Alexander the Great

Military Leaders and Global Leaders: Contrasts, Contradictions, and Opportunities

By Anthony J. DiBella

Leadership has long been a focal point of human curiosity but has recently gathered even more attention. As globalization becomes increasingly the dominant force in political, social, and economic affairs, leaders far and wide are being called upon to take on new roles and address emergent challenges. This trend may be most prominent in the arena of national security. In particular, military leaders must now interact with a broader range of social communities as engagements span national and cultural boundaries.[1] While in the past, national militaries or their forces or branches acted alone, most of today's engagements involve coalitions, "partners", or joint forces. How do the traditional traits and characteristics of military leaders align with this new environment? This paper will examine several traits or characteristics of military leaders, compare them to those of other global leaders, and suggest ways to prepare military leaders for global leadership roles that go beyond parochial interests.

Military Leaders: Character and Skills

Over the years, there has been a greater focus on what makes for good leadership as research results converge on the key traits, attributes, and prerequisites of effective leaders. At the same time, there has been a shared recognition that effective leadership combines elements of both art and science. The science derives from a process of identifying required leadership skills and building educational programs to promote those skills. The art of leadership derives from certain apparently innate attributes or traits such as perseverance or conviction. For leaders to be truly effective, they must have not just skills (competencies) or traits (characteristics), but both.[2]

The study of military leadership has itself a lengthy history. Among its recurring themes is, "big man theory," according to which there are

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certain individuals just born to be military leaders, from Alexander the Great to Napoleon to George Patton. When it comes to the nature of military leadership in today's national security environment, there are several traits that appear to be universally essential. Among them are the propensity to make good decisions quickly, the capacity to act with conviction, and the ability to take a position, be it of policy or strategy, and compel it on others.[3] Each of these characteristics is distinctive, but in the conduct of leading others they are not simply complementary but synergistic as well.

Making Decisions Quickly

Battles may be won or lost at a moment's notice. When the circumstances arrive to attack (or retreat), an effective military leader must not delay but decide on a course of action and begin to implement it. If there is one trait that can undermine one's regard for a military leader, it is the inability to make a timely decision and then act quickly on the basis of that decision. Some of the explanations for why the U.S. Civil War lasted so long point to the indecisiveness of General George McClellan and his hesitation to take action against the Army of Northern Virginia despite the disproportionate power of the Union Army.

Acting with Conviction

Decisions facing military leaders at the strategic, operational, or tactical level often have clear and direct implications for the health and well being of those under their command. One of the simple definitions of a leader is someone who has followers. Followers engage with leaders who are able to communicate the correctness of their decisions, and thus evoke within followers the strong sense or faith that the right course of action is being taken.[4] A commander who is unable to demonstrate or show conviction is less apt to have followers who implement their orders with zeal, especially if their lives depend on the outcome. When General Robert E. Lee ordered the charge of Pickett's brigade up Cemetery Ridge at the battle of Gettysburg in 1863, he demonstrated conviction that the direct attack would break the Union line.[5] The greater the sense of conviction a military commander projects, the greater will be the sense of confidence the commander instills. At the same time, that orientation may lead to a lower capacity for self-correction.

Advocating and Imposing a Clear Position

Effective leadership in battle can be defined as the ability to impose one's will on the enemy. This capacity derives from knowing what one wants to do or having a definitive opinion on a topic, strategy, or course of action. This trait carries over from the battlefield to the war rooms of the Pentagon. Officers who hold, advocate for, or are able to impose their views on others usually command greater respect and hold more power than those who exhibit uncertainty or ambivalence. This orientation tends to lead to binary thinking – right or wrong, my way or the highway. However, it is regarded as a virtue as it provides a leader with the "steadfastness and resolve" needed to pursue a course of action that may have serious consequences to life and limb.[6] This trait reinforces one's capacity to act with conviction. It is much easier to have conviction when you see the world in only one way; and when you see the world in only one way, it is much easier to advocate for the way you see it!

One of the major criticisms that may be directed to anyone in a position of leadership, or who aspires to leadership, is being ambivalent or, as we say in the United States "wishy-washy" or a "flip-flop." Better to hold a position and stand by it than to change one's position and risk the impression that one cannot be counted on to hold one's ground against the opinions or influences of others. According to Chris Argyris, this trait explains why it is difficult to teach smart people new things.[7] Smart people often tend to focus on, and argue for, the correctness of their position and are closed to the opinions and perspectives of others. To do otherwise would be taken as a sign of weakness.

