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Reflections on the Characteristics of a Commander

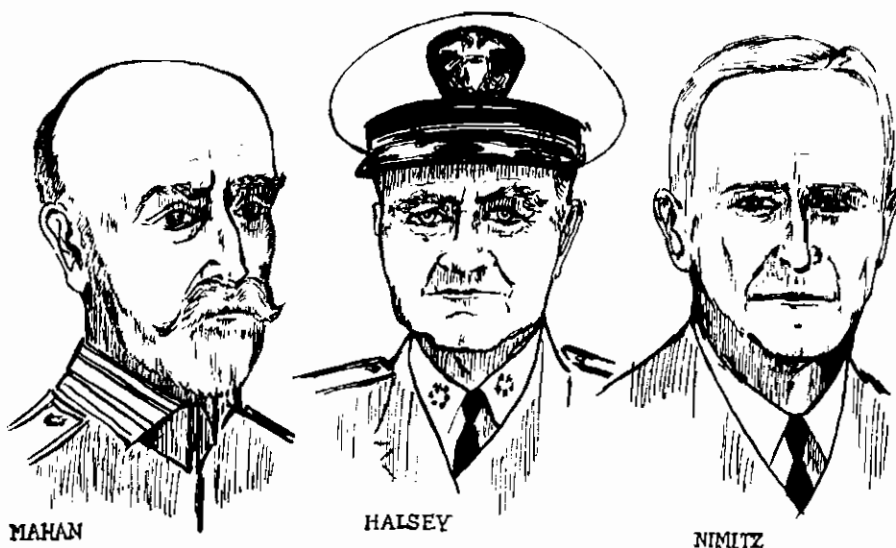
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MAHAN

HALSEY

NIMITZ

REFLECTION ON THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A COMMANDER

by

Professor Raymond G. O'Connor

Probably one of the more difficult problems for the historian is the discernment of those personal qualities and characteristics that bear on the performance of the successful military commander. Mahan, in analyzing types of naval officers, found they "by natural characteristics arrange themselves in pairs—presenting points of contrast, in deficiencies and excellencies, which group together, not by similarity chiefly, but as complementary."

This observation certainly applies to the six leaders that are discussed in this paper. In fact, one is tempted to conclude that there are no absolute qualifications necessary for successful leadership, no scientific formula, no universal criteria or statistical profile by which to

measure an individual's potential or existing ability to exercise command. Those of us who have struggled with courses designed to train young men in the complexities of leadership are aware that the subject scarcely merits the designation of an "inexact science," and the simple enumeration of glib generalizations may be useful only as an exercise in demonstrating the exceptions. Nonetheless, all military personnel are constantly being evaluated by their superiors in terms of leadership qualities, and they are being judged by the men they command in terms of their effectiveness.

Each of these officers possessed an image which had an impact that was directly related to his success in com-

38 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

mand, Beatty, King, and Halsey gave the impression of boldness, aggressiveness, dash, dynamism, toughness, and flair. They had, in Madison Avenue parlance, STYLE. Their physical appearance, including dress, visage, and physique, their speech and their mannerisms, all contributed to the effect. On the other hand, Jellicoe, Spruance, and Nimitz were quiet, modest if not self-effacing, conventional in dress and conduct, each the very antithesis of flamboyance. Yet their cool exteriors exuded confidence and they had that indefinable quality, PRESENCE. These three officers used their power quietly, and which of these stereotype groups was most effective in exercising leadership could well depend on the circumstances and the requirements of the particular job.

