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TRANSLATING VISION INTO REALITY:  
THE ROLE OF THE STRATEGIC LEADER

BY

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United States Army

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TRANSLATING VISION INTO REALITY: THE ROLE OF THE STRATEGIC LEADER

AN INDIVIDUAL STUDY PROJECT

by

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## ABSTRACT

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We are witnessing a period of tremendous change, both nationally and internationally. The recent dissolution of the Soviet Union and its military apparatus, coupled with myriad domestic and budgetary concerns, has caused the American people and Congress to seriously reevaluate defense requirements and the costs associated with national defense. As a result, one of the greatest challenges facing the Army today is the ability to see into the future, define the threats that will exist to our national security, and fashion a strategy and a fighting force with the requisite capabilities to meet and defeat those threats. This paper concerns itself with the role that the strategic leader must play in order to meet the challenges presented to our nation today and in the future. The purpose is to examine the importance of vision within a military leadership context, to identify its characteristics, to discuss the competencies required of strategic leaders, and to present some thoughts on how to develop future leaders with the skills and vision to operate in an environment that is characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. The intent is to provide a broad understanding of the strategic leadership dynamic to the uninitiated and to those who some day may be operating within that arena.

## INTRODUCTION

"If there is a spark of genius in the leadership function...it must lie in the ability to assemble...a clearly articulated vision of the future that is at once simple, easily understood, clearly desirable, and energizing."

Bennis and Naus

"Vision without action is merely a dream. Action without vision just passes time. Vision with action can change the world."

Joel Barker

We are witnessing a period of tremendous change, both nationally and internationally. The recent dissolution of the Soviet Union and its military apparatus, coupled with myriad domestic and budgetary concerns, has caused the American people and Congress to seriously reevaluate defense requirements and the costs associated with national defense. As a result, one of the greatest challenges facing the Army today is the ability to see into the future ten to twenty years, define the threats that will exist to our national security, and fashion a strategy and a fighting force with the requisite capabilities to meet and defeat those threats.

For the past forty years the presence of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact provided us with a clearly defined threat to focus on. Today, we no longer have that focal point. It has now fallen to our senior military leaders to redefine the threat, postulate a new strategy, and set the

course we will follow to be successful in the future. This is no easy task and the consequences for failure are immense.

This paper concerns itself with the role that the strategic leader must play in order to meet the challenges presented to our nation today and in the future. The purpose is to examine the importance of vision within a military leadership context, to identify its characteristics, to discuss the competencies required of strategic leaders, and to present some thoughts on how to develop leaders with the skills and vision to operate in an environment that is characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. The intent is to provide a broad understanding of the strategic leadership dynamic to the uninitiated and to those who some day may be operating within that arena.

### STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP

Department of the Army Pamphlet (DA PAM) 600-80:  
Executive Leadership, distinguishes among three levels of leadership: indirect-executive, indirect-organizational, and direct. When written in 1987, the DA PAM 600-80 defined the executive level as the top one or two echelons of an organization.<sup>1</sup> Today the terms "strategic" and "executive" have replaced "senior" and "organizational," respectively, to describe these two levels of leadership. See Figure 1.

