When we promise to "*bear true faith and allegiance*" to the Constitution, we acknowledge that self-policing is not optional; it is part of who we are. The Oath demands that we remain accountable, call out wrongdoings, and serve as ethical leaders in both our daily routines and broader strategic decisions. Far from being a mere formality, the oath becomes our best hope of regaining and sustaining the public's trust, reminding us that genuine allegiance involves moral courage as much as tactical competence.

Considering these current events, the Oath has become a cornerstone of my professional identity. It ties my personal experiences arriving as a Cuban refugee and encountering different forms of governance directly to the Army's mission. I saw firsthand how institutions can either protect or endanger freedoms. That perspective informs how I view my responsibilities now. By upholding the Constitution through honorable service, I feel as though I am giving something back to a system that afforded me a chance at a better life.

Mentorship reinforces the Oath's significance. Future officers often face a blend of legal, operational, and moral challenges. Senior leaders, experienced in these dilemmas, can guide junior officers in navigating them without compromising their duties. This transfer of wisdom is central to stewardship and preserves the Army's standards for future generations.

Accountability is vital to improving our profession's stewardship. This means taking ethics seriously in planning, training exercises, and warfare by requiring ethical conduct as a daily requirement. Overlooking minor infractions risks larger breaches. When officers hold each other to the oath's ideals, they foster a culture that minimizes misconduct.

Another significant avenue to improve our ability to apply ethics and morality to our daily battle rhythm is professional development, which focuses on moral reasoning and ethical decision-making. We talk a lot about fieldcraft, weapons proficiency, and leadership techniques, but moral reflection should be seen as just as critical. By only valuing efficiency and results, we might overlook whether certain decisions undermine the constitutional principles we are pledged to defend or violate the ethic of combat that we abide by. Integrating ethical discussions into leadership labs or scenario-based exercises, such as our commandant's hours training, reinforces the idea that our service is intertwined with moral judgment.

Finally, we cannot overlook how rapidly technology is changing warfare. With the rise of AI, drones, and data-driven intelligence, officers must routinely decide whether a new capability crosses ethical or legal boundaries. The oath is not some archaic statement that loses relevance amid advanced technology; if anything, it becomes more vital because it guides officers to use these tools responsibly, ensuring that innovations serve lawful and ethical purposes rather than subverting them.

To me, the Oath of Commissioned Officers represents a deeply personal commitment and a professional obligation that shapes an officer's career trajectory. Each phrase "support and defend," "bear true faith and allegiance," "without mental reservation," and "well and faithfully discharge" carries layers of meaning that tie back to American ideals and the trust placed in us by our fellow citizens. Scholars like John Mark Mattox remind us that this trust is inherently moral,

not merely procedural, and the Modern War Institute article "*Closing the US Military's Public Trust Deficit*" shows what happens when that moral foundation starts to crack.

Standing only a few months before my commission, I know living the oath is an ongoing process. It is not just about reciting a statement once; It is about constantly aligning my actions with the high standards the Army sets for itself. That may mean speaking out when I see ethical lapses, guiding younger cadets or officers as they come up through the ranks, and using every resource wisely to protect the Constitution and the nation it serves. Given my personal journey, I find it fitting that I am now ready to give back to a country that gave me and my family so much.

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A Culture of Trust: The Oath of the Commissioned Officer

Shawn Carter

Editor's Note: This commentary was written as an assignment for the Officership capstone course at West Point and was recommended for publication by the course director. It was edited for clarity and flow, and is presented here as an opinion piece. It originally contained citations and footnotes.

A Rare Occasion

There are only a few instances in life where a person has sworn to something under God's watch. In fact, many people will never take part in one of these instances. After somebody takes the Oath of Commissioned Officers, they are held to a new standard; one that acknowledges their appointment as an officer and requires them to defend the Constitution with their life. Therefore, the oath is not something that should be taken lightly by anyone. Despite its unique challenges, I am honored to take on the role of an Army officer because growing up in the United States has been an amazing experience full of love, endless possibilities, and freedom. I believe everyone deserves a life that consists of these factors and that each factor is worth fighting for. Unfortunately, the honor and prestige of officership is often forgotten because of the various tasks that divert soldiers' attention away from combat readiness. To maintain motivation through these tasks, officers need to embody the fundamental expectations of their job. By doing so, they can find renewed meanings in these tasks and be better equipped to solve problems.

The Forgotten Privilege

According to the Secretary of the Army Daniel Driscoll, administrative burdens and unnecessary distractions have taken the Army away from what matters most, which is being a lethal fighting force. Specifically, Secretary Driscoll addresses issues such as poor housing conditions, broken procurement systems, and readiness strains. Later in his address, Secretary Driscoll promises to refocus, eliminate distractions, and train to fight and win in the most contested environments. Secretary Driscoll's concise and upfront acknowledgement of these issues is a step in the right direction across the Army. As changes are implemented and continue to progress, it will be important for junior officers and even field grade officers to understand the role they have in them. Since the systemic issues mentioned by Secretary Driscoll are not fully solved at their levels, it is possible that junior and field grade officers will not believe they are actively making changes. When a leader does not think they are making effective changes, it is easy for them to lose sight of their goals and become complacent.

A key takeaway from Secretary Driscoll's statement is that the American soldier will always be his mission. Every junior officer should embody this mission because they have the ability to

impact a soldier's outlook, attitude, and belief system every time they show up to work. Even if a task is unclear, leaders can always build trust with their soldiers. The soldier is undoubtedly the number one priority because the Army is a people-based organization. Meanwhile, trust is essential in the conduct of missions and performance of duty as stated in the Army ethic. Without trust, any mission, no matter how big or small, cannot be accomplished.

Therefore, Secretary Driscoll's big picture missions that junior or field grade officers may not directly participate in cannot be accomplished without them building trust and meaningful relationships with subordinates. A culture of trust will fix broken systems and improve large-scale readiness issues. If soldiers have faith in the Army's institutions that oversee other aspects of their livelihood while training, they can focus solely on becoming lethal warfighters prepared for any mission. By striving to improve individual attitudes and trust among their subordinates, junior officers always have something to work towards and can avoid complacency.

Besides soldiers themselves, the honor and prestige of officership can be found through the oath and the Army ethic. Trust is portrayed in the oath when it says "…*I will bear true faith and allegiance…*" because the speaker is declaring reliability and a promise to trust the echelons above and below themselves. This line is powerful because it is a statement of where your loyalty lies, along with a promise to God that you will only defend the United States. By making these promises, Army officers are answering a higher call that goes far beyond their own needs and even their own life. Part of this higher call is the honor of protecting America's sons and daughters. Being entrusted with people's lives should never be taken for granted and is no small feat. Families are expecting the Army to provide leaders who not only believe in the oath but also embody it.

Moreover, the Army ethic is the set of enduring moral principles, values, beliefs, and laws that guide the Army profession and create the culture of trust essential to Army professionals in the conduct of missions, performance of duty, and all aspects of life. Although civilian jobs demand competent and committed professionals with strong character as well, the majority of civilians do not have legal foundations such as the Constitution or the Uniformed Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) embedded within their job's culture to motivate and guide them. Although these foundations and the expectation to always uphold them can make officership challenging, it serves as a humble reminder to be constantly learning and enforcing the standard. By doing this, I can be a well-rounded, capable, and effective officer that my subordinates' loved ones can trust.

Unlike most civilian jobs where employees focus on quantifiable information such as sales, bank accounts, or stocks, Army officers get to focus on developing subordinates and making a positive impact. Personally, I find this much more rewarding because a meaningful relationship is being created. Getting to create these relationships is a privilege because they often become strong, lifelong bonds developed by persevering through shared hardships. In short, deep connections

with people are not made by analyzing spreadsheets and charts together. Although quantifiable information is still extremely important for officers, their handling of it differs from a civilian because officers need to think about how it will better others.

Balancing People and Data

A good example of officers using quantifiable information to better others is seen in General Gary M. Brito's article *Data Literacy: How We Prepare for the Future*. In this article, General Brito talks about how through partnerships with the operational force, soldiers' data-literacy skills continue to build throughout their careers as they apply them to real-world situations and in collective training scenarios with their units. He also states that a continuum of learning between brick-and-mortar institutional training and unit of assignment training is vital for keeping data literacy at the forefront. These statements clearly show that data is not being examined at face-value but instead is being used to make soldiers more lethal on the battlefield.

General Brito talks about how data-literate soldiers are essential to the Army's ability to shoot, move, communicate, and perform first aid because they will be making rapid and sound decisions after using all capabilities available to them. Since the American people expect reliable, effective, honorable, and efficient performance, it is important that our Army has people who can take the latest technology and employ it to achieve impactful effects. Ultimately, General Brito's article provides junior officers a great example of applying Secretary Driscoll's American soldier mission to a task that is unrelated to combat readiness at face value. Instead of data literacy being a Garrison task taught in classrooms, leaders found a way to apply data to the battlefield and develop their soldiers with it. With the uncertainty seen around the world today, officers need to relate complicated, seemingly distracting tasks to their most basic mission sets. Doing this will result in innovative and effective solutions for modern problems.

The Pros Outweigh the Cons

Between the ongoing war in Ukraine and the rise of China on the world stage, the state of the world is rapidly changing. The increased hostilities in the Indo-Pacific and Eastern European regions are something soldiers and civilians alike are talking about. According to General Brito, the job of a platoon leader is vastly different from what senior leaders remember. Today, Army officers are expected to be more agile and adaptable than ever before. This means that unheard-of challenges and dilemmas are expected to arise. Despite the potential risks in these situations, I believe taking on the role of an Army Officer is worth the risk. The degree to which you can leave a lasting impact on a person and sometimes the world is unmatched.

Overall, I am very excited to become an Army officer and undergo this unique opportunity that only less than one percent of the population has experienced. Saying the Oath of Commissioned

Officers and joining the officer corps will be the biggest responsibility I have ever been given. Throughout my career, tasks unrelated to combat readiness will be inevitable and pose distractions. However, finding ways to inspire soldiers during them can remind myself and other officers of the honor and prestige their job has. After a while, newfound motivation moving up and down the chain of command will impact soldiers in situations outside the battlefield, too. Although it may sound idealistic, I truly believe that embodying the fundamentals of officership will eventually fix poor conditions, broken systems, and readiness issues that the Secretary of the Army addresses. Despite the many obstacles I will face and the mistakes that will be made, I am confident in my ability to use fundamental expectations of officership to better myself, overcome complacency, and strive for excellence in any situation.

Shawn Carter is a 2025 graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point.

Steel, Sweat, and Strategy: Inside the Sandhurst Military Skills Competition at West Point

Connor Lister

The cannon blasts and the charge begins. Over 575 Cadets from across the United States Service Academies, Reserve Officer Training Corps, and allied institutions stampede across the West Point cantonment.

Every spring since 1967, nestled between the imposing granite of the Hudson Highlands and the might of the Hudson River, the United States Military Academy at West Point becomes a warrior's arena. Future combat leaders from across the globe converge at the world's premier Military Academy, not for lectures or leadership seminars, but for warrior competition in its rawest form. It is time for the Sandhurst Military Skills Competition, a two-day crucible of tactical excellence where intellect, endurance, and grit collide.

The Sandhurst Competition was founded some 58 years ago between the British Army's Royal Military Academy Sandhurst and the United States Military Academy at West Point to celebrate fraternity, professional prowess, and shared hardships between two great allied nations. It has since grown into one of the most demanding and prestigious tests of military skill and cohesion anywhere in the world.

A Global Test of Leadership and Tactical Excellence

What began as a brotherly rivalry between British and American Officer Cadets has evolved into an international proving ground. The 2025 Sandhurst Competition saw over 48 teams from across the United States Corps of Cadets, all four United States Service Academies and more than fifteen allied nations - including Canada, Chile, Germany, Mexico, Japan, and of course, the United Kingdom.

Each team is composed of 12 cadets who must navigate a gauntlet of physically and mentally taxing events over 36 hours with little rest and no room for error. Racing under combat load to events designed to push the capacity of the next generation of military leaders to their physical and mental limit. With each event testing essential military skills from navigation to life saving care, the cadets compete to demonstrate their lethality as leaders and their ability to soldier on through hardship. Victory is their Academy earning their etching on the coveted Sandhurst Trophy: a pair of crossed officer swords, one from the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst and the other from the United States Military Academy at West Point.

It's not just a fitness test. It's a comprehensive assessment of leadership, communication, fieldcraft, and mental resilience. To maximize the opportunity of having the best of the next generation of leaders present, the cadets also attend the Sandhurst Conference, an intellectual complement supplied by the Modern Warfare Institute to support the physical competition.

Beyond the Barracks: The Brotherhood of Arms

While scores and podiums matter, the heart of Sandhurst lies in shared soldiering across borders. On muddy trails and over razor-wire obstacles, nationalities blur and the uniform becomes universal. It is one of discipline, humility, and respect.

Between the hardships, smiles are also universal. From comparing tactics between patrols to trading patches and historic jibes after a long day's march. Camaraderie is built not through comfort but earned through shared adversity.

The Spirit of Competition

Victory at Sandhurst is hard-won. The competition is fierce. National pride and the team's institutional reputation is on the line. The competition demands more than peak physical conditioning—it demands strategic thought under stress. Teams must self-regulate, adapt, and work through the spectrum of challenges posed in delivering small-unit leadership at the edge of endurance.

In 2025, the competition's overall winner was USMA Black. But they did not triumph without incredibly stiff competition from the University of Minnesota, Canada's Royal Military College Kingston & Royal Military College Saint Jean. From the moment of victory, the scoreboard was forgotten. All teams celebrated. The message was universal: in a competition of the best, to have strived in earnest, all competitors did themselves proud.

Why the Sandhurst Competition Matters

With remote technology now dominating battlefields across the world and shaping how the next wars will be fought, the relevance of a rucksack-and-rifle competition might seem nostalgic. Yet, Sandhurst endures because it distills the fundamentals of military leadership that are required to effectively lead soldiers in combat. To endure under duress, make decisions under pressure, and to place selfless commitment to the team above all else.

Looking Forward

With its continued growth and relevance, Sandhurst is more than just a competition. It is a crucible that forges the next generation of military leaders. A crucible that celebrates partnership and alliances. It arms the next generation of leaders from all our nations with the confidence that wherever in the world their service may take them, they will be joined by like-minded professionals in arms. It represents a profession of arms that is agnostic of uniform, bound by shared sacrifice, enduring values, and the relentless pursuit of excellence.

And for two unforgettable days each spring, that pursuit reaches its peak on the hallowed grounds of West Point.

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The Bravest Hearts and the Noblest Souls
a West Point commencement speech by President Donald Trump

Editor's Note: This is the transcript of the commencement address made by President Donald Trump to the graduating class of the United States Military Academy at West Point on May 24, 2025. The transcript was edited for clarity, brevity, and flow and was condensed to fit within the space allotted.

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Thank you very much. This is a beautiful place. I've been here many times, going to high school not so far away, a good place, also a military academy. Not quite of this distinction, but it was a lot of fun for me. And I just want to say hello cadets, and on behalf of our entire nation, let me begin by saying congratulations to the West Point class of 2025, you are winners, every single one of you. Thank you.

And now we want you to relax, and I'm supposed to say "at ease." But you're already at ease. You're at ease because you've made a great choice in what you're doing. Your choices in life have been really amazing. So this is a celebration, and let's have a little fun. I want to thank your highly respected superintendent, Lieutenant General Steven Gilland, and he is really something. I got to know him backstage with his beautiful family and his reputation. His wife is just incredible, his reputation is unbelievable.

And thank you very much. And your daughter is a winner also. Just like everybody out there, a real winner. I also want to thank your commandant, Brigadier General R.J. Garcia, the Secretary of the Army, Dan Driscoll, Army Chief of Staff, General Randy George, Senator Ashley Moody, Representatives Steve Womack, Bill Huizenga, Pat Ryan, Mark Green, and Keith Self. Also Acting US Attorney Alina Habba. Just all of the friends. So I just want to thank so many people who are here.

Over the past four years, an extraordinary group of professors, teachers, coaches, leaders, and warriors has transformed this class of cadets into an exceptional group of scholars and soldiers. And so let's give the entire group, the entire West Point faculty and the staff, for their incredible love of you and outstanding devotion to the Corps, let's give them a little hand. And importantly, we can't forget all of those people beaming with pride, look at them in the audience, oh, they're so proud. They're in the stands. So thank your parents, your grandparents and family members who made this all possible for you. Thank you. And I think they must have done something right based on what I'm looking at. America loves our military moms and dads.

Nearly one-third of the cadets graduating today are themselves the children of veterans. So to everyone with us this morning who served America in uniform, no matter your age, please stand so we can salute your service. We would like to see who you are. Congratulations, great job. Every cadet on the field before me should savor this morning, because this is a day that you will never, ever forget.

