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The Great Captains of Chaos: Developing Adaptive Leaders

Major F. John Burpo, U.S. Army

The maximum use of force is in no way incompatible with the simultaneous use of intellect.

—Carl von Clausewitz¹

AS A JUNIOR staff captain, I observed an officer record brief (ORB) scrub of the majors inbound to my unit. The brigade personnel officer (S1) sorted the ORBs first into U.S. Command and General Staff Officer Course (CGSOC) resident and nonresident graduates. The brigade executive officer (XO) then wanted to know which resident CGSOC graduates had served as observer/controllers (O/Cs) at the National Training Center.

The S1 dutifully read the background of each officer. As he did so, he came across one I thought was quite promising—an officer who had light, airborne, and heavy experience and a master's degree in Arabic studies from an Ivy League school. The XO, however, directed the S1 to “[s]end that [expletive] back to corps. We don't need any smart guys down here.” Surely, the unit did *not* need an Arabic-speaking foreign area officer with tactical experience across the heavy-light spectrum! While this was admittedly a singular event, the story resonates throughout the officer assignment and selection system and is reinforced by the actions of many senior mentors.

After serving two commands, I was considering studying biochemical engineering and teaching at West Point, but I was continually berated by my senior rater: “You're [expletive]-up, ranger!” Serving as a combat training center O/C was the recommendation du jour in order to remain competitive for battalion command. However, this singular partiality to tactical assignments and developmental experiences is disconnected from the operational environment's demands and the increasing requirements for adaptive leaders. U.S. Army Field Manual (FM) 1, *The Army*,

asserts: “The ambiguous nature of the operational environment requires Army leaders who are self-aware and adaptive.”²

In this article, therefore, I want to further refine the Army's definition of adaptive leadership and recommend specific courses of action to develop adaptive leaders. Doing so requires an analysis of current leadership-development programs and the operating environment. While my focus is on the officer corps, this analysis could also serve to enhance the developmental models used for noncommissioned officers and junior enlisted soldiers. Ultimately, the operating environment demands leaders who are comfortable with the technologically insurmountable ambiguity that chaos theory defines and which current Army leadership programs fail to directly address. To further develop adaptive leaders and to attract people who have enhanced skills such as technical knowledge, language proficiency, and regional area expertise, the Army must align leadership-development programs with the demands of the operating environment.

The Operating Environment

We are shaping the world faster than we can change ourselves, and we are applying to the present the habits of the past.—Winston Churchill³

Lieutenant General Frederic J. Brown says that “[g]enuinely new leadership requirements have arisen since the events of 9/11. . . . National Security Strategy now identifies preemption, recovery of failed states, and Homeland Security as major military missions. Each new mission, alone and in combination, places new joint, interagency, intergovernmental, and multinational (JIIM) responsibilities squarely on the plates of Army leaders at every grade.”⁴

Clearly the bipolar world of fighting conventional enemy orders of battle exclusively is past. The new

operating environment requires Army leaders to be more familiar with the JIIM framework and the world at large. The complexity of areas of operations (particularly in military operations in urban terrain) further compounds the challenges the increased number of actors impose. Accordingly, FM 3-0, *Operations*, states: “Adaptability is critical to urban stability operations and support operations because these operations relentlessly present complex challenges to commanders for which no prescribed solutions exist.”⁵ As warfare and technology rapidly evolve, doctrine will lag behind the need for ready solutions, and Army officers will confront many situations outside the doctrinal framework. The consequent demand for adaptability further necessitates that “[c]ultural and demographic factors that transcend borders make conflict resolution a complicated and lengthy process, often requiring several changes in the nature of an operation before an end state can be achieved.”⁶

This emergent contemporary operating environment (COE) places Army core competencies and combat operations as a subset of more general problem solving across the diplomatic, informational, military, and economic (DIME) spectrum with which Army leaders at all levels

Organizational and Operational (O&O) Concept defines an adaptive leader as “[a] leader who can influence people—by providing purpose, direction, and motivation—while operating in a complex, dynamic environment of uncertainty and ambiguity to accomplish the mission and improve the organization.”

must be conversant and prepared to control.⁷ Whether the COE progresses toward machine-versus-machine, high-tech cyber-warfare; people-networked fourth-generation warfare; or some intermediate form of warfare, the minds of Great Captains will be ascendant as the most critical and powerful tools for conducting warfare.⁸ These minds will serve as the driving force in the conduct of warfare, as well as in future revolutions in military affairs, which historically are driven by conceptual, doctrinal, and intellectual forces, not technology.⁹