# The Leadership System

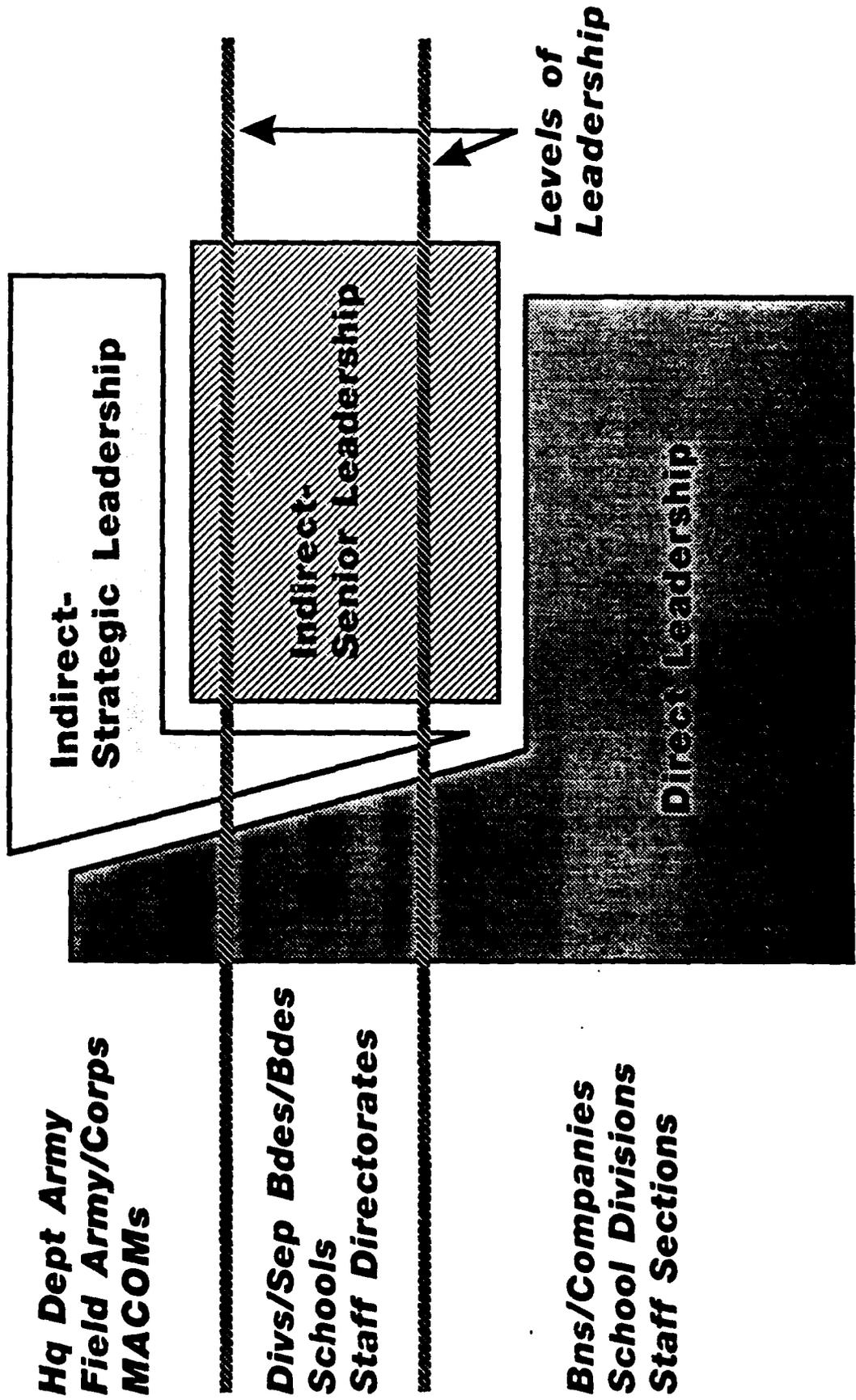


FIGURE 1

For this discussion, a strategic leader is defined as an individual occupying a position of responsibility at the top of the organization. For the United States Army that includes some three-star and all four-star general officers -- e.g., Chief of Staff, Army (CSA); commanders in chief (CINCs); Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans (DCSOPS); Deputy Chief of Staff for Logistics (DCSLOG). These are officers that are held accountable by the institution for getting work done. Their focus is accomplishing goals and objectives while carrying out or implementing tasks, projects, and programs. Their goals and objectives come in varying degrees of complexity based upon what has to be done to complete the task and what problems are encountered. As one moves higher in the organization the more complex the tasks become. The strategic leader's function, therefore, is directly associated with his possession of the necessary leadership, managerial, and technical competencies to perform in the position assigned. Since strategic leaders are responsible for the output of the entire organization, getting the organization to move in a common direction with subordinate personnel operating innovatively and creatively while achieving their full potential becomes the focus.

Department of the Army Field Manual (DA FM) 22-103: Leadership and Command at Senior Levels, states that it is the responsibility of senior leaders to create the conditions for sustained success by directly and indirectly

Influencing organizations to achieve results.<sup>2</sup> They do this through a blend of vision, communication, and technical know-how to achieve the desired effect. Of these three ingredients, the least understood and the most difficult to quantify is the aspect of vision. Yet, it is a critical component of the strategic leader's make-up. A leader without vision, more often than not, is judged by those around him as moving without direction and ineffective. One need look no further than to the critics of President George Bush's crisis-management style and his continuing search for the "vision thing" to underscore its importance.<sup>3</sup>

### STRATEGIC VISION

What is strategic vision? The two previously-cited Department of the Army publications are the only recent, official military treatments of this key element of the leadership dynamic. FM 22-103 dedicates a complete chapter to the discussion of leadership vision. It is described in terms of senior leader attributes, perspectives, imperatives, and implementation. DA PAM 600-80 describes vision in terms of organizational planning and establishes timeframes to distinguish among the three levels of leadership. Yet, both publications are woefully deficient in their ability to clearly and simply describe vision and its attributes. The chapter in FM 22-103 is

confusing in organization and lacks practical examples. DA PAM 600-80 is too conceptual and complex in its presentation. It is obvious that the preparation of these two documents was done by different agencies with different audiences in mind. They were not coordinated or integrated to insure consistency in content or clarity in presentation. Therefore, we need to look elsewhere to reduce the complexity and to gain understanding of the concept of vision.