In a few moments, you'll become graduates of the most elite and storied military academy in human history. And you'll become officers in the greatest and most powerful army the world has ever known. Your experience here at West Point has been anything but easy. You came for duty.

You came to serve your country, and you came to show yourselves, your family, and the world that you are among the smartest, toughest, strongest, most lethal warriors ever to walk on this planet. Looking out at all of you today, I can proudly say, mission accomplished.

Great job. But now you have to go on. You have to forget that because now you have another. It's a sad thing, isn't it? You know, you can't rest on your laurels no matter what. You just have to keep going. You take a little day off and you go on to the rest, because you have to have victory, after victory, after victory.

And that's what you're going to have as you receive your commissions as second lieutenants, each of you continues down the same hallowed path, walked by titans and legends of the US, military. Giants like Ulysses S. Grant, John "Black Jack" Pershing, Dwight David Eisenhower, the one and only Douglas MacArthur, "Old blood and guts," George Patton and "Stormin'" Norman Schwarzkopf, all great.

So many more. They and countless other patriots before you have walked out of these halls and straight into history. And today, you officially join those immortal heroes in the proud ranks of the long gray line. You know that term. So beautiful. "The Long Gray Line." Among the 1,000 cadets graduating today, 26 of you wear the prestigious star wreath, signifying the highest level of academic achievement. Please stand up. 26. Congratulations. That's a big honor. This class includes an incredible four Rhodes Scholars. Stand up, please. Four. Wow. That's tied for the most of any West Point class since 1959. That's great. Four. Congratulations.

This class excelled not only mentally but also physically last January when more than 1,000 cadets volunteered for an 18-and-a-half-mile march on a freezing winter night. Cadet Chris Verdugo completed the task in 2 hours and 30 minutes flat, smashing the international record for the competition by 13 minutes. Where is he? Get up here, Chris. Say something.

Chris Verdugo offers remarks.

Wow. That's great. Keep it going, Chris. That really is the definition of Army Strong, isn't it? This class includes 513 graduates who completed Air Assault School, 70 who completed Airborne School, eight who made it through the ultra-elite Army Diver School, among the most difficult and grueling programs anywhere on Earth. That includes the first two women in West Point history to complete Diver School, cadets Megan Cooper and Clara Sebu. Where are you? Stand up. Great job. That is not easy. Congratulations, Megan and Clara. That's a job well done.

Some of you achieved a different kind of distinction here at the Academy, including seven "century men" who completed 100 hours of marching for disciplinary infractions. So, in keeping with tradition, I hereby pardon all cadets on restriction for minor conduct offenses effective immediately. So you're all okay.

The class of 2025 has a lot to be proud of, including your first-rate athletes and athletics. You are something. I've been watching too. I watch. I love the sports stuff. What you've done is pretty amazing. Last year, for the first time ever, Army Lacrosse became the number one ranked men's lacrosse team in the entire country. Look at that. Those of you on the team, stand. That's a big

honor. Stand. Great. That's a tough sport too. That is number one in the country. In your sophomore year, Army football beat Navy 20-17. And then you did it again, beating Navy 17 to 11 and dominating Air Force 23 to three.

But, this year, the Black Knights fought their way into the top 20 nationally and racked up your longest winning streak since 1949 with the help of graduating quarterback Cadet Bryson Daily or, as you call him, Captain America. Stand up, Bryson. Where is Bryson? We've got to get him up here, right? Come on, Bryson. Come on up. I came to a game, I said, "Yeah, he can get into the NFL, can't he?" But he chose this life and you know what, I think he made a good choice. Come on up here, Bryson. Come on up. Wow.

Bryson Daily offers remarks.

Thank you, Bryson. At a time when other top college quarterbacks were thinking about going pro, Bryson's mind was on something else. As he told an interviewer earlier this year, "I'm focused on my career as an infantry officer." That's what he wants to do. So, Bryson, you did the right thing, and that's service at its finest.

Each of you on the field today is among the most talented members of your generation. You could have done anything you wanted. You could have gone anywhere. You could have gone to any school. This is one of the hardest schools to get into. And writing your own ticket to top jobs on Wall Street or Silicon Valley wouldn't be bad, but I think what you're doing is better. Instead of sports teams and spreadsheets and software, you chose a life of service, very important service, instead of stock options. You chose honor and you chose sacrifice. And instead of business suits and dress shoes, you chose muddy boots and fatigues, keeping yourself in shape, because West Point cadets don't just have the brightest minds, you also have the bravest hearts and the noblest souls.

You're amazing people. I could not be more proud to serve you as your commander-in-chief. And our country is doing well. We've turned it around. Very quickly, we've turned it around. The United States of America is hotter now than we've ever seen it and, a year ago, it was as cold as it gets. And it's true. It's true. We have the hottest country in the world, and the whole world is talking about it. And that's an honor for all of us. I cannot wait to see the glory that is still ahead.

However, for the West Point Class of 2025, and we're going to help you a lot because we're going to give you a nation as good or better than it ever was. That's what I promise you. All the victories that you've had together on these grounds will soon pale in comparison to the momentous deeds that you'll perform on the mission you're accepting today as future leader of America's Army.

And, time and time again, the American soldier is charged into the fires of hell and sent the devil racing in full retreat. No task has ever been too tough for America's Army. And now that 250-year legacy of glory and triumph belongs to you, the 1,000 newest officers of the greatest fighting force in the history of the world.

And that's what you are, and that's what you're being thought of. Again, you are the first West Point graduates of the Golden Age of America. This is the golden age, I tell you. Promise. We're in a new age. This is the Golden Age, and you are going to lead the Army to summits of greatness that has never been reached before.

And you see that. And you see what's happening. You see what's going on in the world. Each of you is entering the officer corps at a defining moment in the Army's history. For at least two decades, political leaders from both parties have dragged our military into missions, it was never meant to be. All of that's ended. We're getting rid of the distractions and we're focusing our military on its core mission, crushing America's adversaries, killing America's enemies, and defending our great American flag like it has never been defended before.

The military's job is to dominate any foe and annihilate any threat to America, anywhere, anytime, in any place. A big part of that job is to be respected again. And you are, as of right now, respected more than any army anywhere in the world. And that's happening. And I can tell you, you are respected like nobody can believe. As president, I am laser-focused on our core national interests. My preference will always be to make peace and to seek partnership, even with countries where our differences may be profound.

If the United States or its allies are ever threatened or attacked, the Army will obliterate our opponents with overwhelming strength and devastating force. That's why my administration has begun a colossal buildup of the United States Armed Forces, a buildup like we've never had before. "Peace through strength." You know the term, I've used it a lot. Because as much as you want to fight, I'd rather do it without having to fight. I just want to look at them and have them fold. And that's happening. That's happening. And I've approved a one-trillion-dollar investment. And that will be, again, the largest ever in the history of our country.

And we are buying you new airplanes, brand-new, beautiful planes, redesigned planes, brand-new planes, totally stealth planes. I hope they're stealth. I don't know, that whole stealth thing, I'm sort of wondering. You mean if we shape a wing this way, they don't see it, but the other way they don't see it? I'm not so sure. But that's what they tell me. We have the best tanks anywhere in the world. We're going to start shipbuilding again. We're going to start ship. We used to build a ship a day. Now we don't build them anymore. We had a lot of people that didn't know much about getting things built. But that's all I've done in my life, is build.

We're going to have the best missiles, we already do, drones and much, much more. And earlier this week, I think you'll like this, I announced that we are officially building all in America, made in America, designed in America. We're the only ones that could do it, because we're the only ones that, with the great technology, we're building the Golden Dome Missile Defense Shield to protect our homeland and to protect West Point from attack.

And it will be completed before I leave office. And you know, you wouldn't think this, but our enemies are very unhappy about it. You've been hearing, you've been reading, "Why are they doing that? Why?" Well, we're doing it because we want to be around for a long time. That's

why we're doing it. We're also restoring the fundamental principle that a central purpose of our military is to protect our own borders from invasion.

Gone are the days where defending every nation but our own was the primary thought. We are putting America first. We have to put America first. We have to rebuild and defend our nation. And very shortly you're going to see a nation better than it's ever been. And you see that with the trade. For years, we've been ripped off by every nation in the world on trade.

We've been ripped off at the NATO level. We've been ripped off like no country has ever been ripped off. But they don't rip us off anymore. They're not going to rip us off anymore. And you're seeing it. You have to watch what we're doing on trade. I know it's not your primary thing, but it's quite important in all fairness.

And everything we do, we are bringing common sense back to America. It's all about common sense. We can say we're liberal, we're conservative. The new word is progressive. They don't like using the word liberal anymore. That's why I call them liberal. But, whatever you are, most importantly, you have to have common sense because most of it's about common sense when you get right down to it. And we have a lot of people with a lotta, lot of very smart people, but they have to have common sense.

And we've liberated our troops from divisive and demeaning political trainings. That's over. We've ended it. And promotions and appointments will not be based on politics or identity. They'll be based on merit. We won that case in the Supreme Court of the United States. We're allowed to go back to a system of merit. We're a merit-based country again. Today, morale in the armed forces is soaring to the highest levels in many decades after years of recruiting shortfalls. And we had years and years of recruiting shortfalls, and just last year was the worst of all.

We couldn't get anybody to join our military. We couldn't get anybody to join our police or firefighters. We couldn't get anybody to join anything. And right now, just less than a year later, we just set a brand new peacetime recruiting record. We are brimming with confidence and we're brimming with people. We had the best recruiting month that we've had in memory. Nobody remembers anything like it. And that's all because they have spirit now. They have spirit. They have a spirit for our country.

And now everybody wants to be doing what you're doing. Think of that. So, it's really a great honor, I will say. And I'm pleased to report that by next week, the Army is expected to surpass its recruiting targets for the entire year. Something that hasn't happened in 28 years where we've had that. So that's pretty good.

And it's nice to know that you're doing something that everybody wants to do. Isn't it really nice? During the campaign, I was hearing that you couldn't get people to enlist. But now we're getting people, and it's sad because we're telling so many people, "I'm sorry, we can't do it."

My administration is doing everything possible to forge the most powerful military ever built. But ultimately, the task of keeping America strong and safe in the years ahead is going to belong to you. Among you are the lieutenants, majors, colonels, and generals who'll lead the Army for

the next 10, 20, 30, and even 40 years. So as commander-in-chief, let me offer a few words of advice as you begin your Army careers.

And I thought I'd do this, and I can make this to a civilian audience or to a military audience. It's pretty much the same. And I did this recently at Ohio State, and they really liked it. I gave them a little advice as to what I see for what you want to do and some tips.

First of all, and you've already done it different from civilians. They're making their decision right now. You've already made your decision. I love your decision. You have to do what you love. If you don't love it, you'll never be successful at it. And many of you in the audience, many of you that are graduating, you come from military backgrounds or you love the military, it's what you want to do, it's what you want to talk about.

One thing I see about people that love the military, that's all they want to talk about. I'll be out to dinner, and generals, if they love their job, usually the only good ones are the ones that want to talk about it all the time. But if they talk, that's what they want to talk about. I rarely, really very rarely, see somebody who's successful that doesn't love what he or she does.

You have to love what you do. In your case, the military is what you chose. And I'll tell you what, you cannot go wrong. You're going to see it too. You're going to love it more and more with time. You know, I work all the time. That's all I do is I work, whether it's politically, or before that, I was a very good businessman in case you haven't heard, really good. But I was good because I loved it, I loved it. I learned from my father. My father was a happy guy and all he did was work. He'd work Saturdays, Sundays. He'd work all the time. And he was a happy guy. He just loved life. And I learned that. I say, "You know, it makes him happy." I've seen other people who never work and they're not happy.

But you've got to love it, otherwise you won't be successful. In the Army there are a lot of different paths you can take, so follow your instincts and make sure that you take the path that you love, that you're doing something that you love within your military. You will be happier and the Army will be far stronger for it.

The second thing is to think big. Always think big. If you're going to do something, you might as well think big, do it big because it's just as tough, and sometimes it's a lot easier thinking big than doing a small task that's more difficult. One of your greatest graduates, General Eisenhower used to say, "Whenever I run into a problem that I can't solve, I always like to make it bigger to solve it and solve more of it." If you go into solve a problem, and it might as well be a big problem as opposed to a small problem that lots of people can take advantage of and solve. So you can achieve something really amazing. Think big. Third though, you have to do this. The brainpower you have to have, the potential you have to have, but to be really successful, you're always going to have to work hard.

Fourth, you have to know when you have the momentum, but sometimes you have to also know when you've lost the momentum and leaving a field, sometimes leaving what you're doing sometimes is okay, but you have to have momentum, but you have to know if that momentum's gone, you have to know when to say it's time to get out.

Fifth, you have to have the courage to take risks and to do things differently. Eisenhower was threatened with courts-martial as a young officer for advocating a new doctrine of tank warfare. Billy Mitchell was thrown out of the Army for pioneering the use of air power. People willing to try and do things differently, it's never going to be easy for them, but they're the ones who are going to really do the important things, they're the ones who are going to make history. So don't be ashamed and don't be afraid, this is a time of incredible change, and we do not need an officer corps of careerists, yes-men, and people who want to keep it going the way it's been because it changes rapidly, especially what you're doing.

Because believe it or not, you're in a business and profession where things change as rapidly like warfare, the type of warfare. Unfortunately we're getting to see it with Russia and Ukraine, and we're studying it and it's a very terrible thing to study. But we're seeing the different forms of warfare. We're seeing the drones that are coming down at angles and with speed and with precision. We've never seen anything like it, we've never seen anything like it, and we're learning from it, but your profession changes very rapidly, you've have to keep, you've have to be at the top of it, you've have to be right at the head of the needle.

We need patriots with guts, and vision, and backbone who take personal risks to ensure that America wins every single time, we want to win our battles. We've had great military success, when you have the right leader and you have the right people, and we have the right people, you're going to have tremendous success.

Six, never lose your faith in America and the American people because they're always going to be there for you. I went through a very tough time with some very radicalized sick people, and I say, I was investigated more than the great late Alphonse Capone. Alphonse Capone was a monster, he was a very hardened criminal. I went through more investigations than Alphonse Capone, and now I'm talking to you as president, can you believe this? So you have to fight hard, and you have to never give up and don't let bad people take you down. You have to let them, you have to take them down. We've got a lot of bad people out there, and those people, you have to figure it out, but you also have a lot of great people.

Finally, hold on to your culture and your traditions, because that's what makes something really great, and that's what's made the Army great, the culture and the tradition.

Whether we're talking about a battalion, a business, a sports team, or even a nation, history has shown that in many ways, culture is destiny. So do not let anyone destroy the culture of winning; you have to win. Winning is a beautiful thing, losing not for us, it's not for us, not for anybody here. If it were, you wouldn't be here.

From the earliest days of our nation, this supreme tradition of American military service has been passed down from soldier to soldier and generation to generation, and it's a beautiful thing to watch. Graduating today is Cadet Ricky McMahon. Ricky's great-grandfather, stand up wherever you are, Ricky, because you're going to like this.

Ricky's great-grandfather served in World War I. His grandfather served in World War II, and his uncle, father and mother all graduated from West Point. In 2004, when Ricky was just a little, little tiny boy, his dad, Lieutenant Colonel Michael McMahon, made the ultimate sacrifice for our nation in Afghanistan. Today, Lieutenant Colonel McMahon rests not far from here in the West Point Cemetery. Last year, two decades after losing his father, Ricky placed a gold chip from his dad's 1985 class ring into a crucible along 87 other rings were with it of past West Point grads that were melted down to forge those now worn by the class of 2025.

Do you all know that? Do you know that, what you're wearing? Each of you will carry Michael's memory with you always as you continue the legacy he gave you. It gave you something that would be so proud, he would be so proud, he is proud as he looks down. To Ricky and his mom, Jeanette, you embody what this place is all about, and I know Michael, he's up there, he's smiling broadly. So proud. He's so proud of you today, you know that. I just love that story. And everybody's ring, they're going to remember you, they're going to remember your family, and most importantly, you're going to remember a great tradition. It's a great tradition of West Point and of winners. Thank you very much. It's great to meet you. Thank you. If you want to come up, come up. Come on up.

Ricky McMahon offers comments.

For two and a half centuries, our republic has endured because of heroes like Michael. They've laid down their lives for America, and because young people like all of you have picked up the banner of service and carried forward the flag of freedom from Lexington to Yorktown, from Gettysburg to Sicily, and from Inchon to Fallujah, America has been won and saved by an unbroken chain of soldiers and patriots who ran to the sound of the guns, leapt into the maw of battle and charged into the crucible of fire to seize the crown of victory no matter the odds, no matter the cost, no matter the danger.