These three leadership traits – timely decision-making, having conviction, and advocating a clear point-of-view – are valued in military culture in general and in American military culture in particular. While these traits are all admirable and constructive in certain contexts, today's national security environment presents a different and more challenging set of circumstances than those of the past. Effective leadership therein necessitates the application of a different skill set.

Essential Attributes of Global Leaders

As the international economy expands and globalization becomes a dominant force in many industries, the latest focal point in leadership research has been the need for "global leaders." Such individuals are able to function across cultural or national divides to lead partnerships or coalitions of diverse actors. Here too one can see a great deal of convergence.[8] While there are many theories, frameworks, or models of and for global leadership, three attributes that are characteristic of most if not all of them: the ability to tolerate ambiguity; inquisitiveness or curiosity; and the ability to manage paradox or embrace duality.[9]

Tolerance of Ambiguity

The French scientist and theologian Blaise Pascal once claimed that, "a truth on one side of the Pyrenees is a falsehood on the other." Anyone who has ever worked or traveled cross-cultural divides can understand the meaning and relevance of Pascal's insight. People from different cultures view the world from differing sets of assumptions. At a minimum, global leaders must be able to acknowledge different views of reality, and better yet to incorporate them into their leadership and decision-making processes.

Ambiguity stems from the recognition that there are multiple ways to look at or understand a problem or situation. While the principles of mathematics and science may be universal, the truth regarding assumptions or values comes in many sizes and shapes. Accepting this premise means that when it comes to problems or situations involving people, there is more than one possible answer.

Mitigating ambiguity means suspending judgment and decision-making until more facts are known, or more interpretations or perspectives are articulated. It means waiting until there is greater clarity in the decision-making environment or a greater number of options or choices are available. In effect, the leader must keep from making a decision until the best decision or at least a better decision is found. Tolerating ambiguity requires patience and being comfortable with the anxiety and uncertainty of not knowing what is to be done. Lack of this skill often leads to what is known as, "rush to judgment;" on the other hand, too much leads to, "paralysis from analysis."

However, in positions of senior leadership, the most challenging problems and difficult questions are the ambiguous ones. Effective global leaders are able to accept and grapple with uncertainty for as long as it takes to fully understand the problem and its solution. Global leaders are able to fend off social or political pressures to act hastily, an orientation that can propel a leader to solve the problem of ambiguity but to make a decision prematurely.

Inquisitiveness or Curiosity

An inquisitive person is continually trying to better understand the world and all the things in it. By definition, an inquisitive person makes a habit of being in inquiry mode; perennially open to the environment while searching and looking for new, more, or better information. That may mean being pro-active and asking a lot of questions or simply being receptive to what is going on around them. Perhaps the person is simply curious about how something works or what it would be like to have an experience that differs from the normal routine or repertoire.

Being inquisitive means more than asking questions or seeking answers; it means having a mind that is open to new and different ideas. It means suspending judgment to first understand differences or new ways of thinking or doing. Yet

more critically, to be inquisitive or to practice curiosity requires a person to refrain from being in action. That is, the more involved a person is in doing something, whether it is making a decision or implementing it, the less they are able to acquire and process information that comes from being curious. This distinction highlights the balance between action versus inquiry and the cultural balance between the two. In the U.S., we are far more action than inquiry oriented as reflected in the proverbial saying, "don't just stand there, do something." There is also something in the dynamic relationship that exists between follower and leader. Followers look to their leaders for answers not questions.

Embracing Duality and Difference

When acting in a global context a leader is sure to face situations involving differences in culture, perspectives, and points of view. A key attribute of effective global leaders is the capacity to recognize that no individual, or culture has a monopoly on the truth. Indeed, there is usually some truth and validity to every point of view. To lead in that context requires an individual to acknowledge, accept, and embrace different perspectives.