The more than casually curious person, seeking to discover how these people got that way, would surely find himself involved in the age-old argument over heredity and environment. Some authorities contend that leaders are born not made, although the services stress education, indoctrination, training, and experience. But in regard to the image, does the individual assiduously cultivate an exterior designed to project in a particular way, which he deliberately creates as suited to his personality, his aspirations, and his assessment of the qualities needed for success in his chosen profession? Probably most have some sort of model, a Nelson or a Lord Horublower, to which they try to conform; and evidently none of the men considered made strenuous efforts to disabuse others of their convictions in attributing to them distinctive qualities, however inaccurate. Halsey later could protest, "Now that I am sitting down to my autobiography it is Bill Halsey whom I want to get on paper, not the fake, flamboyant 'Bull.'" Yet it is clear that he came to take pride in the nickname, and he selected El Toro to be used as his TBS code call. His boastful statements about a quick end to the

war, dictating the peace in Tokyo, riding the Emperor's horse, and exhorting everyone to kill more Japs made headlines and contributed to his image. At the same time it helped restore the morale of a fleet reeling from a succession of defeats. In his thesis written as a student at the Naval War College, Halsey enumerated the characteristics he considered necessary in a fleet commander. Stressing what we would call the "charismatic" qualities or "star appeal," he felt the commander should inspire the men and insure that his will permeated and dominated the entire force. To continue briefly with the cultivation of an image, King protested about certain legends concerning his toughness, but in his autobiography he quotes with pride stories of his shaving with a blowtorch. Beatty's vanity was manifest in his six-button coat, which he did not inflict on others. King insisted that the slate-gray uniform replace the summer khaki, and while eventually it did not prevail, a number of us thought the damned things only to find that they were not permitted in the Pacific.

In contrast with King, Halsey, and Beatty, the other three leaders appeared uninterested in any type of unique or distinctive projection, with the possible exception of Nimitz' propensity for having his photograph taken pitching horseshoes with enlisted men. Jellicoe's biographer described him as that "great little man," and Nimitz referred to Spruance as "this reserved and self-effacing man." As for temperament being part of the image, King had a reputation of engaging in name-calling with his subordinates; Halsey's rages were legend, and both of these men had acquired reputations for being harsh and outspoken in their criticism of shortcomings in their subordinates. Probably these outbursts were not contrived, but they contributed to the image and may have contributed to an efficiency of performance. Conversely, the "iron hand in the velvet glove" approach, as

illustrated in the stories about Nimitz' firmness, could have been just as effective. The relative merits of the carrot and the stick, the pat on the back rather than the kick in the posterior, are hotly debated. But it appears that none of these "types" had significant problems with morale, loyalty, dedication, or performance.

Still, one should resist the tendency to assume that the commander who wins has made no mistakes, or the other extreme, which one might conclude after reading a number of war books, that nothing that anyone did was right. Perhaps the most essential factor in exercising command is good judgment, and this dimension of leadership deserves a good deal more attention. Liddell Hart has concluded that "The most successful of the Allied commanders enjoyed such immense quantitative advantage that the qualitative value of their own performance cannot be gauged." But such was certainly not true during the early years in the Pacific, and, in any event, the commanders had to make a number of hard decisions which, for their forces and at times for the nation, were "moments of truth." There is a story about a wise man being asked how one avoids making mistakes, and he replied that one does so by exercising good judgment. When asked how one develops good judgment, he replied "by making mistakes." Both Alfred P. Sloan and Henry Ford II have been quoted to the effect that a successful executive should be right at least half of the time, which may be satisfactory in the automobile business. But military leaders and physicians bury their mistakes, and a single major defeat can have catastrophic consequences.

C.P. Snow defines good judgment as "the ability to think of many matters at once, in their interdependence, their relative importance, and their consequences." Significantly, Spruance was dubbed as the man with a computer brain, and we are all familiar with the

current stress on systems analysis, which I define as a more efficient method for considering all the factors involved in making a decision. But without engaging in the controversy over "computers versus judgment" I would like to deal with this ultimate test of a commander's talents.