All over the world, our soldiers have made sacred the ground where they shed their blood and showed their valor. From Seminary Ridge to San Juan Hill, Belleau Wood, Omaha Beach, Leyte Gulf, and Ardennes Forest, Chosin Reservoir, all over. And even a place called Pork Chop Hill. And in all of those battles and so many more, some of the best, brightest, and bravest have come from right here at the US Military Academy at West Point, one of the greatest places anywhere in the world.

America's Army has never failed us, and with leaders like the West Point class of 2025, the Army will never fail. We will never let you down. We won the First World War. We won the Second World War, and you know where we won it from? Right here at West Point. West Point won the war. You won two world wars and plenty of other things, but you want to think of it.

We don't want to have a third world war, but we won the First World War. We won the Second World War right here from West Point. And that's something, and we're going to be talking about it. You know, they can talk about it, and in some cases, as you know, they didn't do too much to help. They were ground down, but they were celebrating victory. No, we're going to celebrate victory because we're the ones that won that war.

Standing before you today, I know that you will never stop. You will never quit. You will never yield. You will never tire. You will never, ever, ever surrender. Never give up. Remember that. Never give up. That's another little factor I could have added. Never, ever give up. Raise your right hand. I pledge I will never, ever give up. You can never give up. You can never give up. If you do, you're not going to be successful because you'll go through things that will be bad. You're going to have great moments, you're going to have bad moments. You can never give up.

Through every challenge and every battle, you'll stand strong, you'll work hard, you'll stay tough, and you will fight, fight, fight, and win, win, win. So, I want to just congratulate you all. I'm going back now to deal with Russia, to deal with China. What's that- what's that all about? I- I said that to- that to get you lots of victories. So, we're going to keep winning. This country is going to keep winning. And with you, the job is easy. I want to thank you all. Congratulations to the class of 2025. God bless you all. Incredible people. Thank you very much everybody."

Leadership in Uncertain Times

a Thayer Award acceptance speech by former president Barack Obama

Editor's Note: This is the transcript of remarks made by former President Barack Obama at the Thayer Award Acceptance at the United States Military Academy at West Point on September 19, 2024. The Thayer Award is presented by West Point to a non-West Point graduate whose character and accomplishments exemplify West Point's qualities and its motto, "Duty, Honor, Country." The transcript was edited for clarity, brevity, and flow.

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Thank you so much. Thank you. Please, please. Thank you so much. Please be seated. To General Gilland, thank you for the introduction, more importantly thank you for your leadership of one of the world's finest not only military institutions but institutions period. Don't tell Navy I said that.

To the leadership, staff, and distinguished guests, thank you for being here. To the West Point Association of Graduates–including your Chairman, and one of the best Secretaries of Veterans Affairs this country has ever had, my friend Bob McDonald–thank you for this incredible honor.

I had a chance to look at the list of past recipients of the Thayer Award, and I could not help but feel profoundly humbled. It's even more humbling to know that this award is bestowed by men and women who represent the very best that this country has to offer.

And I couldn't be happier to have had the chance to spend time with a group that I know will make their own lasting mark on our nation in the years ahead: the Corps of Cadets. I had the pleasure of visiting with some of you today and saw the rest of you on the Plain–and I think it's fair to say that you are a whole lot more impressive than I was in college. You are certainly tidier than I was.

Since we're in the Cadet Mess Hall, you should know it was my intention to give you more than 25 minutes to finish your dinner. But I'm told that's about all the time you'll have–which I guess you are used to by now. On my previous visit to West Point, I was also able to repay some hospitality by absolving all cadets who are on restriction for minor conduct offenses. Unfortunately, it turns out as one of my predecessors pointed out, former presidents can't do that. But I promise that when I get back to Washington, I'll put in a good word with the guy who can. I've still got a little bit of juice.

So, my powers may be more limited as a private citizen than they were when I was President and Commander-in-Chief. But the one thing I can still do is to express my heartfelt gratitude and my pride to every cadet for your commitment to serve the American people. We live in a strange time, and at a time of so much division, you've chosen teamwork and unity. At a time of so much cynicism, you've chosen faith in our country and faith in the future. And at a time when so much

of our culture is constantly steering us towards money and fame and distraction and "likes", you've embarked on a life of purpose – to strive on behalf of something bigger than yourselves. That is worthy of thanks. It fills me with pride.

Of course, the world you inherit is complicated, and it is moving faster than at any time in human history. So, if it's alright with you, I'd like to spend ten minutes or so sharing a few observations about America's place in the world, and the vital role that you will all play in keeping our nation strong and secure. And I'm going to start with a point that didn't used to be in dispute but may be today– America remains the indispensable nation.

It's become popular in some quarters, both on the left and the right, to question US primacy in world affairs. And it's true that a host of changes in the international landscape–from globalization to the information revolution, to the rise of China to the reassertion of Russian aggression against its neighbors–these things are testing the international order that the United States helped construct from the end of World War II through the end of the Cold War.

But I can tell you from experience, from sitting in the Oval Office for 8 years, that the world continues, in ways large and small, to depend on American leadership. Our economy remains the strongest and most innovative. Our values continue to inspire people across the globe. And although we must remain ever vigilant, constantly improving readiness and modernizing our forces, no other country comes close to matching the capabilities of our Navy, our Air Force, our Marines, and our Coast Guard–and of course, our Army.

Now over the course of 75 years, the post-World War II era, we haven't always employed this awesome power perfectly. We've made our share of mistakes, and there have been instances where we did not fully live up to our ideals. But overall, the international system that we built has helped usher in the most peaceful, prosperous era in human history.

With all the violence and suffering that we see in the news every day, that may sound controversial. It may seem like an exaggeration, but it is true. For more than half a century, the absolute number of war deaths around the world has declined. Wars between nations have been increasingly rare. More than 1 billion people have been lifted from extreme poverty in my lifetime, and diseases that once killed and crippled millions have been effectively eradicated.

The United States of America helped to do all that–and we did it not just for our benefit, but for much of the world's. Even our adversaries benefitted from that architecture that we built; China's rise depended on it, for example. And that leadership is as vital today as it ever was. It's the reason why, when there's a pandemic, or a natural disaster, or a conflict, or a blatant violation of human rights, leaders do not call Beijing or Moscow. They call Washington, because they know we care and they know we can get things done.

I say all this, cadets, not just to pump you up or to wave the flag, I'm saying this to you because your generation is up. You have taken the baton. And it will be up to you to make sure that

America does not turn inward, that we do not abandon our leadership role and give in to isolationism.

And that won't be easy. In these uncertain times, it can be tempting to let other countries fend for themselves, to wash our hands of conflicts and dysfunction and poverty that seem distant and intractable, especially when we have plenty of problems to deal with here at home. It's one of the few things even today that unifies democrats and republicans, they're opposed to foreign assistance and doing a lot for folks over there.

But history teaches us, from Pearl Harbor to 9/11, that oceans alone do not insulate us from chaos and disorder and security threats. In a global economy, a financial crisis on the other side of the world can mean layoffs and hardship in the US heartland. Diseases and a changing climate, they don't recognize borders, and although I believe it's vital for us to fortify our borders and revamp our immigration laws, there is no wall that is high enough to prevent people desperate to feed their children from seeking refuge in wealthier countries. So we have a stake in making sure that other places function and prosper and are peaceful.

If we want security and prosperity at home, we have to tend to our responsibilities abroad. That doesn't mean that we can or should be the world's policeman. Part of using power wisely means recognizing that we cannot prevent every conflict between countries, or stop every instance of violence or injustice within them. But while American foreign policy needs to be guided by a healthy dose of realism, we have to balance it with a continued willingness to make this world better, however and whenever we can, to protect the vulnerable, and stand up for freedom, and to aid those in need. Not just because it's right, but because it is ultimately in America's interests to do so.

Which brings me to my second point. All of you have committed to putting your lives on the line to defend this nation, and as Commander-in-Chief, I took a solemn oath to do whatever was necessary to protect the American people. In an often dangerous and violent world, that sometimes meant ordering the use of lethal force – and sending young men and women like yourselves into combat. Because whether it's pirates off the coast of Somalia, terrorists like bin Laden, or rogue states trying to obtain nuclear weapons, our enemies need to understand that if they target America or its allies, there will be hell to pay.

But while we can never hesitate to do what is necessary to keep this nation safe, and while we should celebrate every day, and thank God, for the extraordinary courage and resolve of our troops, we should also never forget that war is a tragedy. No matter how just, no matter how good our intentions. It always leaves scars, seen and unseen, not only on the vanquished but on the victors. And no one understands this better than those who actually do the fighting – our veterans, including so many decorated West Point alumni here tonight, or our wounded warriors or our Gold Star families, all of whom deserve our eternal thanks.

And that's why it is up to policy makers, decision makers, and voters who elect them to meet our solemn responsibility, to you, cadets, and all the other Americans who are willing to fight in our name.

So what are those responsibilities? We should expect our leaders to exhaust other options before rushing into war. We should expect them to be guided by sound intelligence and strategy rather than ideology or the desire to look strong.

We have a responsibility to maintain our alliances–and build, whenever possible, coalitions and partnerships that can share the burden of global security. There are times, like after 9/11, when we confront a direct and immediate threat, and if we have to, we must be prepared to go it alone. But in most instances, the threats we confront don't solely affect the United States, and we should make sure that we've built the institutions, invested in things like NATO, and cultivated relationships that provide the opportunity for others to effectively step up and join us.

We have a responsibility to resist the temptation to intervene militarily every time there's a problem or crisis. History is littered with the ruins of empires and nations that overextended themselves, draining their power and influence. You know, during my eight years in office, one of the things that impressed me most was how often it was my military advisors–the Joint Chiefs, commanding officers, and military personnel detailed to the White House–they were the ones who counseled restraint when it came to using lethal force, which was a welcome contrast to the slew of politicians and talking heads on TV who liked to talk tough from the cheap seats.

We have a responsibility to always give our troops a clear mission, the support they need to get the job done, and a plan for what comes after. And when the US military gets involved in a conflict, we need to do so by making honest assessments of the risks and the tradeoffs. And when things don't go according to plan, we need to admit our mistakes and reevaluate our strategies rather than just doubling down. That is what we owe the heroes, those who are willing to put themselves in the line of fire. That's how we prevent the kind of mission creep that history teaches us to avoid. That's how we keep our nation secure and justify the trust of our troops.

And when we do use force, we have a responsibility to use it proportionally. In every war, without exception, innocents get caught in the crossfire. And as technology evolves, those deaths can seem increasingly abstract. Except there's nothing abstract about a dead child or a grieving mother. And I know firsthand sometimes, as decision makers, we must bear the weight of such tragic consequences. It's part of the job. But we should never become numb to such deaths. If we want to continue to lead the world, and rally others to our side, then America should always hold itself to the highest ethical standards when it comes to the use of force, even when our adversaries don't, and do everything in our power to prevent the loss of innocent life.

Which leads me to my final point: as powerful as our armed forces are, many of the greatest threats to our security will not be solved by military force alone. Our military power is necessary,

but it is not sufficient. To meet the challenges of our time, we'll also need to harness every element of our national power.

And it's a truth that all the top military leaders who advised me well understood during my presidency. If you want to support our military, then along with a strong defense budget and looking after our veterans, you should also support US programs that help young people in poor countries get an education. If you want to reduce the appeal of violent extremism in distant parts of the world, then you have to care about economic and political reforms that promote growth and allow citizens to choose their own leaders. Diplomacy, foreign aid, cultural exchanges, lifting up universal principles around things like human rights – those things matter because they may save us over the long term from having to send our sons and daughters off to fight.

And here's the thing when it comes to all these elements of American power: maybe none is more important than the example we set here at home.

No nation, no society in human history, has ever tried to build a democracy as big and diverse as ours, ever; one where our allegiances and our community are defined not by race or blood, but by common creed. That's what I saw on The Plain today. That's what I saw represented by those cadets. And people around the world are watching to see if we can pull it off. That's why when we live up to our values, when we invest in each other, and find ways to live together, and respect the democratic process, the world gets a little bit brighter. And when we don't, the world grows a little dimmer. And dictators and autocrats feel emboldened, international norms begin to fray, we lose credibility and influence with our allies, and over time, we become less safe.

As future leaders, cadets, all of you will have a key role to play in helping us stay true to our ideals and helping us to set that example. I don't know where all of you are going to end up, but you are going to have influence, and you are going to have power. And it will be up to you to uphold our Constitution and our Bill of Rights, the rule of law, and the peaceful transfer of power. It will be up to you to ensure that our military institutions are never politicized, and respect for civilian control of the policymaking process.

It will be up to you to set an example for how we can disagree without calling each other names, and demonizing each other, showing us how to treat each other with respect, and standing up to those who would divide us along racial or religious lines. That's going to be the test for your leadership, and like those who came before, you will have a chance to show our friends and our adversaries alike that democracy is not just about the words on our founding documents, or any particular election. It's about the choices we make and the actions we take, and our fidelity to our ideals, as Americans, every single day.

So, there you have it – a few thoughts from a former Commander-in-Chief who's getting greyer by the minute about how to keep our military strong and our nation secure.

I realize that no Thayer Award speech is complete without quoting its most famous recipient, or one of them, General Douglas MacArthur. I'm told he gave his acceptance speech from memory – an example I have obviously failed to live up to.

But when General MacArthur spoke of American soldiers in that speech, when he reflected on your "patience under adversity," your "courage under fire," and your "modesty in victory," he described being, and I quote, "filled with an emotion of admiration I cannot put into words." Well, let me just say, I feel the same way. And while we can never know exactly what the future holds, I sleep well at night knowing that men and women like you serve to keep us free.

So thank you again for this tremendous honor. And more importantly, thank you and every member of the Long Gray Line for your service and sacrifice in the name of duty, honor, and country.

Speak Your Dreams
an interview with former vice president Mike Pence

Editor's Note: Mike Pence was the 48th vice president of the United States of America. This interview is part of the Key Leader Engagements series and took place in the Class of 1974 Recording Studio inside the Modern War Institute at West Point. It was edited for clarity, brevity, and flow.

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MWI: Mr. Vice President, welcome back to West Point!

Pence: Great to be with you, and it's an honor to be back at West Point. This is one of the truly most inspiring places in America. And I appreciate your dedication over the last decade here, and it's a real privilege to be on the key leader engagement podcast.

MWI: Thank you, sir. As you said, this isn't your first time at West Point. You've been here several times, and in fact, you delivered the commencement address here in 2019. So what brings you back to West Point on this rainy November day?

Pence: I have an opportunity to speak to a number of the alumni tonight, but I didn't want to miss the opportunity to spend some time with cadets, not just the ones from Indiana, and I'm going to be participating in a couple of classes this afternoon. It's frankly very humbling for me to be here. I didn't wear the uniform of the United States. My dad was an Army combat veteran in the Korean War. My son's a major in the Marine Corps. But for me to be among these men and women who've made such an incredible commitment to be able to qualify to be here and to put the country first in their lives is deeply inspiring, and I wanted to take every opportunity to spend some time with all the young people here who I know are going to be key leaders in America in the future.

MWI: As a governor, lawmaker, and Vice President of the United States, you gained a great deal of experience dealing with threats, both large and small. What do you see as the biggest external future threats to the US, and how can we prepare young people like the ones here in the room with us, to counter or mitigate them?

Pence: I think the greatest strategic and economic threat to the United States is the Chinese Communist Party. I mean China's continued military provocations across the Asia Pacific, the investments that they continue to make to expand their military presence in the region, coupled with human rights abuses and trade abuses, I think, represent a unique challenge during our administration four years ago. I think one of the one of the achievements of the Trump/Pence years was, I think we changed the national consensus on China. I think there had always been the

hope that as we expanded economic exchange with China, that that you would see China ultimately embrace greater political freedoms, private property, and move forward into the family of nations. But as we've learned over the last decade, the opposite has actually been true. The more prosperous China has become, the more authoritarian it's become. And so I think, for this generation of leaders of the United States, military and leaders in this country, answering that moment in a way that will achieve securing America's interest, not just in the region, but protecting our country, while at the same time leaving a pathway for peaceful resolution of differences between our two nations. But for me, it all begins with American strength and being here among this rising generation of military leaders, I'm more confident than ever that we're going to meet this moment with American strength.

I think we have a ways to go in Washington, DC, frankly, on making investments in our military to keep pace with what we're seeing, and not just in the Asia Pacific, but in wider challenges around the world. But I think the American people know we're the leader of the free world. We're going to meet that moment, and I'll continue to be a voice for the principles of peace through strength, especially when it comes to the challenges we face with Communist China.

MWI: Along those same lines, during a surprise Thanksgiving trip to Iraq in 2019 you said to the troops you met there that the armed forces of the United States are the greatest force for good that the world is known. What makes the US military a force for good, and how can we ensure that we maintain that title in the future?