Acknowledgment and recognition, however, represent just the first step. To truly lead, an individual must bring people together; one fundamental way of doing so is to embrace duality and integrate differences.[10] The dilemma comes from the contrasting points of view reflected between different cultures. The effective global leader can recognize some truthfulness in every point of view and come up with a more robust understanding of the problem or solution than what can be offered from a singular perspective. By integrating differences, a leader can demonstrate respect for different points of view and promote solutions or courses of action that have greater acceptance. Leaders must, to quote Thad Allen, former Commandant of U.S. Coast Guard, " […] learn how to unite those who have a consequential role in the outcomes we seek regardless of their role or affiliation […] we

must be effective within a political process without becoming political."[11]

While each of these three traits, tolerance of ambiguity, inquisitiveness, and the ability to embrace duality, is distinctive, there is a synergy between them. To be inquisitive suggests that a person is not zealous or righteous or arrogant about some act, attitude, or belief. It means that a person acts or lives with some degree of uncertainty and can tolerate the discomfort that comes from not knowing the answer to some question or how some experience "feels." To acknowledge and integrate differences requires not only the capacity to be uncertain about the truth, but also an appreciation of the fact that two heads (or perspectives) may be better than one.

Global Leaders Versus Military Leaders

When you compare the three traits of military leaders previously described with the three typical traits of global leaders, some intriguing and perhaps disturbing contrasts can be made. Table 1 highlights these distinctions. While the two sets could be seen as contradictory, they could also be viewed as complementary.

While a military leader must be decisive, the global leader must be inquisitive. In a military situation, too much inquisitiveness or inquiry can delay deciding on a course of action beyond its period of usefulness. For a global leader to understand and integrate different points of view, he must take time to inquire about what those perspectives actually are.

Given the risks and consequences of their decisions, military leaders are understandably intolerant of ambiguity. While a military leader must demonstrate conviction in his decisions and actions, the global leader must acknowledge the uncertainty and ambiguity reflected in any culturally complex situation. A military leader must simplify circumstances and project confidence in what the situation demands. A global leader must recognize multiple and possibly conflicting ways of framing a situation each of which suggest a range

Table 1: Contrasting Set of Leadership Traits & Skills	
"A"	"B"
Military Leaders	Global Leaders
Decisive	Inquisitive
Act with Conviction	Act with Uncertainty
Advocate	Integrate

of responses. As the supreme commander of allied forces during WWII, General Dwight Eisenhower exhibited both competencies by tolerating the uncertainty of when to commence D-Day and projecting confidence that the attack would succeed once he authorized its start.[12]

What is expected of the military leader is the ability to control, dictate, or advocate a particular position, while the global leader is looking to integrate multiple positions or points of view into one that can be universally shared. In the command and control environment of military culture, which rewards those who follow orders without questioning, multiple points of view need not be a major concern to a person in command. For the military leader, differences of opinion can be ignored or worse seen as a threat, whereas for a global leader they are an opportunity. In acting with conviction, military leaders are apt to foster a climate that constrains the sense of openness required for the sharing of alternative perspectives. Military leaders are also expected to advocate positions that are consistent with or advantageous to their primary loyalty which is often to their own country rather than to some global coalition.

While the three characteristics of military leaders would seem to be in conflict with the three skills of global leaders, effective leadership really requires a balance of both. Research supports the view that some traits of military leaders taken to an extreme can be destructive. In a study on leadership and subordinate satisfaction, survey respondents identified as the most common negative behaviors the tendency for leaders to, "impose his or her solution," "insist on one solution," "force acceptance of his or her point of view," "would not take no for an answer," and "demand to get his or her way."[13] In effect, when military leaders use their formal authority or position to bully subordinates and impose a decision or position, their effectiveness and credibility are compromised.

Even Clausewitz seems to recognize that while it is good for military leaders to stick to a specific position that should not lead to overconfidence and resisting input from others.[14] For example, Dwight Eisenhower was an effective leader for Operation Overlord precisely because of his capacity to hear, tolerate, and integrate the multiple points of view articulated by the diverse set of generals (e.g. Charles de Gaulle, Trafford Leigh-Mallory, Bernard Montgomery, George Patton) who commanded Allied forces.[15] On the other hand, some American generals, such as Douglas MacArthur and Stanley McChrystal, were relieved of their commands due to their strong advocacy of certain policy positions.[16]

Another way to characterize this issue would be to say that from a military perspective alternative points of view distract, whereas for a global leader they contribute. In effect, a military leader must have a frame of vision that is like a spotlight; the global leader needs a frame like a floodlight. This distinction suggests that leaders need to be more like "pentathletes than single event competitors." The latter phrase was penned by John Donnelly in pointing out that, new criteria for promoting U.S. Army generals places greater emphasis on breadth of experience than was the case previously.[17]

An intriguing comparison, or perhaps dilemma, is that the military's reward systems traditionally reinforce one set of characteristics at

the expense of the other. The more pronounced, extreme or archetypical the characteristics of a leader, the more apt they are to be admired and rewarded. At the same time however, it is more difficult for such an individual to exhibit the contrasting set of characteristics. For example, the more conviction a military leader projects, the greater the level of confidence passed on to subordinates, but the less he is apt to appear open to divergent points of view. Similarly, the more a global leader tries to integrate diverse perspectives and get buy-in from diverse stakeholders, the less clear he will appear to be in advocating a particular position.