As to the process, it appears that judgment involves both logical, rational thought and intuition based upon imagination and experience. "The intuitive process or factor," says Henry Eccles, "is the creative or artistic element of military thinking," and Justice Brandeis thought judgment involved "the almost instinctive correlation of a thousand imponderables." Mahan extolled "the intuitive ability which practice gives to size up a situation. The French call it *coup d'oeil*--at a glance." Spruance, in explaining why he had followed a particular course of action at Midway, called his reason "a feeling, an intuition perhaps." His biographer points out that the decision "was actually based upon sound logic [and a] thorough estimate of the situation and orderly thought." Spruance, "the thinking man's naval officer," has ever been aware of human fallibility, and recently he attributed much of his success at Midway to "luck." He is quoted as saying that "I am more than ever impressed with the part that good or bad fortune plays in tactical engagements. [We have been given] credit, where no credit is due . . ." He would probably agree with Machiavelli, who surmized that human beings exercise control over about 50 percent of their activities (he was not so foolhardy as to specify which half). Spruance also has stressed the value of imagination, "tempered and guided by common sense and reason," which he thinks necessary to, as he puts it, "discipline the imagination." So the commander must consider a multiplicity of factors and weigh their significance, but before deciding he must endeavor to anticipate

40 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

the outcome. Every decision is a prediction, and the operator is selecting from alternative courses of action that which is most likely to be successful in light of the objective. The situation is often such that a lengthy appraisal, "due deliberation," would be impracticable, in which case he must rely on an intuitive or "gut" reaction. While this area of investigation may more appropriately be the province of the psychologist, a bit of conjecture may provoke discussion if not dissentious.

Freud maintained that the "unconscious mind" was more reliable in certain matters than the conscious mind, i.e., that intuition can be more effective than reason as a guide to action. We are reminded of the saying that women are wiser than men because they know less but understand more. Be that as it may, this intuitive ability which I have emphasized is developed by the individual in his own professional field through experience, both directly and vicariously. Mahan quoted Napoleon to the effect that on the field of battle the happiest inspiration—again *coup d'oeil*—is often only a recollection. And Mahan went on to observe that:

This is a testimony to the value of historical illustration, which is simply recorded experience; for, whether the recollection be of what some other man did, or whether it be of some incident one's self has seen and recalls, it draws upon the past and that, too, not in a general way, but by specific application to an instant emergency, comprehended at a glance, just because it is familiar.

Numerous military figures have commented on the value of history, not only for what to do but for what to avoid doing, and the best way to escape what Marx called the "dead hand of the past controlling the living" is to study history.

At this point I take the opportunity to introduce the role of the Naval War

College. Nimitz remarked, "I regard the course I had here in 1922 to middle '23, an 11 months course, as the best training I could conceive of for command at sea," and of the Pacific war game, "the course was so complete that when the war in the Pacific actually started, nothing that happened surprised us at all except the kamikaze attacks." Being forewarned he was forearmed, and he recognized the contingencies as they arose. Spruance's biographer says the admiral "himself attributes his later successful war operations in large measure to the training received at the Naval War College," and Spruance says of the College "this is where I got my education." Halsey learned strategy and tactics "with emphasis on the problems of logistics." But, as noted earlier, he was required to deal with the knotty question of command qualities. "The duty," Halsey wrote, "was pleasant, stimulating because of the instruction, the exchange of ideas, the chance to test your pet theories on the game board, and the opportunity to read up on professional publications." King found the months at Newport "refreshing and valuable." "What he learned of Pacific strategy," he said, "proved its usefulness in due time," and his first thesis, "The Influence of the National Policy on the Strategy of a War," submitted on 7 November 1932, contained, in King's words, "passages that were to be confirmed by developments of nine years later."

Well, I'm not engaged in a public relations venture for my temporary institution, but these examples demonstrate one of the most effective means of developing judgment. King has observed that:

Any man facing a major decision acts, consciously or otherwise, upon the training and beliefs of a lifetime. This is no less true of a military commander than of a surgeon, who, while operating, suddenly encounters an unsuspected complication. In both instances,

the men must act immediately with little time for reflection, and if they are successful in dealing with the unexpected it is upon the basis of past experience and training.

No doubt a critic would feel that King is slighting what is called native ability, or that the opponent by his ineptitude might contribute more to victory than the superior decisionmaking of the victor. But the cumulative effect of exposure to situations, real or imaginary, actual or vicarious, cannot be discounted.