Pence: I don't know any nation in history that has ever sent their own into harm's way to win other people's freedom, and then, having won it, asked for no more land than a place to bury our honored dead and we go home. In the 1960s became very fashionable to criticize the United States, and my late father used to say, "I may disagree with everything you say, but I'll fight to the death for your right to say it." And I don't begrudge anyone criticism of America's decisions at home or abroad, but I really believe it's inarguable that when you look at the at the long sweep of history, and even during my 20 years in public service, that the United States military has been the greatest force for good the world has ever known, and I have every confidence here at West Point, looking at this bright and rising generation of leaders, that that will always be true.

MWI: You traveled to Israel shortly after the Hamas attacks in October of 2023. What did you learn from that experience, and what can be done to prevent that type of thing from happening again?

Pence: I often said that if the world knows nothing else, the world should know this, that America stands with Israel. Israel is, I believe, our most cherished ally; the hope for seeing the people of Israel returned to the Land of Israel actually predates the founding of our country. You can find sermons as a part of the Zionist movement from pulpits in this country even before 1776

and that was why at the end of World War Two, President Truman had the United States be the first nation on earth to recognize the Jewish state of Israel. And we've always stood by our side, and I pray we always will. For my part, during my years in Congress and as a governor and as vice president, I sought to give voice to that devotion the American people feel.

But in the aftermath of October 7, I just thought it was important, even as a private citizen, for me to travel as soon as I could, to Israel to see the aftermath of really the worst attack on the Jewish people since the Holocaust. What I learned there was that what happened on October 7 was less a terrorist attack and more a terrorist invasion. I was in a community known as Sderot, and I learned there that on that morning, which was the Shabbat, the Sabbath on a Saturday morning, when people in Israel are trying to enjoy quiet and leisure and a break from the work week, at 90 different places along the fence line that separated Gaza from Israel there were simultaneous breaches and motorized vehicles, heavily armed personnel, moved through those 90 different openings.

This was an extremely well-coordinated attack, and as they found in the aftermath, the attackers had brought sufficient arms to fight all the way to Tel Aviv and to Jerusalem. It's fairly obvious that their intention was to literally cut Israel in half in the hopes that the terrorists of Hezbollah would move from the north and ultimately overrun and end the Jewish state of Israel. But thanks to law enforcement, courageous IDF forces and, frankly, just ordinary citizens, they were able to stop the terrorist invasion in their tracks, but not, not before there was a horrendous loss of life that took place and the most unspeakable violence. I mean to walk through a kibbutz where you can literally see Gaza from the kibbutz and hear stories of the handful of survivors that managed to stay barricaded in their homes that day, of what occurred was just unspeakable.

But I thought it was important that we be there, that we do our part to use whatever remaining bully pulpit that I have from being a former vice president to put daylight on it, and then, since then, I'm more convinced than ever that that we must continue to support Israel until Hamas is completely destroyed. There's no coexistence that could exist between Israel and that terrorist organization, and I've tried to be a voice over the last year for unambiguous support for Israel.

Of course, the way we've seen Iran launch the very first direct attack on Israel in decades with their missile attack, which fortunately almost entirely was prevented from doing harm by virtue of not just the Iron Dome technology that the United States first made available some 20 years ago, but also we have two full battle groups in the region. And while I don't get those briefings the way that I used to, I have every confidence that the US armed forces in the region did our share of making sure that that lives were spared in the wake of those attacks, and I know that those battle groups continue to stay at their post in the region, and at the end of the day, I'm confident that there will be a very unambiguous commitment to support policies that isolate Iran

economically and diplomatically and ultimately will set the conditions where I think we can continue to expand the foundations of what came to be known as the Abraham accords.

The conditions are set for ongoing warfare in the region. And actually what it created was the kind of clarity that made the Abraham accords possible, the first, the first peace agreement between two Arab nations and Israel in some 30 years. There's a Bible verse that says, "If the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will know to get ready for battle?" and for the United States to send a clear call that we're going to stand with Israel.

My hope is that other Arab nations will then step forward, reach peace agreements, normalize relations with Israel and put us on a on a path where, again, the leading state sponsor of terrorism in the world, which is Iran, will be more and more isolated and my hope is someday the people of Iran will be able to step forward and reclaim their own birthright of freedom.

MWI: Here at West Point, we have a number of programs that take cadets to Israel every year, including one that's called the Peace and Dialogue Leadership Initiative. It's a partnership with Yale, and when you were recounting your experiences in Israel, they closely match my own. You mentioned Sderot. We've been there several times, and that's been a huge eye opener for a lot of people, for not only the value of the relationship between the US and Israel, but also the plight of the Palestinians who are caught in between these terrorist groups that you mentioned, right?

Pence: All you need to do is do a very cursory review of the military tactics of Hamas to know their disregard for the Palestinian people. I mean, to literally locate their military operations in homes, to use civilians as human shields as they have, and I grieve the loss of life that's occurred on both sides of that conflict, but that at the end of the day, you know whether it be Hamas moving against Israel, whether it be Russia invading Ukraine and in a brutal and unprovoked invasion two years ago.

I really do believe, at the end of the day, it's our role as leader of the free world to stand with those that are fighting for their own freedom. Israel is us. We have a unique relationship with Israel, and it's one that, as I said, I describe as our most cherished ally. But ultimately, I think, I think history teaches that whether, whether it's America simply standing strong or providing the resources to those that are fighting for their own freedom has contributed to the security, not just of the West, but peace across the world. Absolutely and will again.

MWI: Well sir, you've traveled quite a bit over the course of your life. Do you have a particularly favorite or memorable place or experience that you've had overseas that you'd like to share with the audience?

Pence: You know, we I'm just a small town guy from southern Indiana, and so the privileges that I've had to travel the world have all been meaningful to me, but I will tell you probably it may come as a surprise to you, but Michael Richard Pence was named after Richard Michael Cawley, a young Irishman who at the age of 21 stepped off a boat onto Ellis Island from Ireland. He caught a train to Chicago, Illinois. He drove a bus in Chicago for 40 years, and his grandson was named after him. And so for me to have traveled to Ireland as a young man, to go to the place where he grew up, to be able, as governor of Indiana, to take our three kids to Ireland. Another Bible verse that I love is, "Remember the rock from which you were hewn, the ditch from which you were dug." And when I think about the travels that I've had the opportunity to even to have returned to Ireland as Vice President of the United States was a great privilege to be among distant relations there, and not to celebrate anything I've accomplished, but really affirm the faith and confidence that my grandfather had in this country.

I know one of the great things about West Point is that it teaches these rising military leaders about the unique and truly exceptional nature of the United States. My grandfather believed that anybody could be anybody in this country, and there are a lot of fancier ways to put that, but this is the land of opportunity. Our family experienced that, and to be able to have traveled there, to be able to have gone back, and be able to celebrate that faith and that confidence, and really give evidence of the truth of the American dream. It's probably my favorite place to go.

MWI: So, sir, the primary purpose of this interview series is leadership development, and that's one of the primary goals of West Point as well. You certainly have a great deal of leadership experience, going from the local to the national, international levels. What have you found has contributed to your success as a leader? What things go into the calculus that produces the outcome that eventually resulted in you being the vice president United States?

Pence: Well, for me, I've told people many times over the years, I'm a Christian, a conservative, and a Republican in that order, everything I hope in my life begins with my faith, and whatever anyone's faith perspective, I think the principles that the Bible teaches about leadership are enduring and timeless. I talked about them when I spoke here at West Point at the close of my speech, where I addressed a lot of major national and international issues. But and I think if you look you look at the principles in in the Bible, there's a there's a truth that when it comes to leadership, the humility, orientation to authority, and self control are the three pillars of effective leadership, at least the leadership that I aspire to and I hold the view that for young people who aspire to leadership, if you'll commit yourself to grow in your understanding and application of those three principles, that you will find that you will be more effective and more respected in virtually any leadership role that you're in. And the idea of considering others is more important than yourself, as the principle of humility, orientation to authority, something that people in West Point learn every day.

Nevertheless, for me in civilian positions of leadership was just as important, whether I was governor and had people who served me who understood what the line of decision was, or when I was serving in a secondary role as Vice President, or a secondary role in leadership in the Congress, to understand and to have to be able to recognize orientation to authority and practice that contributes to effective leadership and relationships in an organization, and ultimately just self control. I hardly need to lecture people at West Point about discipline, but I do like that other verse. It says, "Like a city whose walls are broken down as a man who lacks self control." If you if you will commit yourself to not just physical but the way you carry yourself and to be disciplined, that will earn you the respect of your peers. And so I often tell young people, if you want to, you want to make a difference in the world, use this time in your life to grow in the qualities of the inner man and the inner woman that will reflect character, because people follow people they trust, whether it's in uniform or in civilian life or in business or politics, and so I think, more than anything else, our nation longs for and rewards leaders of character at every level. And I'm just, I'm just glad that I know all of what I just said to you is hardly a new idea here at West Point, but they're principles that I've tried to embrace throughout my life and career.

MWI: You are now teaching political science at Grove City College. What's that experience like?

Pence: Well, we're teaching a couple of courses on faith and public service and growing cities, at about a 150-year-old school in western Pennsylvania that has a great Christian tradition. I'll tell you, there's something deeply meaningful about being around this rising generation of Americans, and it's been deeply inspiring to me to be able to share from my experience some of these principles and to reflect on how we've tried to approach issues throughout our life and our career. So it's been a great honor for me, and I enjoyed it greatly.

MWI: Mr. Pence, knowing what you know now, what advice do you have for our young listeners who are just starting out on their own leadership journey?

Pence: Well, I would say I'm someone that believes that every one of us has we're born with certain gifts that come from our Creator. Our founders believed that all of us were endowed by our creator with certain inalienable rights, but I believe we're also endowed with gifts. But leadership, to me, is just among the gifts. There are many different gifts. There are gifts of teaching, there are gifts of administering, there are gifts that the Bible teaches of a whole different range. And I view leadership as, in a sense, it's, it's like the gift of athletic talent you can be born with, obviously, I wasn't. You can be born with great athletic ability, but if you don't develop it, if you don't invest in it, if you don't look to others, if you aren't mentored and make the sacrifices you'll never achieve the full potential of that gift. And I think leadership is the same way. I mean, for me, I'm involved in and it's not over yet.

I've been involved in a lifelong study of leadership, reading biographies of men and women that I respect, people of impact and consequence, trying to emulate the people that I admire the most, and then putting those things into practice. But the end of the day, to me, I would just say first and foremost is, don't doubt if you and I think anyone that steps forward and is qualified to be here at West Point has already demonstrated a leadership capacity. I've already decided that our lives are more important than their own. They've decided to put the country ahead of themselves. So they're all leaders. It seems to me, this is, this is an entire institution of leaders. But I would just say to each and every one of them is, just understand that that leadership can be learned and developed for good or for ill, that there's certain types of leadership that will proceed naturally out of a certain approach to life. But I think the most consequential leadership takes discipline and study and can be learned.

The last thing I say to anybody that's listening in is something you don't have to say to West Point cadets, and that is the if you desire and aspire to be in leadership, step up. Everybody here stepped up, served their country, and I was incredibly proud, although among these cadets, the fact that my son is a Marine and my son-in-law's Navy doesn't get me too far, but I think these are all people who stepped up and served their country. And I say to anyone that aspires to leadership, particularly in the civilian realm or maybe after your time in uniform, you want to apply leadership, is to step up. Show up.

Some sage said years ago, the 95% of success in life is just showing up well, they've already shown up here and demonstrated the leadership capacity. But it's really no different than in civilian life. And a lot of people think about politics, particularly, they think that somebody's going to call you on the phone and ask you to do something someday. And I'm not saying that never happens, but for me, once, I joined the Republican Party as a young man about the age some of these cadets seated here, I just walked into the local party headquarters and said, I'm here to go to work. What can I do? And the first office I ever held was precinct committeeman in Washington Township in Indianapolis, Indiana. I ran the elections in our neighborhood for the Republican Party, and that opened doors for me to run for Congress for the first time before I was 29 years old. So showing up, stepping forward, like everybody here at West Point has already done for their country, is the other principle of leadership. And lastly, I would just say, what I always tell young people who have some desire for leadership is, speak your dreams.

Speak your dreams. Don't a lot of times people are shy about their own aspirations. But I whenever I ask, I've asked young people over the years, "Tell me what you want to do," and they'll shuffle their feet a little bit. Some young lady will look at me and say, "Well, you know, I'd really like to someday be governor of this state." And I said, "Okay, you just passed the first test." And they get a little surprised and say, "What do you mean?" I'd say, "Well, you got to speak your dreams." You've got to be willing to look people in the eye and with humility, tell

them this is what I feel called to do, and doing that for me, then empowers other people around you to understand better how they can help you achieve your dreams. And so those are the principles that I'd apply. That leadership, I think, is a gift, but it has to be developed, right? And secondly, if you want to lead, you've got to step forward, just like everybody here at West Point has already done. You've done and lastly, it's just the ability to willingness to speak your dreams, tell those senior officers what you'd like to do and why you think you're the right person to do it. You. Then in civilian life, tell people how you want to contribute to your community, your state or your nation.

MWI: Well, sir, I think that's a great place to leave it. I know we have to get you off to your next engagement, but Mr. Vice President, thank you so much for your time today. And on behalf of our director, Colonel Patrick Sullivan, I'd like to present you with this rare and coveted MWI coin as a token of our appreciation. Thank you, sir.

Pence: That's great. Thank you, and thanks for all that you do here, for this rising generation of American leaders. You've contributed mightily here at West Point, and you have our appreciation, just as an everyday American, for the work that you do. And God bless you and all the key leaders that you engage with every day.

Leading in the Age of AI

An Interview with former Homeland Security secretary Michael Chertoff

Editor's Note: Michael Chertoff is the former Secretary of Homeland Security. This interview is part of the Key Leader Engagements series and was recorded in the Class of 1974 Recording Study at the Modern War Institute at West Point. It was edited for brevity, clarity, and flow.

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MWI: Mr. Secretary, welcome to MWI. You have a long and very impressive biography, but before we get into your long history of public service, can we start with having you talk a little bit about your background and what interested you in pursuing law as a profession?

Chertoff: Good to be here. Well, I mean, I went to college, and we're getting to the point of getting in my graduation, and my parents were saying, "Well, what do you want to do next?" And I didn't really have a clear idea. I knew I wasn't going to be a doctor, and I thought for a while about maybe trying to become a university professor, but I decided I didn't really have the patience for teaching, so that tended, at least when I was in college back then, to be by default law school. So I figured I'd try law school out and see if I liked it. And it turned out I did like it. I found it very, very interesting blend of practical and theoretical, and so that kind of drove me into becoming a lawyer. And then I clerked for a couple of years, and then went into private practice, and we actually did pro bono death penalty work, and I got to try a couple of cases, and I discovered I really liked trying cases. So I asked people at the firm, "What if you want to be able to try cases? What's the best thing you can do?" And they said, "Well, become a prosecutor. That way you get the experience. The government kind of pays for it, and eventually you can go into private practice." And so that got me to apply to US Attorney's offices, and I got hired, and in 1983 and I was off to the races.

MWI: While you were practicing law, you were involved in some of the most complicated and high-profile political and legal actions of our nation's recent history. They include things like the White Water scandal, border security and immigration reform, the mafia commission trial, racial profiling, prosecution, 9/11 terrorists, Enron, Hurricane Katrina. The list goes on and on. From a leadership perspective, what event or series of events in your government career was the most challenging and why?

Chertoff: Well, I would say that a couple are challenging in different ways. I say the most challenging, in terms of an immediate challenge, was 9/11. I was on my way to work. I was the head of the Criminal Division. There was no Homeland Security Department in those days, so it was up to the Department of Justice to respond to terrorist attacks. As I was driving in, I was on the car phone with my deputy, and he had the TV on, and he said a plane hit the World Trade Center, and we both thought it was some small plane with some pilot got turned around and got

into an accident. He had the TV on a little longer, and then he said a second plane hit. And we said, this is not an accident. And we quickly heard that they were airliners. So I came in, we walked over to the FBI special security operations center, which is the kind of the headquarters or command center for running responses to major terrorist attacks. Bob Mueller, the new FBI director, was there. I'd known Bob for years before then, and we immediately started to work on figuring out who had done it, how many more planes were in jeopardy, and what we could do to stop it.

And that meant we had to reach out, first and foremost, to people that we knew had relatives who had been on the planes, to see if they could tell us anything that the relatives had passed on to them. We heard when I was there about the plane that hit the Pentagon, and so we knew that again, this was not over, and once we started to get the names of people who we thought had been the hijackers, we were able to begin to collect data to triangulate their relationships. And more importantly, were there other people that they might be connected to that might also be plotters. And so for the rest of that day, we worked on putting together a list of who we knew the hijackers to be, and beginning to track down financial and travel and other records that might lead them might lead us to people if they were connected, who might also be either knowledgeable about or actually involved in these parts.