The term Great Captain conjures images of Napoleon masterfully orchestrating a battle from a commanding hilltop. His view of both friendly and enemy situations offers perfect situational awareness in real time, enhancing the faculties of intuition and emboldening the speed of decision. In modern parlance, this idealized Napoleon possessed information superiority and could achieve

a more rapid observation, orientation, decision, action (OODA) loop cycle.¹⁰ Today, senior leaders continually seek to develop technological substitutes for Napoleon’s hilltop, which are panaceas to clear the fog of war. Supposedly, technological information superiority then facilitates the prediction of enemy courses of action.¹¹

The problem is, however, that while certainly desirable, dispensing with the unpredictable nature of war is consistent with neither common sense nor mathematical probability. Warfare is not subject to a simple linear relationship of output effects proportional to the input of combat force. A number of variables define war—troop strength, supply rates, morale, enemy psychology, terrain, and weather—and almost all have nonlinear effects and maintain an interrelationship with many other variables. The nonlinearity of the defining variables describes a chaotic system, and “[c]haotic systems never repeat exactly because their future behavior is extremely sensitive to initial conditions.”¹² Quantifying abstract but influential variables such as enemy psychology and friendly morale presents immediate problems, not the least of which is resolving initial system values to any significance.

The implication for predicting enemy actions to disable his OODA loop is that

no matter how effective the model, unpredictability will always exist. Uncertainty is the only constant of warfare. Author Leonard Wong quotes an officer from Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF): “We don’t know whether we are going to get rocks thrown at us, or mortars, or a handshake, or a cup of tea. It really doesn’t depend on what neighborhood we are going to. It doesn’t matter what we are going to do. The level of hostility is something that we cannot predict.”¹³

No amount of technology can offset the effects of chaos theory, despite that theory’s ability to set the boundaries of high probability. Williamson Murray says: “Precisely because we Americans have a long track record of overestimating our technological superiority and underestimating the ability of our opponents to short circuit our advantages . . . we cannot afford to indulge [in this form of hubris] again.”¹⁴ Robert B. Brown further asserts that one

primary reason for this is that “[t]echnology is readily available to our enemies, and they will use it to exploit weaknesses.”¹⁵ The question then is, How can we define and develop Great Captains who can adaptively plan and execute in the midst of chaos?

Defining Adaptive Leadership

One of the serious problems in planning the fight against American doctrine is that the Americans do not read their manuals, nor do they feel any obligation to follow their doctrine.—From a Soviet Junior Lieutenant’s Notebook¹⁶

The U.S. Army has a great history of innovation, from the use of irregular tactics during the American Revolutionary War to improvised vehicle armor in Operation Iraqi Freedom. Continuing in this tradition and recognizing its value, the Honorable Louis Caldera stated: “We are working on producing leaders for change, not just leaders who are doctrinally capable and competent leaders for warfighting, but leaders also for all kinds of missions with the capability to deal with an evolving global situation in which the array of threats faced goes across the entire spectrum.”¹⁷

Field Manual 22-100, *Army Leadership*, makes numerous references to the need to adapt as a leader: “You must adapt and improvise”; “no exact blue print will exist for success in every context; leadership and the ability to adapt to the situation will carry the day”; “adapt to and handle fluid environments”; “envision, adapt, and lead change.”¹⁸ What Army leadership doctrine does not offer is a definition of adaptive leadership; it offers only random imperatives of the importance to adapt.

Recognizing the need for a new type of leadership (and perhaps recognizing the inadequacy of FM 22-100), the Interim Brigade Combat Team (IBCT) Organizational and Operational (O&O) Concept defines an adaptive leader as “[a] leader who can influence people—by providing purpose, direction, and motivation—while operating in a complex, dynamic environment of uncertainty and ambiguity to accomplish the mission and improve the organization.”¹⁹ The following list further refines the definition of adaptive leader traits:

- Being decisive.
- Balancing human leadership dimensions with technology.

- Being comfortable with uncertainty (agile and flexible).

- Being a focused, quick learner.
- Empowering and decentralizing leadership, allowing for initiative within intent.

- Being a good communicator.
- Building cohesive, trusting teams with candor.
- Using force across the full spectrum of conflict.²⁰

Because FM 22-100 does not give a definition of adaptive leadership, the IBCT O&O plan definition and character trait list are taken together as a starting definition. While this definition addresses the requirement to operate in an ambiguous environment, it does not specify *how* an adaptive leader is to do this, nor does it distinguish adaptive-leader characteristics from the general leadership characteristics FM 22-100 describes. The definition ultimately fails to convey the essence of the term *adaptive*, which entails adjusting “to a specified use or situation [and to] make fit for, or change to suit a new purpose.”²¹ Consequently, without a concrete characterization of adaptive leadership, crafting and evaluating an effective leadership-development program is not feasible.

