Ash Carter and the Rolling Stones Rule of Leadership

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In 2015, the Department of Defense will have a new secretary. Assuming a successful confirmation process, Dr. Ash Carter will be taking that position. He will face a multitude of immediate challenges, some old and some new. Given his extensive background and experience, Dr. Carter will likely bring some ideas with him about how the department can be improved. As he plans his tenure, however, Dr. Carter might want to consider how his priorities will be affected by the realities of time and circumstance.

In the time that he will be Secretary of Defense, Dr. Carter might consider what I call the Rolling Stones Rule of Leadership. As Mick Jagger and Keith Richards have noted, “you can’t always get what you want, but if you try sometimes, you just might find you get what you need.” Paraphrasing this counsel, the Rolling Stones Rule of Leadership is, “you can’t always do what you want, but if you try sometimes, you can still do something important.”

This rule is a recognition that what you want to do is unavoidably affected by what you can do. In a perfect world, a leader’s only limitations are that there are only twenty-four hours in a day and that a person cannot be two places at the same time. Yet because we do not live in a perfect world, having the desire and ability to affect change are not always enough to overcome the reality of the context in which leaders find themselves. This concept can be further distilled into the consideration of three basic tenets: priorities, time, and circumstance.

Priorities are necessary for any leader, but achieving significant change is not just a matter of refining priorities. As in all aspects of life, good intentions are not enough, which is the difference between having a “to do” list and actually getting things done. While refining priorities is a necessary aspect of achieving change, it is not sufficient.

Reality dictates that all leaders are bound by the tyranny of time, particularly leaders of federal agencies. Steve Jobs, Jack Welch, and Bill Gates had decades at the top of their organizations, but this is not the case for a leader of a federal agency whose average time in charge is just over three years. Dr. Carter’s biggest national security challenges, such as implementing a new strategy in the Asia-Pacific region and dealing with a belligerent Vladimir Putin, will likely far outlast his tenure, and for these, Dr. Carter will succeed by helping to set a solid foundation on which his successors can build.

Circumstance is the other limiting factor, and for leaders of federal agencies, this is usually driven by politics. Given that the next two years will likely be a constant jockeying for position in the 2016 elections, Dr. Carter’s only guarantee is that any significant action, regardless of its rightness, will likely come under criticism from one party or the other. More broadly, the American people have little interest in direct involvement in the world’s current hot spots. Given these realities, Dr. Carter will be bound by the circumstance of being secretary of defense under a president in his last two years of office whose party is in the minority of both houses of Congress with an American public that is tired of conflict.

However, Dr. Carter will still have opportunities to make a positive impact on the department. Day-to-day tasks can be handily dealt with by the ever-capable deputy secretary of defense, but some issues can only be sufficiently addressed by the secretary. While no one who has not served in the position can fully appreciate the travail of being secretary of defense, the challenges facing the organization are palpable. Thus, I believe three issues merit Dr. Carter’s attention. Like the other major challenges of the day, they cannot necessarily be fixed in the next two years, but Dr. Carter’s attention can move the department in a positive direction and establish a solid foundation for long-term success.

First, the department should focus on effectively communicating its activities to Congress and the American public. As Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey articulated in November, the department must be able
to explain to civilian leaders and the public how having options to meet the myriad national security challenges of the future is worth the costs. Addressing Chinese cyber attacks is very different from countering the threat of ISIL in Iraq, and they require very different responses. Effective communication, though, is about more than the budget — it is about building trust and confidence with political leadership and the American people.

Second, the Department of Defense must continue to build long-term relationships with allies and partners. Warfare will always be a human endeavor, and the success of coalitions of the future rest in the ability of individuals to make connections with other individuals from different nations and cultures. To this end, the Army’s Regionally Aligned Forces policy is not an esoteric organizational plan, but rather an investment in the skills and experience of individual soldiers to work with the people who are training partners today but may be comrades-in-arms tomorrow. Dr. Carter’s previous travels around the world set an excellent precedent.

Finally, there may be a unique opening to improve how the department buys weapons and equipment. Dr. Carter’s expertise in this area is recognized, and he has first-hand experience with how the acquisition process has affected soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan. Politically, the new leadership of the Congressional Armed Services committees may provide for a bipartisan opening facilitated by those leaders’ own priorities and personalities. Given the impending conflict over the defense budget and sequestration, a short time horizon may help focus executive and congressional attention and facilitate some improvement. In progress as in constraint, time and circumstance have real impacts on leaders.

Thus, achieving important change is not just about what a leader wants to do, it is also about the limitations imposed by time and circumstance. This is a lesson for leaders, as well as an important lesson for the rest of us — our expectations of them should not outpace their reality. Yet even though the Rolling Stones remind us that what we want and what we need are not necessarily the same thing, the Department of Defense might have both in an experienced and capable leader like Ash Carter.

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