MWI: That's pretty amazing. It sounds like a lot of intel work going on in there, but under enormous pressure, because the clock is working against you, because in the middle of all this, there was the plane that came down over Shanksville, right?

Chertoff: You know, we didn't know at first whether that was a play that we had shot down, because we knew that there was now an order to shoot down planes. We knew planes that were coming and now being ordered to land wherever they could land, so you really had a gun pointed at your head. And, you know, no pun intended in terms of getting the answers quickly, so we could then start up the system again.

MWI: Your initial reaction to 9/11 reminds me a lot of mine. In the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks, you were the senior official from the Justice Department at the FBI command center, and you described some of that just a second ago. What was that experience like? And how did you manage a team that was part of a large and complex task force that not only may not have worked together before, but presumably never dealt with an issue that was 9/11 before?

Chertoff: Well, I mean, a lot of it was, of course, FBI agents, and Bob Mueller as the FBI director, had direct control over them. He was very new to the FBI job. He'd only been there for about 10 days. And a lot of it was analyzing records that we got from the airlines, the airline manifest for the various flights. You look at the names, some of them stand out, and then the

intelligence community and the State Department said they had travel records or other information of that sort, were also very quick to respond. And as we started to track travel and financial records, we began to see connectivity between some of the hijackers and some people that we knew to be al-Qaeda people back in the Middle East. And so that led us, by the end of the day, to be quite confident that al-Qaeda was behind it.

MWI: This podcast is taking place in the recording studio of the Modern War Institute at West Point. Before we started recording, you mentioned this is your first trip to West Point, so could you share what brought you here today and what would have been some of the highlights of your visit?

Chertoff: Yeah, it's been great, first of all, to get a tour of West Point and the history. My main purpose in being here was to do a fireside chat about these issues in terms of modern warfare, what security looks like these days, what Homeland Security looks like, and what we have to be prepared to do to deal with challenges coming in the future. So I got to speak to a large body of students, and we had a smaller session that we did as a side session to talk a little bit more in depth in some of the issues involving counterterrorism.

MWI: That sounds like a good way to spend a day. Thinking back to your long service in government, if you could revisit one decision from your time in government, which would it be and why?

Chertoff: That's a tough question. I think that maybe the one thing I would revisit in Hurricane Katrina. We were relying too much on the general principle that the state and local governments are the first responders to a natural disaster hurricane. That's almost always true, and when I had dealt with hurricanes, for example, in Florida, Florida had a very efficient state emergency management system, and the federal government came in to support them and back them up, but the lead was the state, by assuming that that was the general principle. I did not fully understand how poorly prepared the state government and the city government in Louisiana and New Orleans were, and so we were a little late to kind of tune up and build a plan. And the real lesson was, you've got to make sure that the states have a plan before the disaster hits. I was maybe too complacent in assuming that Louisiana, which had dealt with hurricanes before, had a plan.

MWI: Okay, so eventually it's time for every leader to step back from the roles. Eventually it's time for every leader to step back from national service. How did you know when it was time to go?

Well, it was easy in the sense that we had an election. President Bush had served his two terms, and we had Barack Obama coming in. I knew I wasn't going to stay for more than one day in the

new administration, so I was fully prepared for the fact that my four year tenure at DHS would be up, and the next step would be the private sector. Well, that makes it easy, right?

MWI: Totally. What do you think was the most misunderstood part of any role that you had had in a government office? What do you think people understood the least about anything a job you held in office?

Chertoff: I mean, I think when I was the Secretary of Homeland Security, people were still getting accustomed to what that job was. And I mean, there were so many different facets to it. There was obviously dealing with border security, transportation security, intelligence collection on threats, as well as disaster management, Secret Service investigation of financial crimes. So I think the scope and breadth of what I did as Secretary of Homeland Security was not clear to a lot of people, and I think it took a long time for people to have some idea. Even these days, people may not really understand the full breadth and dimensions of Homeland Security.

MWI: Managing risk is an important skill for any leader. Why did you decide to go into risk management and security consulting after you left government?

Chertoff: Well, the real lesson I learned from my four years at DHS is you cannot eliminate risk even if you don't get out of bed in the morning, the roof might fall on you, right? So if you set an unrealistic goal of eliminating risk, you're going to fail, and you're going to even allow things to get worse. Managing risk means, first of all, understanding what your highest threats are, what the most consequential threats are, and then what are the sacrifices you have to make in order to reduce or eliminate those threats. And it's a trade-off.

I'll give you a great example of risk management which we've experienced recently, and this is COVID. So when COVID first hit I was not in government, but I had done work when I was in government on dealing with pandemics and major kinds of medical emergencies. And you know, I understood the impulse on the part of public health people is to reduce the impact, and certainly the serious medical impact of disaster. And that's perfectly appropriate. But the question is, how far do you go to drive that risk down to zero? Because, as we saw with COVID, if at some point, your way of keeping risk to zero is to simply shut everything down for a long period of time, there will be collateral costs. There will be costs to the economy. For example, kids who can't go to school, some of them will never actually recover their social skills and their mental acuity. And so is it worth it to keep them paying that price if it's going to reduce the number of fatalities from like 10 to like seven? And that's really risk management. So, I mean, I thought we overdid the risk elimination effort a little bit, and I think we're still paying the price for that.

MWI: I think that's an excellent example. And one of the things we stress, not only here at West Point, but in the Army in general, and our leadership philosophy, which is mission

command, is accepting prudent risk. And that's something that's beaten into young leaders in the Army, because, like you said, you can't take the risk down to zero to accomplish the mission or take advantage of opportunities.

Chertoff: Part of our effort is to give people an awareness of the tools they have to reduce risk, but also give them an architecture that can manage the risk in a way that eliminates the biggest threats to their success and their livelihood. But doesn't necessarily mean you're never going to have a problem, right? We have a number of senior advisors who served in senior military and intelligence and law enforcement roles, and I think using that experience, we can work with companies and even with some government agencies to help them think through what are the most high consequence things they need to protect, and then to what extent they want to make a tradeoff. And only they can appreciate how important the tradeoff is going to be to them. But by directing them with questions and probing, we can get them to focus in a way that makes decision making much more effective.

MWI: So one of the things that I did prepare for today's show was to query ChatGPT what questions I should ask you. Interestingly, one of the things that was suggested, and as it ended up the only one I use from that for today, was related to the potential impact of AI, especially deep and synthetic media. So given your previous roles in government, do you think we are as a nation to counter those kinds of threats?

Chertoff: I don't think we're as prepared as we need to be. And I think there are two dimensions of what we need to focus bearing in mind that this is still a developing issue. One is, how do we educate people and give them the tools about the appropriate degree of skepticism to be adopting and looking at, for example, videos that appear to be real, or other things that are simulating reality, and on deep fakes, there'd be things like the image wouldn't blink right, or saying that anybody would look at and they say there's something wrong with this, but I think that's been corrected, or is about to be corrected, so some of it is educating people and giving them tools. As far as concerned, I do think that there should be some rules about propagating deep fakes and maybe, among other things, disclosing that artificial intelligence was used in some way in preparing this image. Now that works with law-abiding entities. It's not going to work with foreign adversaries, and there, I think the government may have a role to play in terms of exposing when there's a deep fake, which may be partly a function of elections in foreign locations. I'm sure there have been many over time.

I've read plenty of books about security and things of that sort. But I guess I'd say, at a philosophical level, the two that I'm most because I've the courage to swim against my national security issue, but in a way to do it in a way that doesn't necessarily avenge ourselves on people, but is able to allow for reconciliation. And again, they may be positive in terms of more security, but they can't get wedded to only focusing on the content.

MWI: Mr. Secretary we're coming to the end of our time together. Are there any final words you have for the cadets here at West Point?

Chertoff: I admire those who've come to West Point because they want to serve their country, and I would say you'll take the oath of commission. You'll be committed to doing the right thing, and the paramount obligations you owe your country and what your country wants from you and will make you feel at the end of your time that you've done something satisfying and worthwhile and that you admire in yourself.

MWI: I think that's a great place to leave it. Secretary Chertoff, thank you so much for sharing your time and your insights with us today. On behalf of our director, Colonel Pat Sulivan, I'm pleased to present you with this rare and coveted MWI coin.

Chertoff: That's great! Thank you.

Leadership from All Directions

an interview with former astronaut and Air Force veteran Cady Coleman

Editor's Note: Cady Coleman is a retired US Air Force colonel and a former NASA astronaut. This interview is part of the Key Leader Engagements series and was recorded in the Class of 1974 Recording Study at the Modern War Institute at West Point. It was edited for brevity, clarity, and flow.

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MWI: Cady, welcome! You the first astronaut that we've interviewed here in the Modern War Institute, and I'm really excited to talk to you about you and your career in the Air Force as well as your experiences in space. So to start us off, can you please talk to us a little about your background and what prompted you to seek out military service?

Coleman: Sure! My dad was in the Navy, and so I grew up in that world. He was in salvage and hard hat diving and in the Sea Lab program, when men first lived under the sea, he was a project officer for Sea Lab Three. And so to me, living someplace that was kind of dangerous where not many people lived seemed kind of normal to me. And at the same time, it never occurred to me that I could be one of those explorers, just because, I mean, the guys that came over to our house for dinner were named things like Uncle Squirrely and Black Bart and Goliath, right? There was nobody that I could really look up to. And it wasn't until I was in college and Dr. Sally Ride, the first American woman astronaut, came and spoke at MIT. And I looked at her and I listened to what she had to say, and I just thought, "Wow. She's passionate about what she's learning about, being as good at it as she can be, and at the same time, she has this kind of adventure and exploration in her life." And that's when I decided to apply. I was 21 when that happened.

MWI: OK, so you graduated from college and went into the military. What was your path from research chemist in the Air Force to NASA astronaut?

Coleman: Well, while at MIT I was in ROTC, and that was for a variety of reasons. I grew up in that world, and I think that a certain amount of service to your community, to your country, and it doesn't have to be military, is something all of us should think about doing in our own way. And I also wanted to go to college, and we didn't actually have enough money to go to college for all of us. And so for me, it was actually just a great bargain, so to speak. I really wanted to spend some time in the military, and I wanted to go to college, and ROTC made it possible. I studied chemistry at MIT, and then I had an educational delay at UMass at Amherst, where I studied polymer science and engineering. I then went to do my four-year commitment to the Air Force, and was at the Air Force materials lab working on kind of bigger, better Kevlar, and different materials for airplanes and optics.

MWI: Well, someone who has spent a lot of time in Kevlar, I appreciate your efforts on that front. While you were doing this research, did you know that you were going to be in the space program? Was it something that came a little later?

Coleman: It was something that I wanted to do, and I figured it would take a long time. Once I got on active duty, I went to go look into how I would actually apply, and there was good news and bad news. The bad news was you needed four years of active duty. And I wasn't like a test pilot or a pilot who had already had a lot of their career before applying, where I'd had a lot of that graduate school work beforehand. And I said to the person in charge at the special flying Programs Office, "But sir, if I was a civilian, I'd be really well qualified." And he said, "But you are not a civilian," and he was right. And I think it was an important lesson for me, but also just to realize and say who you are and what you bring, so that people understand that. All of us are serving our country but doesn't mean that you can't try to point out things they might not know at least once.

MWI: Now let's talk about some of your experiences in space. So in 1995 when you were part of the STS 73 crew, you reported a UFO. Can you talk to us about that experience?

Coleman: (laughing) Well, you're the first person in quite a while to ask me about that. I was selected in 1992 for NASA and then assigned to STS 93, a Space Lab mission doing a lot of experiments. We flew in 1995 and it was our very first day of a 16 day mission, the longest at the time. And from the ground, they called up and they go, "Hey, can we switch to camera two in the laboratory?" We just were like, "Sure," and we were really glad, because camera one wasn't mounted right. Eventually we realized that we'd been pointing camera one instead of camera two and we've been doing bad "astronaut TV," right? And my crew mate was a really shy guy, and he was especially embarrassed, and so he launched himself down the module and accidentally bounced off the ceiling. And I called down and said, "Houston, we have an unidentified flying object," and that wasn't very good. One of my one of my friends told me later, "You know, Cady, if you never make a joke, you never make a bad joke." And I did answer five congressional inquiries into whether I had actually seen UFOs on this mission.

MWI (laughing) Oh, that's amazing. So the "UFO" was your crew mate, and you told Houston that the UFO was inside your spacecraft?

Coleman: I did imply that, yes. Yes, I did. And actually, if you, if you put together, all at the same time, in the same time frame, all the different pieces of video, it's really clear. But if you were watching the NASA channel, and all of a sudden somebody said what I said, and pretty immediately they went to no TV in the cabin, just voices, or they're just seeing a blank screen, hearing only the audio… I predict that 1000 conspiracy theories were born off that. You have to be careful with the facts.

MWI: Well, speaking of facts, during your second Columbia mission you were lead mission specialist for the Chandra X-ray Observatory, which was intended to assist in the comprehensive studies of the universe. Was leading a national mission like this one similar to leadership in the Air Force. If so, how?

Coleman: I have to think that it very much is. Launching a telescope is not just a five-person crew up in the space shuttle, saying, "3, 2, 1, go." It is an exercise together with mission control in Houston. There is mission control for the telescope itself, and there is an Air Force mission control in Sunnyvale for the rocket on the rear end of the telescope that is going to take it into its final orbit, which is like a third of the way to the moon. In other words, no repair for this bit for this telescope. I think one of the things that really made us successful was having hard conversations between these teams before the launch about what people really understood.

Things like what decision would you really make on launch day, when somebody says, "Can you go another two minutes?" And then on launch day, when we really have that question come up, then they were prepared. Preparation matters too. I was the person who was in charge of launching the telescope and my crew and I were at the sort of the nexus of those conversations, and that telescope Mission Control is in Boston, and I I've lived there, and was a long time, I was a 26-year commuter between Texas and Massachusetts. And so I would go to Mission Control quite a bit, and just go by and see how they're doing and what they needed and what they were thinking. And those insights were really important to help you know the Mission Control in Houston, understand how to interface with this actually brand new mission control, and also the one in Sunnyvale, where they really knew their business, and they launched a lot of rockets like this, even on the shuttle. And so it was my job to help all of them talk together.

MWI: So it sounds to me like rehearsals, creating shared understanding and helping build cohesive teams were essential parts of your leadership in NASA. Do you think that's accurate?

Coleman: Absolutely.

MWI: Along those same lines, during your time in NASA you worked closely with astronauts from Russia. Then as now, Russia and the US are often at odds politically. What were those dynamics like working with Russians in the space program.

Coleman: Well, the space program is special, and the space station in particular has got a very special classification. Anything that is happening political is outside the Space Station mission, and the Space Station mission will continue. And so even in recent times, that mission still continues. US astronauts are still training and launching from Russia. Cosmonauts are training

and launching from the US. And I think that communication is really the key. I've been very, very proud of my work with the Russians. I've learned—I won't say it's because they're Russian, but I learned—that you need to respect where people are from, and why they might think a certain way. And also understanding the principle that, in their culture, you should never sign up for a requirement that you cannot fulfill. Because as long as we understood the goodwill was there, we knew the mission could be accomplished together. So you've got these two organizations, these two countries that aren't friends, and haven't been for a very long time, but you're finding a way to work together that's outside of that political standpoint.

MWI: Are you still in contact with any of those Russian cosmonauts?

Coleman: Absolutely. In fact, there's a reunion every year of all astronauts globally. I mean, how could we not have reunions?

MWI: Your biography also indicates some proficiency in wind instruments. In fact, you played live on National Public Radio while in orbit during one of your missions. Can you please tell us that story?

Coleman: I play the flute. I am not the most amazing flute player, but I do like to play. And actually, within the astronaut office, we have quite a few musicians. In fact, we have like three different bands. I mean, I'm retired from there now, but one of our bands, we still play a couple times a year. And there's just something magic that happens when we're together. And music happens, and it's kind of folk, new age, you know some songs from this century, right?

So music's been important, and bringing other people's flutes was a way of bringing other people, and other people who might not notice space and realize that it belongs to them too, bringing them with you. So I brought Ian Anderson's flute from the band Jethro Tull. And I know a lot of your listeners here at the Academy may not know them, but it's a really neat band he's known for standing on one foot. Playing the flute that way was, of course, much easier up in space. And I think this is actually a great example of the kind of bravery it takes to collaborate. I mean, I had to be brave enough to ask this famous guy, could I, could I bring his flute, and could we do something together that would spread what we're doing in space. And he had to say yes to somebody never met, had no idea whether they could play the flute or not. And, I think there's a certain way to build new ground together. You have to be vulnerable to each other, and you have to learn to trust each other. And so I think there's some bravery involved there. And we played a duet that was amazing on the 50th anniversary of human spaceflight. Ian Anderson was the flute player's name; he was playing a concert in Russia, and I was on the International Space Station. And this was the anniversary of Yuri Gagarin's first launch. That launch is celebrated around the world, and we celebrated it with that duet.