There has been a great deal written in the public sector, by both military and civilian professionals, to describe vision and its essential nature to successful leadership. The authors of many books and articles appearing in recent years on management and leadership have, without exception, expended considerable energy developing the theory and context of vision. Leading management practitioners and theorists -- such as Warren Bennis, Burt Nanus, John Gardner, James Kouzes, Barry Posner, and Thomas Peters -- have worked diligently to define vision.

Some of these authors speak of vision in terms of process, some speak of it in terms of possible futures, and others refer to it as the essence of successful leadership. Although there exist some rather distinct differences in the approaches taken, there are consistent similarities in content. For these authors, and as stated in FM 22-103, vision is the strategic leader's -- top management's -- concept of what the organization must be capable of doing by

some future point in time.<sup>4</sup> Put another way, vision is the leader's mental image of what the future ought to be like and is expressed as a desired end-state. The end-state is frequently described in terms of what needs be done now and in the future to achieve the desired results.<sup>5</sup> With these considerations in mind, vision would appear to possess more specific attributes or characteristics which help to shape it.

### STRATEGIC VISION CHARACTERISTICS

What are the characteristics of strategic vision? What distinguishes one vision from another; successful from unsuccessful? Visions come in many forms. Why are some better than others? The collective efforts of the previously identified authors has resulted in the accumulation of considerable data on the subject. What is noteworthy is that successful visions appear to share certain common elements. Analysis of the existing body of knowledge indicates the following characteristics of vision:

- \* a mental image (a picture in the mind).<sup>6</sup>
- \* clearly communicated, easily understood.<sup>7</sup>
- \* generates excitement, appeals to the gut.<sup>8</sup>
- \* creates energy and commitment.<sup>9</sup>
- \* describes a desirable future state.<sup>10</sup>
- \* embedded in some environmental context.<sup>11</sup>
- \* establishes/reinforces values of the group.<sup>12</sup>

This list of candidate characteristics points to general agreement among the writers that vision must provide both direction and inspiration for the organization. They agree, also, that it is important for strategic leaders to create and communicate the vision. For the vision to succeed, it must be communicated clearly and simply so that the desired future state can be achieved while focusing and empowering subordinates.

On the surface, achieving vision would appear to be a relatively easy task; but, in fact vision can be amazingly difficult to articulate and institutionalize. The accomplishment or achievement of vision becomes inextricably tied to the attributes, perspectives, and competencies of the leader. Here the leader is key. As in most other situations, what the leader does, or does not do, determines the outcome; determines success or failure.

### STRATEGIC LEADER COMPETENCIES

The significance of the role played by the strategic leader and the importance of vision as a part of the strategic leader's make-up demands that certain competencies exist. Department of the Army Field Manual 22-100: Military Leadership, presents nine leadership competencies or functions that all leaders must perform if an organization is to operate effectively.<sup>13</sup> They include communications, supervision, teaching and counseling, team

development, tactical and technical proficiency, use of available systems, and professional ethics. These competencies are required to provide a broad framework for leadership development and assessment. They define the areas where leaders must be competent. These competencies are at the heart of the U.S. Army's "BE, KNOW, DO" leadership philosophy.<sup>14</sup>

There is another competency -- the skill of problem solving -- required at the strategic leader level. It is only briefly mentioned as a part of the decision-making process in FM 22-100. It is general in its scope, but specific in its application. Its possession is critical to success within the strategic leadership arena. As such, it requires further elaboration.

General Maxwell R. Thurman, recently retired, operated extensively in the strategic leadership arena during his thirty-eight year career. Prior to his departure from active duty he served as the Commander in Chief - South, as Commander of the United States Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), four years as the Vice Chief of Staff of the Army, and as the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel. He amassed a reputation during his years of service as more than just a player in the strategic leadership environment. In fact, he is widely recognized today, both inside and outside of government, for his incisive problem solving abilities and skillful direction of the Army during an important period of its history. He spent considerable

time, during his presentation to the United States Army War College Strategic Leadership Conference conducted in February 1991, addressing strategic leader problem solving capacity.<sup>15</sup>

General Thurman characterized the strategic leadership environment in terms of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. The nature of the work and the tasks to be accomplished under these circumstances vary in difficulty based on the problems to be overcome. As one progresses higher in organizational leadership, the more complex the tasks become. The complexity comes from such factors as the rapid rate of change, the number of variables that exist, the interdependence of the variables, and the uncertainty of events and outcomes. Because of these factors, strategic leaders must possess considerable problem solving ability.