Of course there were a great many factors operating in the favor of the American naval leaders and some have been noted in passing. At the highest level, as Walter Millis observed, the war was not fought, it was administered. But administration has always constituted a large part of the commander's responsibilities, and successful administration demands the resources of a scientist and the talents of an artist. King often maintained—as he says only half in jest—"that he has never done anything for himself that he could get someone else to do for him." The delegation or decentralization of *authority* is almost a maxim among organizational theorists, but the man at the top can never absolve himself of *responsibility*. Halsey expressed a strong opinion on the subject of overcentralization in his Naval War College thesis. "A commander," he wrote, "may become so fascinated and engrossed in his planning, that he assumes the initiative rightfully belonging to his subordinate. His plans may become so complicated, so detailed, and so manifold, that it is a practical impossibility to follow them." Yet chaos must be avoided, and the successful commander usually adopts the adage of telling subordinates what to do but not how to do it, only to be faced with the prospect of losing control over the segments of his command, destroying essential cohesiveness of purpose, and creating a situation of virtual anarchy.

Conversely, one of the Jellicoe's defects was his tendency to become absorbed in details, to devote his energies to the trees rather than the forest. Such a situation could be remedied, it seems, by a change in the commander's habits or interests and the selection of a competent staff in which he had confidence. In practice the former may be more difficult than the latter, and many a good staff officer has been wasted by serving under an overconscientious commander. The problem is to provide leadership and guidance without stifling responsibility and initiative, and success in command is often directly related to the amount and caliber of work that can be secured from subordinates. The authoritarian personality has its place in a military organization, although persuasion and manipulation may prove more effective than arbitrary dictatorship.

Of the four American leaders discussed, only two faced actual battle situations. It is of some interest to note their reactions to emergencies and disappointments. Halsey tells us that after an operation had been launched he worried and fretted, smoked numerous cigarettes, and drank quantities of coffee, read trashy magazines, and was completely miserable. On the other hand, we are told that after an operation had been set in motion, "Spruance relaxed. He had thought things through so thoroughly that his mind was free of unnecessary worry about improbable contingencies." As for disappointments, Halsey to the day of his death never stopped torturing himself about his absence at Midway and what he considered his "hardest and wrongest decision," namely, to turn away from his pursuit of the Japanese carrier force and heed Kinkaid's request to protect the ships in Leyte Gulf. Spruance, at one time notified that he had been denied an opportunity to engage a Japanese force because of a failure in radio communications, replied quietly, "That's too bad, isn't it?" He gave no

42 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

indication of wasting time in regrets or recriminations.

To pursue another tack in this impressionistic commentary, Spruance emphasized the significance of a change in war planning by stressing the enemy's capabilities rather than his intentions. Of course any commander in his estimate of the situation must consider both factors, but the order of priority is crucial. In the Pacific war the American leaders enjoyed a considerable advantage over their opponents because they could read the Japanese code and their ships were equipped with radar. This advantage could prove decisive, and Midway is the most notable but far from the only example of the contribution made by intelligence to the outcome of a battle. Admiral Sherman, in his *Combat Command*, says with some exaggeration that at Leyte, "Unlike other battles in the Pacific, no previous radio interception had given any inkling of enemy intentions." This superior knowledge was usually available to the commander not only during the initial maneuvering and disposition of the fleets but to a significant degree after the engagement began. General Marshall has observed that battlefield decisions are made in an atmosphere of "chronic obscurity," but the American naval leaders enjoyed the benefit of many "eyes of the fleet." Still, it is frightening to consider the amount of incorrect information that was received by these commanders, and the armchair critic must often contemplate the relevance of the Tolstoyian view of warfare. Of course many participants find out what happened only after the event, and in trying to reconstruct the details of an engagement we might ask whether anyone would submit a battle report that contained information to warrant his court-martial.