MWI: So from your time in the Air Force or your time working with NASA, what was the hardest leadership challenge you had to overcome, and how did you do it?

Coleman: I think the hardest kind of leadership experience is the one in which you are not actually the leader of the group. Everyone's point of view is important. And sometimes there are reasons, maybe on a crew, it is going to be a certain country's turn to have them be the commander of the Space Station, when you might actually be more experienced. And I mean, and that's actually something that happened to me, and it happened to our crew in a way, in that we had three of us from Italy, from the US and from Russia, and we had to figure out our own kind of leadership, because you don't want to turn to the person who has the least experience to say, "Well, okay, so you're the leader. Go ahead. Let's see how that goes, person who's not as experienced as me." I mean that is not the way anybody wants to function, or should function as a team. And also, sometimes there are things you can't really even talk about, you just have to do. You have to fill in and do, and try to figure out, "Is this something we should get more help with?" There was a there was an expression, "leading from behind." But I think it's almost like there's always leadership from all directions, is what I would say. And between the three of us, whether we were in that area of the mission, the leader or not, we made it work together in ways that you know just worked for us.

MWI: That's a great vignette. Thank you. Along those same lines. If you had to pick the most important lesson you learned in all of your experiences as a leader, what would it be?

Coleman: It would be the importance of the mission and what the mission can do for a crew, especially one who does not get to choose each other do not necessarily get to choose their challenge or their start point. And I mean, there's all sorts of ways that a mission can be really hard. And I think focusing on the mission itself is what can bring together a group of, in our case, six people, all from different countries, different backgrounds, different everything in our case, and by focusing on the mission, that is the thing that you have in common, and from there, looking for what are the other things you might have in common to help you focus on the mission. But I see this in communities when you know, for example, I'm from a small town, and here comes solar power and wind power to a small town, town meeting. Some people new selection. Some people have been there many, many years and how do you make good decisions for the town? And it's focusing on what, what does the town really need? Not "Am I worried because I don't know enough about this?" Because you think you know enough about this, and you don't you know, you get away from that and just think about, what does the town need, and how can we accomplish it together

MWI: With all of the extremely talented people that you worked with throughout your career, did you ever experience any sense of imposter syndrome when you were going

through the astronaut program? Did you ever think that you ever wonder why you were there, or think that maybe that that you didn't you shouldn't be there?

Coleman: When you say imposter syndrome, that is something I definitely can identify with, the whole, you know, "Should I be there?" But whatever those words are, I don't think they really matter. Certainly, I have felt that, and what I think is, all of us are human. Some people never feel like that, you know. And for me, seeing Sally Ride on a stage meant something, and I needed that extra almost permission, like, "Hey, I'm kind of like you." That means you can do this—the transitive principle, right? And, you know, I needed that. Not everybody does, but many people do. And so I think it's important to realize that it's okay to have that be part of who you are.

MWI: Last question: what advice would you offer to someone who would like to follow in your footsteps, whether that be in academia, the military or in space?

Coleman: I would say, never underestimate the value of an application, whether it's a job or a position that you want or not. I learn something every time I even think about applying for something. In applications, I think it's hard sometimes for people to brag about themselves, and it's also hard sometimes for people to recognize the gifts that they bring. And in preparing for applications, something that I found is helpful is to sit down and either write or speak int your phone or whatever you want, but make a list of all the things that you are proud of, as if no one was going to read it. It's kind of like a diary. You really have to make that decision and say, "No one will read this." And then really think about what you think you bring to the mission and why.

I think it's great to periodically make one of those kinds of lists, and chances are the next morning, when you read that list, you'll realize "These are things that I'd better figure out how to say on an application." Or "Here's some things that I wish were true, and I realize I don't have the experience to back it up yet." So I think periodically applying for things, or just at least sitting down and writing down this list of things, is very healthy.

MWI: Cady, thank you so much for your time today. As I mentioned at the start you're the first astronaut that we have interviewed here, and I'm very grateful for you being with us today. On behalf of MWI's director, Colonel Pat Sullivan, I'd like to present you with this rare and coveted Modern War Institute coin in appreciation for your time today.

Coleman: Thank you so much! This is actually beautiful and amazing and intriguing, really. And the whole Modern War Institute is so important. Thank you.

Carry It for Them

an interview with West Point's commandant, Brigadier General R.J. Garcia

Editor's Note: Brigadier General R. J. Garcia is the 81st commandant of the United States Military Academy at West Point. This interview is part of the cadet-run Five Questions for a General podcast series and took place in the Class of 1974 Recording Studio inside the Modern War Institute at West Point. It was edited for clarity, brevity, and flow.

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MWI: Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the class of 1974 recording studio and the five questions for a general Podcast. I'm Cadet Sebastian Witt, your host, and it's my pleasure to be here today with Brigadier General R. J. Garcia, the commandant of the United States Military Academy at West Point. General Garcia, welcome to the show.

Garcia: Thanks for having me, Sebastian. Really happy to be here.

MWI: General Garcia, before we get into the questions, I'd like to ask you to share a bit of your origin story with our audience. Long before you were Commandant at West Point, you were a cadet here, in the Class of 1996. Can you describe what led you to want to come to West Point and why you decided to branch into aviation?

Garcia: I grew up in Texas, South Texas, really San Antonio. My family's all from South Texas. As a young high school kid, all I knew is I wanted to be in the military. I just I really enjoyed the military. My dad was an active duty NCO for a while in the Air Force, got out, went to school, started a family, and actually came back into the Army Reserves as an officer. And so I grew up around him, obviously, and then some veterans that led my Boy Scout troop, even some coaches that had been in the military and then became sports coaches, and I just really appreciated who they were and what they stood for and so I really was drawn to the military.

I wasn't necessarily sold on West Point at first. I had a lot of interest in a lot of different opportunities in the military. I considered enlisting. I considered the Naval Academy, the Air Force Academy, and West Point, and was very fortunate to have a few options. But really, what sold me on West Point was running into some really neat people at the Summer Leader Experience (SLE), our summer program. And in fact, my squad leader from SLE is a colonel, just retired, and we kept in touch, and I worked with him on several things. The cadets that I interacted with at SLE were very impressive, and I really felt that this was the place for me.

My cadet experience was pretty average in every metric you can you can think of. I was never anointed or thought of to be the next commandant or any commandant. I really thought I would just do my time and get out. I was average by just about every metric you could find. And I toyed

with a different branch every year. So when I finished basic cadet training (Beast), I was really good at light infantry stuff. I could do land navigation I could shoot a rifle really well. I grew up around that kind of stuff. Boy Scouts, hunting and fishing. And I thought, "Well, I'll just be an infantryman." And then when I was a cadet during what we call Cadet Field Training (CFT), we kind of referred to as just Camp Buckner. We used to go to Fort Knox for a week and do what we call Mounted Maneuver Training, and you got to drive a tank and a Bradley and shoot it. And so I really thought armor was the coolest thing after that. So I said I was going to be an armor officer. And then Cow year, I was really getting into my civil engineering major, and I thought, "No, I'm going to be a sapper, and I'll use my degree and I'll become a professional engineer." And then going into my first year, I got some experience with engineering, and I just didn't like it. It was not for me, and my grades probably should have told me that I was not a great student, like I said.

And so literally, the night before Branch Night selection, I was putting my stuff into the computer, my choices. I didn't know what I was going to do, and it was infantry or aviation. And that day, I spoke with an infantry officer at a blood drive and he convinced me to go aviation, although being infantry himself. And I thought, "When am I going to get an opportunity to learn how to fly a helicopter?" I came from kind of humble means, and I couldn't afford to get flying lessons, so I just thought, "Well, I'll let the Army pay for it, and then I'll get out of the Army, because that was my plan. And 29 years later, I am the commandant of cadets. So, you know, life has twists and turns, and you run into wonderful people that inspire you and show you that you're doing good or you can do better and show your value the organization. And it got me here.

MWI: Thanks, sir. It's particularly inspiring to hear your process of trying to figure out what branch you're going into, because I think you said verbatim about what 90% of my classmates right, trying to, trying to decide what branch you go into.

Garcia: Before we get off that, I think there's a really interesting lesson there. And I'll tell you, I fretted about this. You know, infantry, aviation lieutenants… they all do the same thing. They take care of people, they take care of equipment, and they make sure they're ready to go do their job wherever it is around the world. And so whether you're taking care of an Apache helicopter, or an Abrams tank, or a light infantry platoon, it's all about making sure that people are ready, the equipment's ready, and that they are trained to do their job. And so my job as a brigade commander of an aviation unit was not much different than an infantry brigade commander's: take care of people, take care of equipment and be trained.

MWI: Absolutely, sir, thank you. And now we'll get into our formal questions, sir. I like that you brought up your cadet time. I think one thing that stands out about the briefs that we've gone to is you like to inject some stories about your cadet time and how Cadet Garcia got stuck sleeping in Grand Central Station. I enjoyed that one.

Garcia: (laughing) True story.

MWI: So your journey to becoming commandant after your cadet time has been a pretty extraordinary one. When you look back to your own time as a cadet, though, what lessons or experiences from those earliest days of your military career most shaped who you are as a leader now?

Garcia: Wow, that's a great question. And as I think back on it, the lessons all sort of merge together. I think the number one thing that I learned as a cadet at West Point was that attitude is everything. The West Point leader development system, the way we develop cadets, has changed, and there's always Old Grad stories of how hard we had it. You guys have it just as hard as we do, just in different ways, and it's easy to get beat down at West Point without a good attitude. And again, I was not a great cadet. Academically. I was okay physically and militarily I was probably above average, but I wasn't setting the world on fire.

And what I learned was, just through this constant demand of my time, was the challenges that come with leading peers. That's probably the hardest. Leadership is to lead your peers, and then leading cadets, your attitudes, everything. And if you have a good attitude, you can probably get through anything. And that, you know, I've served across some very tough circumstances, whether it was deployments overseas or situations at our home station. If you have a bad attitude, you're probably going to fail. The most important thing is just have a good attitude, and if you can maintain that, you're going to do great.

In Beast we were doing a road march going up, probably up beyond Michie stadium, up that big hill in Stoney Lonesome. I mean, we're struggling. We're plebes. It's like three miles, and we don't even know how to put rucksacks on, and we're out there. And I remember an officer, and I don't remember who they were, but I remember him zooming by me, and he said, "Hey, when you're struggling and you think you can't go any further, grab somebody else's ruck and carry it for them." And that is it's a really unique sort of way to approach adversity, because I've done that before, and what it always shows me is, when you think you have it bad, give somebody else a break. Do something good for someone else. Give them a break. It'll get paid forward to you later. It gives you something new to focus on. And when you're done, you know, I could have gone a lot further.

We developed that sort of mantra, and my Beast platoon, my Beast squad, you know, when someone was struggling, we'd grab their rifle, or we'd grab their web belt. We said, "Hey, we got you come on," a lot of times. I think focusing outward just helps you get yourself off your own struggles, and then gives you an opportunity.

You probably heard me say to cadets, "Hey, your job is to take a step back sometimes and assess the whole thing," right? And that allows you to do that, you know, take a step back. Who's struggling, forget about yourself, grab that person's stuff, help them, and then next thing you know, the mission's over and you accomplished it.

MWI: That's, I think, a very insightful and kind of rare piece of advice that we get about being in a team is just looking at the people around you. So sir, West Point has a long tradition of producing leaders who thrive in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world. How do you see the role of West Point graduate? As you said, West Point has changed significantly since you've been here. How do you see the role of West Point graduate changing over the next 10 to 20 years?

Garcia: Yeah. You know, I had a boss who used to say, "The only thing that we're really good at is not being able to predict the future," because we try and then it never turns out exactly like we want it to be. And so I think what we've got to do is prepare cadets and graduates to be the most flexible leaders possible. I would convey it this way, right? You know, a lot of times in the Army, people get frustrated at last minute taskings, right? Or changes to those tasks. Someone's always going to have to do these taskings around a post or a unit and look, you know, there's complications all the time, and people can't make it. And, you know, there's lots of reasons why they change.

And what I used to tell my soldiers is, don't focus on the change. Focus on accomplishing whatever we you're told to do, right? And when I was flying missions in Iraq, every mission got changed. You know, we would be going to somewhere to do a reconnaissance or to support some soldiers doing a cordon and search. And then en route, there'd be a "troops in contact," and we would be diverted. That version of the story I just told you would mean me getting on the radio and complaining that the mission changed. I would never do that, right? Because in that moment, you are so focused on supporting whoever's on the ground and making sure they're successful. I'm a patchy pot, so we are there to support them, right?

And so that mindset was very pervasive through our unit during deployment. But when we would come back we go, "Oh no! Something changed." Forget the change. Six months ago, we couldn't have cared less about the change, because it is about accomplishing the mission. So focus on accomplishing the mission by any legal, moral, and ethical means, meaning, don't worry about the process, as long as it's legal, moral and ethical, focus on the product or the end. And I think we've got to do a better job of that across.

I think we've got to prepare our graduates to operate and lead in the harshest, worst conditions possible. We, over the last 20 plus years, were fighting a counterinsurgency. We were able to build forward operating bases. We were able to build a lot of support structures and networks in

Iraq and Afghanistan, and we're doing it today in other places, and we may not have that luxury. And so I imagine our graduates will have to lead. If we look at Ukraine, we look at Gaza, I mean areas that are completely destroyed or in conditions that are very difficult, there will not be a Green Beans coffee shop, I think, in the next combat operation. And so we have to have a mentality of grit and a determination to survive.

And so what are those skills? You know, one of the things we're looking at in Cadet Field Training is, do we bring survival training in? Do we learn how to procure water? Do we learn how to trap and capture animals? And it's one thing that every course, I've gone to Jungle School, I've gone to SERE school, they all have this component, right? And it's not, it's not that you might have to do it, you probably won't have to do it, but it gives you the confidence that you can survive in really austere, desolate, desperate conditions. And I think that's really important as well.

And then the final piece is technology. We have got to change and break down barriers and structures and free the young minds that come out of West Point, ROTC, OCS, basic training, and let them lead us in this way, right? You know, I give an example to my staff. I came from the 25th Infantry Division. I'm an old Boomer, you know, I'm looking at a drone, and I kind of see the issues with it. Give it to young soldiers. In 30 minutes, they're flying the thing, they've already changed it. We've got to let these young great minds lead us. I think Steve Jobs said, "Don't hire smart people and tell them what to do. Hire smart people and have them tell *you* what to do," as the boss. And so we've got to sort of flip some of our decision-making processes. And I think our graduates have got to understand that and lead through that.

MWI: I think one thing that kind of particularly stood out your first point about flexibility. I know you served in Operation Desert Spring, which is at a time where we were all the signs were kind of pointing towards we were going to war, but it wasn't necessarily certain. Do you think that the way that our world stands now, that officers are going to have to face the same kind of uncertainty and have to manage that same sort of flexibility where you just don't know what's going to happen?

Garcia: Absolutely. Absolutely. I think the uncertainty in Operation Desert Spring, what you sort of saw there as it went from that into Operation Iraqi Freedom, was the system working well, but it's a little bewildering too, right? So what I was witnessing was equipment coming out of prepositioned stocks. It was getting retro or fitted for combat, right? It's pretty simple in the boats, but then they bring it in, they up armor, things, they test everything. And so you're seeing that, but then you're not seeing, well, what are we doing that for? Right? Because I didn't sense at the time we were going to go to war. I just thought, you know, maybe we were saber-rattling, or we were just preparing.

Well, what you learn later on is that the logistics trail takes so long, and I think, think we've got to cut that as an Army and as a force, right? We've got to figure out ways to supply resupply better, which leads to a quicker decision-making cycle for strategic leaders, and that trickles down to the soldier, right? So if we can, broadly speaking, if we could get units faster, we can allow strategic leaders, like the president or the secretary of defense or corps commanders, you know, to make more rapid decisions, which is going to inject more unknown to the tactical leader, right? And it's incumbent upon them to learn and read, study and understand more.

I will tell you when I was there, so this was in 2002, right before the invasion. 2003. I kind of sensed, you know, that there was something going on. And I knew we had issues with Iraq but Afghanistan was going well. And I kind of thought, you know, my sense was, we're in a good place. Maybe we just need to deter but now, looking back, there were clearly signs that I missed. And so that rapid decision making at the strategic level, which we've got to solve, is going to translate to more, quicker decisions for the younger leaders, the tactical leaders, the direct level leaders.

MWI: Sir, in your view, what is the single most important leadership trait that today's cadets must cultivate? I know you mentioned a few in the last question, so it's a nice segue. And then the second part of this is, how do you personally model that trait in your personal life?