Before offering a refined definition of adaptive leadership that better captures the essence of adaptation in order to form effective

Clearly there is a need to quickly learn knowledge/skill sets coupled with a new operating frame of reference that might be radically different from the skills, knowledge, and perspectives developed through training.

leader-development programs, it is worth-while to examine Wong’s leadership findings from OIF based on interviews with junior officers. He reports that “[i]n addition to the mental agility needed to take on additional duties or to shift roles constantly, many junior leaders in OIF described the need to adapt by functioning outside their combat specialty. Field artillerymen, engineers, and tankers spoke of operating as infantrymen as they conducted raids or cordon and searches.”²² Clearly there is a need to quickly learn knowledge/skill sets coupled with a new operating frame of reference that might be radically different from the skills, knowledge, and perspectives developed through training. Through an analogy, Wong offers insights on adaptive leadership and innovation: “To use a culinary example, *cooks* are quite adept at carrying out a recipe. While there is a small degree of artistic license that goes into preparing a meal, the recipe drives the action—not the cook. *Chefs*, on the other hand, look at the ingredients available to them and create a meal. The success of the meal comes from the creativity of the chef—not the recipe.”²³



DOD

Washington crossing the Delaware (Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze, 1851).

Wong goes on to state that “[i]nnovation and creativity imply the introduction of new methods, ideas, or techniques. Innovation cannot be taught in an 8-hour block of instruction. It cannot be learned over the Internet. Innovation develops when an officer is given a minimal number of parameters (task, condition, and standard) and the requisite time to plan and execute the training.”²⁴

Clearly there is an indication that creativity, imagination, and innovation forge the ability to manipulate ideas and the environment to achieve some desired effect: Adaptation is more than simply being “comfortable with uncertainty” akin to a chameleon simply blending with its surroundings. Rather, leader adaptation assumes a much more interactive form of change.

Another idea the IBCT adaptive leader definition just misses is team building. For an adaptive leader, simply building a “cohesive, trusting team with candor” is insufficient. The team itself must take on adaptation characteristics that network more than just the leader’s innovative ideas.²⁵ This approach is more in line with the IBCT premise of “initiative within intent.”

Given these ideas, an adaptive leader should be able to quickly identify an operating environment’s defining variables and creatively leverage all resources across the DIME. Further, an adaptive

leader cultivates teams that individually and collectively innovate and display initiative within intent. Leadership traits that distinguish an adaptive leader from those traits that FM 22-100 describes include—

- Maintaining a problem-solving mindset at the fore.
- Pursuing lifelong learning; understanding that adaptation is not a singular event, but a continuing process both operationally and at home station.
- Possessing the requisite intelligence to analyze an operating environment and determine the defining variables and their interrelationships.
- Possessing the imagination and creativity to innovate within and manipulate the resources of the operating environment to achieve desired end-state effects.
- Fostering teams that innovate individually and collectively.
- Displaying initiative within intent individually and communicating intent to subordinates to enable them to do the same.²⁶

With this definition of adaptive leadership, which more clearly identifies the characteristics that foster change in an operating environment, the question is, Is the Army developing adaptive leaders, and if not, how can the current development system be refined to do so?

The Current Approach to Leader Development

A slave to its training and traditions, our army has not succeeded in adapting itself to a form of warfare the military schools do not teach.—Roger Trinquier²⁷

To avoid the same errors that French forces committed in their Algerian colony and the errors of the American experience in Vietnam, Lebanon, and Somalia, the U.S. Army must seriously contemplate whether its leader-development system adequately identifies and prepares the adaptive leaders an operating environment requires. The current institutional struggle to develop adaptive leaders lies in the military's strong tradition of applying ordered systems to disordered problems and of desiring adaptive minds within an organizational culture of conformity. The prevailing notion that commanders will always have at their disposal a ready source of "smart guys and gals" to do the "50-pound headwork" exacerbates this challenge. If every officer maintained this rationale for not seeking self-development, the effort to develop adaptive leaders would quickly degenerate into a Ponzi scheme.

In the Army's leader-development framework, institutional training, operational assignments, and self-development form the pillars building up from values and ethics, expectations and standards, and training and education to produce a trained and ready leader.²⁸ Has this system historically produced adaptive leaders with problem-solving skills that transcend the boundaries of doctrine? It might be argued—based on operational struggles with insurgency warfare and stability operations and support operations over the past four decades—that the Army is not producing the quantity or required type of adaptive leaders. Wong notes: "Unfortunately, behind the seemingly ubiquitous consensus on both the importance of the human dimension in the future and the need for transforming it, a serious disconnect remains between current leader-development practices and the type of leaders the future force requires. Put bluntly, the Army is relying on a leader-development system that encourages reactive instead of proactive thought, compliance instead of creativity, and adherence instead of audacity."²⁹

Despite dedicating unparalleled financial and time resources to develop individuals within its organization, the Army has failed to quickly morph its

officer education system to identify and produce the adaptive leaders the operating environment requires. At the risk of offering a single data point, CGSOC currently uses a frontal-attack scenario in flat, open terrain to demonstrate the unique capabilities of a transformed division organization relative to a legacy division. The use of contiguous, linear operations is well within the comfort zone of both the faculty and students and reveals an institutional reluctance to adapt to contemporary and future operational environments.