One writer has asserted that leading forces in battle is "possibly the most complete human activity, since it involves all the intellectual, physical and

moral power in a man." Modern war accentuates the intellectual dimension, for adapting technology to strategy, or the reverse, the awesome logistic problems, and the intricate command relationships in theaters of war covering thousands of miles of land, sea, and air, imposed demands which seemed almost impossible of human resolution. The Navy that these men represented and the forces they led were the product of the most highly industrialized society known to man. These leaders embodied, and in action realized, many of the ideas and processes of thought which characterized the period. They should be viewed as both products and molders of their times, times characterized not only by mechanization but by a closer association of disparate nations. In the latter connection one discerns qualities necessary to function with opposite numbers in coalition warfare and, from the Navy's point of view, the situation in Washington required a leader who would not be dominated by the forceful personality of General Marshall, overwhelmed by the labyrinthian system, or intimidated by the British. Forrest Pogue has observed that King and Marshall "never succeeded in developing the warm affection Marshall and Stark had for each other," and they had what the Chief of Staff described as "one or two pretty mean fights, but each gained the other's respect and made honest efforts to reach agreement when it seemed that further controversy would interfere seriously with the conduct of the war." That each made significant contributions to the American position on strategy is indicated by Lord Alanbrooke's notes on 1 November 1943 after the Quebec Conference. "I realized only too well how far I have failed," he wrote. "If only I had had sufficient force of character to swing those American Chiefs of Staff and make them see daylight." Of course some of us regret that the American strategy regarding Europe was not implemented at an

earlier date, but the joint chiefs had a formidable antagonist in the British Prime Minister whose addiction to the indirect approach amounted to an obsession.

On the matter of interservice relationships, Louis Morton has related how the commanders in the Pacific argued among themselves over the role of their respective arm in contemplated operations, both on the strategic and tactical level. The alleged "military mind" was subdivided as the professional prism reflected air, land, and sea points of view. Admiral "Mary" Miles recently has described his frustrations in dealing not only with the Army but with the sinister cloak and dagger OSS representatives, from all of which we may reach the obvious conclusion that a commander should be able to get along with and handle people at all levels and in all dimensions of activity. The extent to which "getting along" involves concession and compromise is fundamental, and the successful commander must see that his views prevail a good part of the time. That he need not be a "personality boy" is apparent, although the complexities of modern warfare and the need to deal with so many people outside the service environment seem to emphasize "operator" techniques.

One quality that appears common to these leaders is related to one of the generally accepted principles of war, namely, concentration of force. But in their case it may more appropriately be called "concentration of purpose." Not that these men were necessarily monomaniacs, but they had a dedication and singleness of purpose which colored their outlook and channeled their energies in such a way that they brought to bear on their professional tasks a degree of cumulative and intensive effort unusual in human activity. The casual, part-time naval officer is seldom found

in the annals of history.

There is a desperate need for more analyses in depth of the command, leadership, administrative, and decision-making qualities which positions of authority have required, of the ways in which men have met specific challenges, of the extent to which individuals have controlled events, and of the common or unique characteristics which are most valuable. And we should try to understand how and why these men got that way, how they came to possess the personality, character, and ability to succeed in this ultimate test of human resources.

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY



Professor O'Connor holds an M.A. from The American University and a Ph.D. from Stanford University, and he attended the University of San Francisco Law School. Retired from the Navy, Professor

O'Connor has served in professorial billets in History at Stanford University, the University of Kansas, the University of Costa Rica, and the University of California at Santa Barbara. In 1965 he was appointed professor of History and chairman of the Department of History at Temple University.

As Associate, Historical and Research Organization, Professor O'Connor completed a number of studies for the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. His books include *Perilous Equilibrium*; *Readings in the History of American Military Policy* (editor); *Readings in Twentieth Century History* (co-editor); and *American Defense Policy in Perspective* (editor and coauthor). In addition, he has contributed numerous articles to various periodicals. His current project is *A History of American Foreign Policy, 1921-1941*, which will be volume VI in a seven-volume history of American foreign policy edited by Alexander DeConde.

Professor O'Connor occupied the Ernest J. King Chair of Maritime History at the Naval War College for the academic year 1967-68.