Developing Military Leaders into Global Leaders

Contrasting the traits of military leaders with those of global leaders begets a series of questions. Should we expect military leaders, especially those at the flag level, to function as global leaders? If so, what are the implications for professional military education (PME) and is it fair or reasonable to expect that military officers will be competent in such a diverse range of capabilities? Certainly by promoting military officers whose skill sets include those required of global leaders, we can ensure that our military and national security apparatus will be more effective in the global environment.[18] Where will these leaders come from if the criteria for promoting military leaders is based on the set of elements "A" rather than those in "B" which taken to extremes can work in opposition to one another? How can leaders keep these skills and traits in balance?

Whether operating at the tactical, operational, or strategic level, today's military leaders are more apt to work in joint operations or the interagency environment than was the case previously. These circumstances require a different set of skills.[19] Yet, the uncertainty and volatility of today's security environment make it impossible to specify a-priori what skills our leaders must have. In effect, today's environment calls for adaptive leadership and for leaders who can cope with the discomfort of uncertainty in recognizing today's complexity and who can respond to security threats "along the entire spectrum of conflict."[20]

The need for adaptive, balanced leadership is required by the growing interaction of military and civilian personnel in joint operations, especially during crises.[21] Even the domain of military transformation requires greater civil-military coordination and an increased capacity of military leaders to adapt their styles to the cultures of different stakeholder groups.[22] Rapprochement between these constituencies may be enhanced by overlapping the ways in which civilian and military leaders are developed.

How well the military is doing in educating military officers for positions of global leadership is difficult to determine, although the 2010 Congressional review of PME offers a broad and general assessment.[23] During the past 15 years, especially following the attacks on the United States in 2001, there has been a growing recognition of the need to prepare our military leaders for a more complex environment.[24] Among the evidence are statements and testimony presented in the 2009-2010 hearings of the House Armed Services Committee to examine progress that has been made in PME since passage of the Goldwater-Nichols Act in 1986. More specifically, the hearings were intended to be a follow-up to the committee's last review of military education in 1989, which became known as the Skelton report. A focal point of the review was less the content of PME programs and more the overall educational experience.

The main conclusion of the Congressional review was that military education is "still basically sound."[25] Such a phrase is self-assuring but says nothing about content and whether the skills and competencies focused on in PME are suited to our current era of globalization. The Committee's report includes clear admonitions that officers needs to get better at developing strategy, but there is no mention of the challenge of implementing those strategies or leading global organizations. Another focal

point of the Committee's review was academic rigor, a major concern expressed in the Skelton report. The more recent review is more favorably inclined with respect to rigor, although evidence of such is based primarily on the presence of tests and the effort by some war colleges to seek accreditation from civilian boards of higher education.[26]

To use the presence of tests as an indicator of academic rigor reflects a limited view of education. Tests are only one of many grading mechanisms and what is vital in ensuring academic rigor is not grading per se, but standards of achievement. One anecdotal piece of data reflecting the latter is student perception in war colleges that it is more difficult to get a grade of "C" than an "A." Another is the view that attending PME programs is more about getting one's ticket punched for promotion than about developing competencies that contribute to job performance. If Congress and the Department of Defense are seriously interested in academic rigor, war college administrators would be encouraged to sponsor an academic decathlon instead of Jim Thorpe Day, the military's annual sports competition between war colleges.[27]

Most PME advocates call for greater numbers of military officers to participate and more time in the classroom for those who do.[28] This perspective seems to reflect more of a learning-harder rather than learning-smarter attitude. If military officers are to spend more time in the classroom learning skills that are not suited to today's national security environment, then we are misusing that time. PME programs need to be more than way stations to senior level positions; they need to be opportunities to reflect on and learn about the skills required of more strategic and global leaders. One troublesome observation from the most recent congressional review is that there appears to be less rigor than in the past in the PME "Capstone" course for flag officers.[29]

One of the proposed solutions for shortcomings in PME is to send more military officers to civilian institutions. The presumption is that those types of institutions are more apt to expose military personnel to new perspectives and new forms of critical thinking. Another option is to make war colleges more like civilian institutions. This approach would require cultural changes in our war colleges, especially in regards to how faculties are valued.