Garcia: Now, when I taught PL300, the Psychology of Leadership course, at the end of it, all my cadets would ask me kind of a similar question. Like, okay, so you taught us all these leadership theories what's the best one? And I would say, "Well, it kind of depends," right? I mean, that's the point of what we're trying to teach you, is leaders can use a philosophy or a model. They know when to use the right one, really, they can use all of them, and they know when to use the right one.

When I was a squadron commander, I would do leadership professional development sessions, and we would talk about the Army leadership model. And we would go through everything, the key skills, attributes in there, and then I would kind of get the same question, "Sir, you're giving us all these leadership traits, what's the best one?" The question is really good because it talks about what's important for a cadet now, and I'll tell you, I think the leadership cadets and direct level leaders need to demonstrate is different than what I demonstrate now. That being said, I think the most important thing for a cadet to learn while they're here is courage, moral courage and physical courage, moral courage to do what's right. And I say it's to do what's right when everybody's looking.

A lot of people say, "Oh, do what's right when nobody's looking." You hear that often as a definition of character, right? I think it's actually harder many times to do what's right when

everybody's looking because the pressure is on you then to do what's right and hold to your values and hold to the things you espouse to your soldiers and so or to your fellow cadets, right?

You're going to stand up there and say, "We've got to do XYZ," or you've got to wear your uniforms the right way, or got to be a leader of character. You can sort of do that silently on your own, and you can do it to a level that may meet the standard, but not exceed the standard, but when everybody's watching you, it can be really hard. So courage, physical courage, to do what is beyond your boundaries. And we pride ourselves at West Point of challenging our cadets to do that so they're prepared to lead in the most dynamic, austere, desperate times and so I think courage is the number one thing. It is the foundation of good character. It's the foundation of your personal development. It's the foundation of your ability to develop your unit and your organization.

How do I model that every day? As commandant, one thing is I do that in my personal example is everywhere, everywhere I go. I know how difficult it is for cadets to wear uniforms, you know? And I hear about, I mean, I wear our uniform every day, yep. And so are we, and we try to maintain the same standard, really, in anything we do. I think the other thing that I do is I interact a lot with cadets, and I try to explain to them how it relates to courage and having the personal courage to make the right decision. And I'm unabashedly transparent with cadets about you asking, "What are you thinking? Why are you thinking that?" And help them think through that, and then say, "Look, you've rationalized this, but is that the right thing to do? And remember, it's going to be really hard to do when everybody's watching you." You know, you can tell me it's right to do it now, and you might be able to do it by yourself, but you've got to do it in front of everybody, because, you know what, if you do it by yourself and you fail, okay, I'll try again. I'll keep trying.

It's like being in a batting cage all by yourself. If I keep missing well, I'll just keep trying until I hit it. No one's watching me. But now you're at Wrigley Field against some of the best pitchers in the end in the National League, and everybody's watching you. And everybody watches you failed. You got to have the courage to step off and get back up there. So that's how I try to do it, and a lot of its discussion and helping cadets reflect on their on their actions and so and explain mine. A lot of kids ask me, "Why did you do this, sir?" And I have to have the courage to defend what I decide to do on behalf of the United States Corps of Cadets.

MWI: Sir, that's actually a great transition to the next question, when we're talking about mentorship, because it's such a huge cornerstone of military leadership, can you share a moment when a mentor of yours fundamentally changed your outlook and how that experience influences the way you mentor cadets?

Garcia: Now, yeah, I've had several mentors, and still have several, and I think what to my first point about a good attitude, what would all my mentors the reason they became mentors, I guess, or the reason I asked them to be my mentors? And that's a real important conversation to have with someone you know, "Will you be my mentor?" Will you help me through thinking through some things? Will you meet with me regularly? That mirrors what I valued from my very first point, having a good attitude. The mentors I had always challenged me, but at the end of it, built me up, make me feel positive about the decisions I made. That doesn't always mean they tell me what I want to hear, but at the end of the day, we've worked through something, and I feel better for engaging with them. Many of them have done that, and what came out of that was their trust in me. They started out as a boss, and I had one who, well, really, all of them, in some way, shape or form, gave me authorities that were probably beyond maybe what a normal officer at that level would get and trusted me to make the right decisions.

The one example I was going to tell you about was this: I had come from a unit and I was really ready to get out of the Army. I did okay, there I, you know, I was, I mean, I brought all my guys home. We accomplished every mission, by every sort of metric we talk about, met the standard or exceeded it. But I always felt like I was micromanaged. And I went from that job into a job that was strategic for the Army. And I was really sort of not excited about it, because I thought "I'm just going to be micromanaged. The thing this person does is really big, and I'm sure they're not going to let me do what I want with it. And I'm going to have to report all the time, and it's going to be PowerPoint information papers." And about a week into the job, I said, "Here we go," you know? And I went and I knocked on my boss's door. I said, "Sir, I probably should brief you on this situation that's developed." And he looked at me, and he said, "Okay, go ahead and brief me." And I did.

And then he said, "Okay, that's the last time you're ever going to do that." He said, "R. J., I brought you here because I trust you to make decisions, and as long as you do it legal, morally and ethically, and if you do your very best, I will back you up every time." It was like a weight was lifted off my shoulders, and it was a great job. It was a great experience. And I realized there were leaders in the Army who trusted me and trusted other officers, because that was the way he led, and he took some heat for it. There were times we did screw up, nothing, legal, illegal, immoral or unethical, but we didn't have the whole picture. We made a rapid decision, and he got called on it, and he always had our back. And that mentor is someone I always reached out to, and he would listen to me, and I would vent or talk through stuff, and he would say, "Yeah, you're pretty wrong on that one. I would do it this way, that way, but at the end of the day, I trust you, and you know, you've got to live with this decision." And I would generally always do what he said in some way, shape or form, and I always felt better about it. And that's the power of mentorship, and that's what I try to do to the folks I mentor, help them think through it from all sides that whatever they're going through in their career life, and some folks have reached out to

me on life advice. At the end of the day, you help them see it better, give them your experience and then let them make a decision and support them as they go through it.

MWI: What book idea or piece advice would you find yourself or do you find yourself recommending most often to young officers?

Garcia: I have lots of books, let me say that, but there's three that I think of often, and I give them out when I commission an officer or when cadets ask me, "What are you reading, sir?" I read a lot, and think it's an incredibly important aspect of our profession, and we think we're kind of special. But every profession really has reading requirements. It's mainly though, in sort of professional continuing education, and we trust our officers and NCOs and soldiers do it.

So the first book that I would recommend is, and people think it's because of my last name, *Message to Garcia*. It's a really quick read. In fact, it's like in pamphlet form, but it really is the message of a lieutenant who gets an assignment from the highest levels. And the lesson really is that when you get a mission, you do it, you find ways to do it, you take responsibility for do it. You don't you don't need to drag it down or rationalize your way out of it. And I won't say much more than that, although, other than it's an incredible, incredibly valuable lesson. And I would offer that once a cadet or officer reads that book, go do some research on it, understand when it was written, what our country was going through at the time it was written. It was not written recently. The author had a much higher point than talking about this lieutenant. He was really sending a message to our society, and it's a unique lesson for officers in the United States Army.

So my second book, and I was given a copy by my dad, was *Once an Eagle*. Now if you put *Message to Garcia* and *Once an Eagle* side by side, they are vastly different. And you can just tell by the number of pages, but *Once an Eagle* is about two officers in the Army, polar opposites, and their journey through a career of service and selfless service. I've actually read it twice. I'll probably read it a third time. I find it inspiring and grounding on what it means to be an Army officer, really a military officer, but it's about the Army, the struggles of our families, that the struggles are still the same when we deploy. It doesn't matter whether it's World War One, Two, Korea or Vietnam or the Global War on Terrorism, the family struggles in the same universal way. And so I value that book. I cherish it since my dad gave it to me, but I give that out too.

And then the third book, I have a copy of the Constitution, all of our founding documents and the Federalist Papers in one copy. And I didn't appreciate how inherent our service and our commission is to the Constitution and how every officer needs to understand. How it was founded, formed, developed, studied, debated, and the basic tenants of it right?

You are fighting for the Constitution. You've sworn to defend it. You should read it and understand it. I'm not asking everybody to be a constitutional lawyer on it, but you should realize that the basic rights and the premise of these founding documents that are in are there are what you fight for, not just for US citizens, but when you go forward to do our nation's bidding, you're really what you're fighting for those principles that everybody has them. And so that book, to be honest, I think it's a it's like a Barnes and Noble copy, right, that they've published, or through their editors or through their publisher, and I think you can get it anywhere. It's a tough read, you know? I mean, you know to read it all at once. It should be sort of a cornerstone to your service. And so those are the three books I would recommend,

MWI: Sir, after years of service and leadership in the army, what keeps you inspired and motivated every morning when you walk across The Plane?

Garcia: I tell people this all the time: the energy at West Point is incredible. I didn't appreciate it as a cadet, because I was a cadet, right? I mean, I was counting the days. I was not making the days count. I was counting the days, I promise you. And of course, that was our knowledge. Back to how many days to everything. And when I came back and taught in the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership (BS&L) from 2011 to 2013. It dawned on me just how much positive energy there is, right? And you could argue, well, it's not positive, there's energy, but there's an inherent positivity in energy, right? When you're seeing things happen and accomplished, right? There's a great energy.

And so I love the energy here, the one thing that keeps me going every day, after a couple of years in the military, is that I love when I see organizations be successful. I don't need to be a part of it, other than resourcing it. But I love to see when a cadet squad, platoon, Sandhurst team, the football team, whatever you can break West Point down into, a lot of different ways. Cadet company, you got the college athletics, you got the club athletics. You got clubs, whatever. I love to see them successful. I love to see them work through problems, Train for whatever they're doing, and then they're successful. You know that that is what inspires me.

I've had my time of being that cadet or being that officer. I'm very real with myself. I'm very self-aware that my purpose is to use my rank for good, to make positive change in the Army and to make people around me successful. And so I walk around a lot, and I'll ask cadets, "What are you guys doing?" They's say, "Sir, I'm training for the ACFT, and I'm just trying to do 20 more points, I'm trying to get from a 500 to a 520." Perfect. Set your goal and do it, and I'll find that cadet later and ask "What'd you get?" And they'll say, "Sir! I got a 530!" It warms my heart. It almost brings me to tears to see them do great. And there's some nuance there, right? It's not about achieving perfection. You can get there, but it's about just getting 1% better every day. At a boss who taught him just get 1% better every day. You do 50 push ups, do 51 the next day, and

just get better and so that that's where I find that I'm most useful. And that motivates me every day.

MWI: Sir, West Point is famously rigorous, physically, mentally, morally. How do you strike the balance between maintaining those high standards and making space for innovation, growth, and even failure, as you mentioned before, bringing in the younger generations.

Garcia: Sebastian, I think your question sort of implies it's one or the other. But hopefully, through all these questions, people have realized it's okay to fail. I'm going to fail, like I'll fail out at comps, PT, next Wednesday or whatever. I mean, I will have trouble, you know? I mean, there might be something that somebody throws at me, or when the Superintendent designs a PT session, man, I've never done that, and so I don't see it as sort of this polar thing that you've got to choose, right? In fact, I think the high standards come because you fail, right? You're going to have things you try to do that you don't do well, and so you've got to just accept both of them, right? And to your earlier question about courage, you know, that's how I demonstrate courage law too.

I might fail at this, but I'm going to get better doing it, and I'll get it right one day. And that's been since I was 29 June, 1992 when I showed up, that was my R-Day, a day that will live in infamy in my mind. You know, I remember it, and I started failing immediately. What I learned from all that is, you'll get the high standards if you just keep trying. So I don't see it as sort of this, how do I do it while, you know, still doing it, I just do it, and I just fail, and then I fail better, and I get better.

MWI: Thank you, sir. You mentioned this really early on in this discussion, but when you were a cadet, did you ever see yourself coming back here in a leadership position?

Garcia: (emphatically) NO. No. Not, certainly not as the commandant. I thought I could teach here, but I just thought I was never going to serve long enough to do it. I had three commandants. I keep in touch with one of them pretty regularly. He's a wonderful man, a wonderful officer, wonderful role model. I didn't know the Supe. I don't even know who the BTO was when I was a cadet, I could not give you his name again. I told you in the beginning I wasn't a bad cadet, but I wasn't a great cadet. My TAC officer wasn't the enemy, but he wasn't an ally either. He just was kind of a third party that I operated around. And so I just did my job and went to class and got my 2.0 and "Cs get degrees," and I was going to move out.

Where I sort of changed as a cadet was in a summer detail called drill cadet leader training, which we don't do anymore, and I don't know why, but it's surprising how many graduates I've talked to who did it and say it was an incredible experience for them. And so what we used to do

is send cadets to basic training, and they would augment drill sergeants. And so they had three drill sergeants, and I was sort of the fourth. I wasn't a drill sergeant, but I was the fourth to help. And so, so that was going into my cow year. When I was a plebe, I didn't know anything. When I was a yearling who was just glad not to be a plebe. I was the typical Yuck, you know. I was probably the picture in the definition. And then I went there, and those drill sergeants believed in me, and I realized I could do it, like I could get in front of soldiers, and I knew what to do.

And so I gained a confidence in West Point that West Point taught me everything to do, like, I get this. And then I gained a confidence that not only could be what West Point taught me, but I had sort of the agility in my mind to figure things out, you know. And it just started making sense to me, you know, like, "Okay, well, I'll go the manual, I'll read it," or whatever. And so I came back a much better cadet. It was a little late, right? You're not halfway through, and the ship hadn't set sail, but it was definitely loaded with enough equipment that there was a little, just enough room for me, right, but not enough room to grow.

And so I kind of left there thinking, well, I left West Point, okay, I'll be a good officer. I'll be a decent officer, you know, but I'm going to get out, but the commandant? No, I'm never going to be the commandant. That all being said, I love my job. I feel blessed that I'm the commandant that people saw in me and trusted me. The leadership of the army trusted me to come back here and interact, develop, be a role model for cadets to make tough decisions. I'm blessed beyond words to be here, so I'm very excited about it. Wouldn't change the thing.

MWI: Regarding your return to West Point, was there anything in particular that brought you back as a BS&L instructor?

Garcia: Well, no. I mean I got a C- in PL300, one of BS&L main courses. And I'm sure my instructor thought I was not a very smart cadet. He was a genius, and there's actually an award named after him. He passed away, actually, while I was a cadet. I didn't realize how smart he was and how much he really cared. I mean, just had very high standards he held you to. So I thought I would never go to BS&L. And then I got an email when I was deployed that said, "Hey, you got recommended, you'd be really good in BS&L." But I was deployed, and I wasn't leaving my guys. I mean, we just got to Iraq, Baghdad had just fallen in 2003. I said, "Hey, thanks. It's just, I'm not leaving, can I do this in another year?" They said, "No, the timing won't work out." And so I thought hat the opportunity had passed. And then I got a call when I was a brigade XO. So I taught at West Point, at a real odd time, I taught here and then went to squadron command as lieutenant colonel, most junior faculty rotators come here after company command and then go on to CGSC and to be an S3 or XO at a battalion.

And so I was sort of on the backside of that, and a former boss, retired Brigadier General Bernie Banks, who I had worked for, said, "Hey, I saw your name, and I really think you'd be really

good for the department." And I already have a master's degree, which I'd earned through another opportunity. And I said let me check with my wife, and I all I said was "West Point," and

she's like, yes, we're going there, because I deployed a lot and was pretty busy. And she thought it'd be good for our family, and it was. And so that's how I got to BS&L.

I thought if I was ever going to teach anywhere, maybe in the civil engineering department, but that's if they had really got to the bottom of my cohort, because, like I said, I got through civil engineering and I passed my fundamentals of engineering exam, and I never looked at it again. So that's how I got to BS&L. And I'll tell you, I loved every day there. It made me a better officer. Pro tip cadets, you push your instructors really hard, right? I mean, one of the hardest things I've done in my career is get up in front of 20 skeptical cadets and take on the challenge, demonstrate the courage to your earlier question, to prove a leadership philosophy. And some, some cadets, all cadets, are really smart, and so you have to have your A game every day. And so I feel blessed to have done that and to have that opportunity and done it.

MWI: Fantastic, sir. It seems like it all worked out for the best.

Garcia: It worked out for the best. Yeah, perfect, good. No doubt.

MWI: So sir, all those questions were specifically tailored to you and your experience, but we have one question at the end that we ask every guest that's on the Five Wuestions for a General podcast. Knowing what you know now, with all your career experiences, what advice would you give?

Garcia: (thoughtfully) That's a great question. I think what I've learned across 29 years in the Army and through my time at West Point that I didn't quite appreciate is, that it's all about people. And I probably figured that out around the 10 year, 11 year mark in the Army, and that's not a criticism of our Army, our Army was trying to tell me that, and I didn't quite figure the lesson out. It is really all about people. And that's not to say that it's making life easy for people.