Almost unnoticed is the discontinuation of assignment policies that actually fostered adaptive leaders. First, the Army's culture of frequently moving Soldiers between assignments every few years engenders the basic skills of adapting to new geographic locations, people, and organizations. Moreover, to achieve success, alternating heavy and light assignments forced officers to demonstrate the characteristics of adaptive leaders. Post stabilization and assignment by skill set (that is, light-light and heavy-heavy) minimizes this built-in adaptive

environment. Without dramatically altering assignment and promotion time lines, how does the Army develop leader-development programs to produce the future

Great Captains who will manage the chaos of the operational environment?

Proposed Changes to Leader Development

Change before you have to.—Jack Welch³⁰

Fortunately, many thinkers have already identified the need for adaptive leadership in the Army and recommended how these leaders should be trained. Unfortunately, many recommendations do not identify specific programmatic changes to the Army Training and Leader Development system. For instance, analysis of adaptive leadership in the Interim Brigade Combat Team led to the recommendation that "[t]he Army's commission-producing institutions must initiate an adaptive-learning continuum that instills an open-minded and curious approach to a leader's duties. Officers' basic and advanced courses, together with [the] U.S. Army Command and General Staff College and the U.S. Army War College, must provide the necessary follow-on steps to ensure successive approximations of the desired end state (adaptive leaders)."³¹

Is the Army developing adaptive leaders, and if not, how can the current development system be refined to do so?

The recommendation is too abstract to be “actionable” and characterizes a number of other recommendations on the development of adaptive leaders.³² To bridge the abstract, if not abstruse, goals for adaptive leadership to programs that might serve to identify and further develop these leaders, I offer the following:

- Establish language proficiency pay for language skills for all officers regardless of whether they fill a language-specific position. Pay can be offered based on the supply and demand of specific languages.

- Establish proficiency pay for officers completing graduate degrees on their own time in geographic areas, history, and technical skills, and assign specific skill identifiers to graduate degrees. Pay can be offered based on the specific supply and demand needs of the Army.

- Increase the number of Ranger school allocations.

- Offer an Intermediate Level Education validation examination enabling officers to bypass CGSOC and immediately enter the School for Advanced Military Studies or a civilian advanced degree program.

- Substitute civilian advanced degree, sister service, or foreign military exchange programs for one military school for up to 50 percent of the officers selected for both CGSOC and the Army War College.

- Require advanced-degree civilian education in the same manner as joint experience for promotion to senior ranks.

- Consider a resident civilian advanced-degree program as a year of branch qualification.

- Develop a comprehensive professional certification examination at the conclusion of CGSOC similar to the professional engineer exam or lawyer bar exam.

- Reverse the trend of increasingly privatizing staff and faculty at military schools and, instead, select successful company, battalion, and brigade commanders for teaching assignments.

Each recommendation is designed to help officers adapt to social, organizational, and intellectual environments uniquely different from the Army’s.

While the list is weighted toward advanced civilian education, this course offers significant intellectual challenge, especially for officers far removed from the classroom. Any discussion that ensues from these recommendations is a positive step toward generating more concrete experiences. The desired end state is the development of adaptive leaders prepared for the unpredictability of chaos. Because it is not possible to prepare every officer for every type of assignment and possible deployment, the Army should seek to develop the minds and leadership dynamics of its future Great Captains.

Leading Great Captains Into the Future

Wong says: “Our equation is filled with variables that constantly change: the weather, people, different dynamics that we have no control over. If we tried to control them, we would be breaking the rules. It is important that we understand our constraints, understand our limitations, understand

the variables that are out there, and then learn how to deal with [them]. There are certain things that you are not going to be able to control[:] the emotions your soldiers run into, the problems your soldiers have at

home, the complex situation between the Shiites and Sunnis, the cultural barrier, the standoff between Western culture, Christian culture, and Muslim culture. There are certain things that we won’t understand because it is a totally different environment. . . . To prepare an officer for this, to prepare anyone for this, you need to just constantly test him, put him in challenging situations, and allow [him] to sort of think and act under pressure and stress.”³³

Accepting the unpredictability of the operating environment, identifying the variables that define environments, and continually developing adaptive leaders in demanding situations is the path to creating adaptive leaders. The Army must find ways to identify and further develop future Great Captains who will be able to adapt and successfully defeat chaos. These recommendations are a first step toward driving the conversation away from abstract desires and toward practical programs. **MR**

The Interim Brigade Combat Team led to the recommendation that “[t]he Army’s commission-producing institutions must initiate an adaptive-learning continuum that instills an open-minded and curious approach to a leader’s duties.

NOTES

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