The foundation of any academic experience lies in core faculty. To use an industrial metaphor, they are the tools or machines of production and students the raw material. Discussions about academic freedom at our war colleges often focus on the ability of faculty to publish on policy issues regardless of their political implications. In civilian institutions, academic freedom incorporates another dimension; it pertains to the freedom of a faculty member to teach students the way they wish. When a professor in a civilian institution is assigned to teach a course, he is usually given no more than the course number and title and the room in which classes are to be held. It is up to the faculty member to develop the syllabus and teach the course in the manner that he or she sees fit.

In an earlier part of my career, I was recruited to teach as a core faculty member at one of our nation's war colleges. On my first day on the job, I was assigned to teach several courses. For one of them, I was given a 46-page syllabus that specified all course readings and assignments and discussion questions for each and every class session. I was also informed that I would meet on a regular basis with other faculty to discuss teaching objectives for each class and the way in which course materials could be taught. At a civilian academic institution, such dictates and attention to a professor's teaching responsibility would be the basis for faculty revolt. Another indicator of how faculty is perceived is that war college students referred to my role as a "moderator" not a professor. The former suggests a lower status and reflects the diminished role of faculty compared to the prestige they hold in civilian institutions.

As the saying goes, the medium is the message. If we are to expose military officers to the skills of global leadership, then we have to tolerate more ambiguity in the classroom. Rather than

administrators dictating course requirements and content from above, faculty need the discretion to align how courses are taught with what we expect students to learn. In effect, the more certain Congress or war college administrators want to be about what takes place in the classroom, the less PME students will learn about coping with ambiguity.

A Way Ahead

At the strategic level, a military leader must have the same capabilities and orientation as a global leader.[30] What will it take for military leaders to work effectively across cultures and amidst a diversity of national and international armed forces, diplomats, and political leaders? It will require individuals who can balance the need to show conviction in their decisions with the need for intellectual humility and the openness to alternative points of view.

If the culture of the military remains static, then the same type of values will be promulgated and military leaders with the values reflected in set "A" will be promoted. The design and content of PME can be changed, but if the organizational context of PME graduates does not, our military officers will be learning skills that are neither valued nor used as a basis for promotion. This challenge parallels the findings from a report on officer management conducted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. That report indicated that even as the operational environment and demands on our military personnel have shifted, military promotional systems remain the same. This situation has led to what is referred to as an "ingenuity gap."[31] In effect, military officers with the ingenuity, flexibility, and adaptability to respond to ambiguous times are less apt to be promoted. For global leaders to emerge from the military, the military's career management system will need to change.

It would be comforting and assuring if military personnel never faced the demands or expectations of global leadership, but unfortunately given the nature of contemporary conflicts, that is no longer an option. It would also be folly to think that the culture of our armed services will change either fundamentally or incrementally over time. The best we can hope for is that some accommodation will be made for officers who truly think outside the box and to give faculty at our war colleges more discretion in preparing our military officers for increasingly more uncertain times. That should not mean increasing the number of faculty slots for civilians at our war colleges, but recruiting for faculty (with or without military experience) who are open to inquiry, think comfortably with uncertainty, and are able to deal in the classroom with the challenges that come from not orchestrating every class much as our military cannot orchestrate every battle. The battlefield and our classrooms are or need to be fluid environments where success requires the capacity to respond to that fluidity with creativity and ingenuity.

Professionals who aspire to senior leadership whether in the military, business, or politics need to be in environments where difficult questions are asked and discussed rather than avoided. PME students should not be let off the hook so to speak by discounting or evading ambiguous questions by claiming that they are matters of philosophy.[32] The most fundamental parts of being a leader demand deep thinking and resolute reflection. Practitioners who feel discomfort in exercising the cognitive and intellectual parts of their being and who will not or cannot work past that feeling would be wise to remain tacticians. Effective strategic military and global leadership is a balance of leadership traits.

Military culture is an excellent context for supporting and promoting leaders who are decisive, act with conviction, and can advocate clear points of view. If military officers who have risen to be flag officers can balance those traits with those of global leaders, as Dwight Eisenhower was capable of doing, then the military will be more successful in taking on new roles and responsibilities of international security as they emerge. PRISM

NOTES

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