We do something that is very difficult, physically, morally, and it takes a lot of judgment, and it takes a lot of effort to do to be really good at being a soldier in the United States Army. And if you can understand the people part of it, the relationships, which I talked about, the three things right, take care of your people. Take care of equipment, make sure they're trained and ready. Two of those are really about the people. Right, take care of them and make sure they're trained and ready, and if you can do that, you will be successful at anything. You'll be successful in the Army. You'll be successful as a parent and as a spouse. You'll be successful after the Army in a boardroom or in an operating room or in a courtroom. You really have to understand it's all about people and connections, and relationships.

It doesn't make it doesn't mean you can get rid of the standard. It doesn't mean that you can take shortcuts. It just means that you've got to make sure everyone understands what's going on, that you communicate goals, mission, purpose, intent. You can communicate a vision. You can hear their concerns about accomplishing the vision, the mission, the goals, the purpose, the end state. And if you can do that in all facets of their professional and personal lives, right as a soldier, you'll be successful.

MWI: General Garcia, thank you for sharing your time with us today for the great discussion on leader development. On behalf of Colonel Pat Sullivan, the director of MWI, and Dr Charlie Faint, the director of this podcast series, I'd like to present you with this rare and coveted MWI coin.

Garcia: Well, I really appreciate it. Sebastian, thank you guys for having me, and I've really enjoyed my time talking to you. Good luck to you.

Send Me: The True Story of a Mother at War
by Joe Kent and Marty Skovlund, Jr.
reviewed by Marshall McGurk

Linguist, artist, sailor, wife, mother, cancer survivor, special operations warrior: Chief Petty Officer Shannon Kent held many titles throughout her life. A pathfinder for women in Naval cryptologic intelligence, Naval Special Warfare, and the Joint Special Operations Command, Kent's life, and ultimately the final mission that ended it, are compellingly chronicled in *Send Me*. This biographical account adds to the growing literature on women in combat, and for this reason alone it is important and worth reading. But it also offers so much more.

Send Me begins with one of Kent's final missions in Syria. The authors, both of whom are veterans of the Army's special operations community, set the tension well. In the book's early pages the reader discovers how Kent's work and the work of her team played a role in the killing of notorious ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The book draws a direct line from Kent's intelligence gathering and al-Baghdadi's demise. The assertion, although not confirmed by the DoD review process, is plausible and compelling.

After some initial scene-setting, the book moves back to then-Shannon Smith's early life in Pine Plains, New York. A lover of horses, she learns Spanish to talk with the stable hands, an early sign of her language proficiency and drive for excellence. She not only learns their language but also learns their craft, never shying away from working as a stable hand or doing dirty jobs. After her brother joined the Marine Corps, Shannon enlisted in the Navy in 2003. Following exemplary performance during her initial intelligence and language schooling, she volunteered to support the Navy SEALs in 2007. From there, her pursuit of excellence went into overdrive.

Kent assessed into a highly-specialized special operations support team with flying colors and earned a reputation for toughness and humility. From there she secured a permanent position with Naval Special Warfare Support Activity Two. In 2010 she was named both the Navy and DoD's Language Professional of the Year. Always searching to do more in service to the nation and driven by the challenges of fighting terrorism, she was assessed for a national special mission unit position supporting the National Security Agency. Along the way, she mentored other women entering intelligence analysis and special operations, serving as both pathfinder and waypoint for their own journeys. As her career in special operations progressed, she participated in increasingly important and more dangerous missions until a suicide bomber ultimately took her life.

The emotional weight of the book is palpable. Right from the beginning, the reader knows Chief Petty Officer Shannon Kent, along with Chief Warrant Two Jonathan R. Farmer, DIA operations support specialist Scott Wirtz, and civilian interpreter Ghadir Taher died on January 16, 2019 in

Manbij, Syria. With each page you find yourself rooting for Shannon, her success, and her growing family, despite knowing the outcome. The apprehension built into the text is more remarkable when you consider her widower, Joe Kent, is a co-author.

Key to the book's authenticity is its portrayal of controversial topics, such as the suicide of Commander Job Price, incidents of sexual harassment, and societal expectations regarding motherhood and women in combat. After Commander Price's death, Kent resolves to use connection as an antidote to loneliness. She connects sailors with mental health and hospital resources. She is trusted by her subordinates and peers. She invested further into behavioral healthcare by applying to become a Navy psychiatrist. She was denied for the program due to a previous bout with thyroid cancer, and from there, Shannon's path seems set towards more deployments and eventually Manbij. Readers may see the Navy's denial due to a previous thyroid diagnosis as a bureaucratic madness, but even in death Shannon Kent showed the power of one person lobbying for change. After her death, the Navy changed its medical waiver process.

Send Me beautifully honors the richness of Shannon Kent's life and talents. There is vulnerability in her detailing her relationship with Joe Kent, a Green Beret and fellow special mission unit operator, and the births of their two sons. Shannon Kent doesn't come off as a driven automaton; she's equally comfortable smoking with local sheiks, drinking beers with fellow sailors, or lobbying Navy leaders for change. She's able to manage military service, hobbies, intellectual pursuits, and a growing family. Women and men alike will feel inspired by Shannon Kent's story.

There is little to find fault with inside the book. However, I find the subtitle, "A true story of a mother at war," to be a potential missed opportunity. Most of Chief Petty Officer Kent's accolades as an intelligence analyst and operator were received before she became a wife or a mother. By removing her name from the cover, it prevents a new reader from leaning forward into their curiosity about Chief Petty Officer Shannon Kent versus an anonymous "mother at war." Nevertheless, the tagline does not detract from the book. In a way, the title harkens to the discussions Joe and Shannon Kent had as they dealt with dual military special operations service as parents. The insight into Shannon Kent's marriage to Joe Kent, a US Army Special Forces Green Beret is most welcome. It further humanizes Shannon and forces the reader to reflect on their own opinions about women in the military, and the cost of war.

There were some great insights into the nuances of the special operations community throughout the book, and the authors were upfront about the review process they encountered in working with both the Department of Defense and the intelligence community. As one might expect when writing about special operations, minor redactions—black bands over words and phrases— pepper the middle chapters. But these redactions add to, rather than detract from, the book's

overall authenticity. *Send Me* is evenly-written and fast-paced, alternating between Shannon's home life, education and assessments, and deployments to the Middle East.

Send Me's epilogue revisits Manbij, the fractured nature of ISIS, and Shannon Kent's family. As of the writing of this review, US troops remain in Syria and Iraq but the Islamic State is on its heels as a global terrorist organization. Its leadership has been decimated and it no longer holds large swaths of territory in Syria, Northern Africa, or Asia. Shannon Kent's intelligence work was part of the larger coalition that defeated the ISIS network. The award for Navy Language Professional of the Year is named in her honor, as is the Navy Yard at the Presidio in Monterrey, California, the home of the Defense Language Institute.

The final line of the book states, "The world is a better place because Shannon Kent made her mark."

May we all aspire to such a fitting tribute.

Marshall McGurk is an active-duty Special Forces officer and a 2025 Non-Resident Fellow with the Irregular Warfare Initiative.

Walk in My Combat Boots

by James Patterson and Matt Eversmann
reviewed by Benjamin Phocas

The military is a community of otherwise average individuals from all walks of life, every color and creed, who, for one reason or another raised their right hand in defense of the nation. In any other situation, these differences could drive people apart, but the military forces them together. For many in uniform, their closest comrades in arms are those who look and act nothing like them. The bonds forged in shared hardship are strong. For many veteran writers, their reason for joining started on 9/11, and many of them devote a section of their story to that day. Some were there, sorting through the wreckage. Others lost family members. For millions more Americans, it was an attack on our nation and our identity. It was personal.

The military experience of the past twenty years is not something easily explained or encapsulated in a single book. Yet *Walk in My Combat Boots* manages to be the complete autobiography of the men and women who fought the Global War on Terror (GWOT). The stories told throughout this book are raw. They show the unpolished view of life in the military, both in brutal combat and behind the front lines. There is much to unpack from these stories, and each author writes with a different purpose and for a different audience.

Every reader will interpret each story differently. My personal understanding is limited to my experience thus far in the Army. I have never been under fire, I was barely alive when planes hit the Twin Towers, I have not suffered the effects of PTSD. I have done my best to write my interpretations of the major ideas presented throughout these stories that come together to make up a unified image of life in the military during the GWOT.

Regardless of whether a soldier carries a machine gun or a ballpoint pen and a clipboard, their job matters. The infantryman cannot fire their weapon unless properly supplied by the logistician, who in turn cannot send those supplies without the truck drivers, who in turn cannot drive the supplies unless the fuel specialists have done their job, who cannot do their job unless the Air Force pilots are able to fly the supplies to them. The connections are endless. This vast network can only function if every member does their job. If anyone takes even just one day off, the network falls out of sync, and in a combat zone, people can die. The military is a team, and each member must rely on their teammates to work together to accomplish the mission. Every member of the team must constantly train, because in combat, being the second-best team on the field means dying. Those are the kinds of lessons that this book brings to light.

Another key theme is that quitting is simply not an option. For instance, US Marine Staff Sergeant Lisa Bodenburg and retired US Army Staff Sergeant Jon Eyton both write about their

long journeys, which include Bodenburg becoming one of the first female door gunners in the entire Marine Corps, and for Eyton, to simply survive financial turmoil. In both cases, the writers make it abundantly clear that quitting is not an option. As they explain, that attitude is ingrained from the moment a recruit steps on the proverbial yellow footprints at basic training. At no point is it ever acceptable to concede defeat. To concede defeat is to admit failure, and failure means death in combat.

These stories do not spare details of the reality of war, and the writers do not waste words being polite. War is violent and brutal and ugly. What one sees and does in combat does not always line up with the values of civilization. Generations of soldiers have been affected by the horrors they witness, but for centuries, it has remained a silent struggle. Throughout this book, the writers are open about their struggles with mental health. They want the readers to know that there is no shame in struggling with PTSD, and that asking for help is not a weakness, but a strength.

Throughout the book, the reader is exposed to the realities of combat and the military experience as a whole. Whether they are civilian or military, there are takeaways for every reader. I could personally connect with many of the author's situations and feelings, and I walked away from the book with a much deeper understanding of my situation. I think *Walk in my Combat Boots* is a book that can and should be read by anyone, civilian or military, interested in gaining a much deeper understanding of the culture and lifestyle of the US military.

Second Lieutenant Ben Phocas is a US Army armor officer and 2024 graduate of West Point with a bachelor's degree in Defense and Strategic Studies.

The Five Tribes of Army Special Operations Forces: A Fictional Tale

Daniel Lee, Noah Jenkins, Mitch Campbell, and Giovanni Biondo

Editor's Note: Fictional intelligence, or FICINT, also known as "useful fiction," is a term used to describe a genre of writing that combines fictional storytelling and real-life data to convey national security ideas. In this piece, four West Point cadets use a fictional account of a West Point cadet's day to explain West Point's "Branch Week" and the functions of the Army's special operations forces (ARSOF) units.

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BEEP-BEEP-BEEP- BEEP-BEEP-BEEP- BEEP-BEEP-BEEP- BEEP-BEEP-BEEP

Ryan groaned as he turned to shut his alarm off. He slammed his hand on the clock's snooze button, attempting to sneak in an extra five minutes of sleep. As he closed his eyes, his window blinds suddenly began sliding open.

"Ryan, get up! They just started calling the tenth minute!"

Ryan's eyes flew open as he jumped out of bed. His roommate, Jae, was standing by the window, fumbling to button up his As For Class shirt. He could finally hear the Plebes in his company calling their minutes in the all-too-familiar drawl through the door.

"The uniform is… As For Class. For breakfast…"

The two roommates rushed to throw their uniforms on and clean up the room to room inspection standards. Miraculously, Ryan and Jae made it on time, surprisingly, to morning formation. Following formation and breakfast in the mess hall, Ryan headed to his first (and thankfully) only class of the day in the new Cyber and Engineering Academic Center (CEAC) building. His other classes' instructors had preplanned course drops that day to allow the cadets to walk around and explore one of the Cadets' favorite weeks at West Point, Branch Week.

Branch Week was a decades-long tradition for the Academy where all of the different Army branches set up informational booths around Cadet Area and showed off their respective jobs to cadets. It serves as a prime opportunity for branches to recruit future officers, and for cadets to learn about their future career. Ryan made a mental note to make sure to stop by some of the branches after he finished class.

Ryan's only class in the CEAC building was for his core engineering track, Cyber Engineering. He was in his final class of the track, CY450: Cybersecurity, and although it was early in the semester, Ryan was excited to see what the class had in store for him. For example, that day's lesson was on the concept of artificial intelligence (AI) and its impact on the cyber domain of warfighting.

As Ryan walked by The Apron he spotted a set of tents tucked near the corner. What caught his eye was the logo on the tent, a black dagger set inside of a red arrowhead with an airborne tab

above – the signature logo of the US Army's Special Operations Command.

"Good morning, sir." Ryan greeted the captain standing near the tent with a crisp salute.

"Hey, good morning, Cadet Walker!" The captain gave a quick salute back and reached his hand out for a handshake. "Welcome to the ARSOF tent, do you have any interest in our organization?"

Ryan gave a quick glance around the tent. Several other officers and NCOs were already talking to different groups of cadets, their distinctive variety of berets showing which specific part of the organization they belonged to. The captain he was talking to had the famous green beret on, and a long tab on his shoulder read "Special Forces."

"Yes, sir! Although I don't know too much about ARSOF, and I'm not entirely sure what it does."

"No problem, I can give you a quick rundown of what we like to call the Five Tribes of ARSOF. First up is none other than US Special Forces, or Green Berets as we're most commonly known." The captain smiled as he pointed at his own. "Green Berets operate in small teams known as operational detachment-alphas, or ODAs, with a focus on unconventional warfare. The major focus for the past few decades has been working by, with, and through partner forces all across the world to set the theater in case of future conflict. We've been building a wide web of sorts to build the resilience capabilities of our partners and to deter threats from our adversaries.

The other tribes also conduct operations to do the same. Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations teams usually embed with us in nation or region-specific task forces to help enable the overall mission. Civil Affairs operators are usually the ones who work with partner governments to build those resilience capabilities, while PSYOP operators work mostly behind the scenes to spread our message all over the world. Of course, the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment is our ride to wherever we need to go, even into denied areas. They are masters of their airframes and absolute professionals. You can see some of their aircraft on the field."

Ryan looked out across to The Plain where several helicopters were parked. He could see groups of cadets posing next to them for pictures, one was even sitting in the gunner's seat on one helicopter. It was tradition for cadets to take pictures by the helicopters every year during Branch Week, and Ryan intended to finish his four-year streak with some later with his friends.

"Our final tribe is the 75th Ranger Regiment, the premier light infantry unit in the world. These are the guys that go and deal with threats when they do appear, usually identified with our intelligence and vast deterrence web I mentioned earlier." As the captain finished, Ryan noticed another cadet had joined their group somewhere during the explanation. He recognized him as another cadet in the War Studies major, the same as himself. The other cadet posed another question.

"Sir, I was wondering if you could talk about some of the advanced capabilities you have? Maybe involving how you deal with the threat of ubiquitous surveillance considering ARSOF often works in denied environments." Ryan was impressed; the cadet had clearly previously studied ARSOF before.

"Absolutely," the captain replied. "Integrated into many of our teams are tactical-level cyber and space operators who help secure those domains from our adversaries. They began creating these jobs a couple of decades ago now, and have successfully enhanced our capabilities from the tactical to strategic levels. They often work to deny our adversary access to our area of operations or disrupt their communications networks to prevent or confuse their intelligence gathering."

"They can also go on the offensive and conduct attacks against adversarial critical infrastructure if need be," he continued. "Most of all, these cyber and space operators can work with our partner forces to build up their own capabilities. We often use AI to gather and analyze data from various sensors we have created with these partner forces, and it can help make decisions for targeting threats and opportunities. With humans making the ultimate decision, of course."

Ryan thought back to earlier that morning in his cybersecurity class. He had learned about the concept of humans in the loop, and how AI had been used for years to supplement human decision-making in the military. As Ryan was deep in thought, he glanced at his watch and realized it was already 1150, time for lunch formation.

"Sir, thank you for taking the time to talk to us, but we've got lunch formation," said Ryan as he offered another salute. The Green Beret saluted back.

"No problem. Hope you all learned something about ARSOF today, and I hope to see you in our organization someday! *Sine Pari*."

Daniel Lee, Noah Jenkins, Mitch Campbell, and Giovanni Biondo are graduates of West Point's Class of 2025. This story was submitted as part of a project in the Defense and Strategic Studies major while they were cadets.

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