How does this skill occur? What are the factors that influence a person's ability to solve problems or handle complexity? Some would have you believe that it is in the nature of the individual. Others, particularly theorists of leadership/management development, believe the skill is nurtured or learned. There are other factors that might influence the development of problem-solving ability, but these represent the commonly accepted approaches of the day. Most of the corporate community and the military services subscribe to the latter school of thought. An individual's productivity (work done) is a function of his problem solving ability as magnified by his acquired knowledge,

skills, values, temperament, and wisdom.<sup>16</sup> People vary in their problem-solving capacity and their ability to handle complexity because it is a learned skill. People start out at differing levels. As we age, we develop and improve our capacity, but we mature at different rates because of the range of knowledge and skills acquired.

### STRATEGIC LEADER DEVELOPMENT

This discussion brings us to the next logical question. Assuming that they are, how are strategic leaders developed? The Army has committed itself to a dynamic leader development system consisting of three, equally important, pillars: formal (institutional) schooling, practical (on-the-job) experience, and individual development (self-study).<sup>17</sup> The purpose of this three-pronged approach is to develop leaders capable of maintaining a trained and ready Army. The intent is to develop leaders by providing the necessary skills, knowledge, and experience required to achieve that purpose.

The institutional training provides the formal training that all soldiers receive on a progressive and sequential basis to prepare them for positions of increasing responsibility. Operational experience is gained through differing duty assignments to provide leaders the opportunity to use and build upon what was learned in the institutional setting. Individual initiative and

self-improvement are stressed because of the limits of time and selection in the formal education system. Therefore, self-study is necessary to expand the knowledge base through sources of continuing education.

The development of strategic leaders is, by its nature, a long-term process. From an institutional development standpoint, the process spans an entire career and is slow in realization. It does not require close scrutiny to identify the fact that the development of such notable strategic leaders as Patton, Eisenhower, and Marshall was the culmination of career-long endeavors.<sup>18</sup> But, what distinguished them from the rest of their contemporaries? Each, as so many others, had labored through arduous programs of self-study and reflection and each was a product of the high quality professional education system of the day.

I believe the discriminator to be their experience base. As they progressed through successively higher positions of responsibility, they had to master the requirements of the position, thereby broadening their frames of reference as they moved upward.<sup>19</sup> This broadening effect resulted because of their need to adapt to the new situations and changes that they experienced.<sup>20</sup> Out of this developed understanding and the ability to cope. In a sense, they expanded their comfort zone and grew into the position and the environment they were required to operate. The fact that each of these officers was required to perform duties

and operate in an environment associated with higher rank and problem solving skills early in their careers, suggest that role and not rank alone can determine who is operating in the strategic leadership envelope. It would also explain how these same officers were so well prepared to assume the responsibilities of strategic level leadership when they were called upon.

### STRATEGIC LEADER SELECTION/MANAGEMENT

If experience in the strategic leadership environment is important to leader development, then today's Army must identify and manage key leadership billets judiciously. Captains, majors, and lieutenants colonel, who have demonstrated a high degree of problem-solving skill should be given the opportunity to observe others and participate in running complex organizations. Some are, but many more are not.

Recent personal experience supports the fact that the Army War College is the first attempt, within the institutional setting, to bring about the transition to the strategic level of leadership, both in understanding and orientation. Waiting until an individual is selected to attend the Army War College is not the time to begin the transition process. It must be a continuous effort that recognizes the most gifted and nurtures them within the Army as an institution.

Today's centralized management policies have served us well during a period of expansion, but may not be appropriate to the small professional force envisioned in the future. By today's standard, there will be fewer opportunities. That may mean that the selection process will merely identify a smaller slice of the available talent pool. But, even under these circumstances, the selection process must be more precise. To continue to operate on the premise of equal treatment and selection of the most-qualified will not adequately meet the need. Although this approach may appear elitist in nature, we simply can not settle for "good," when the demands of the future require "the best." The future three and four-star strategic leaders of tomorrow are serving today as captains, majors, and lieutenants colonel. Their selection and transition must already be under way.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

Certain changes must be effected now to ensure the necessary preparation and development of future strategic leaders. What I proposed should not be construed as all encompassing, but part of a fundamental change to the overall leader development process that is at work in the Army today. For the sake of presentation, these recommended changes are prioritized in the order in which they appear.

\* Commence the presentation of strategic leadership concepts early on in the officer education process. It should begin during the basic branch courses and progress through the Combined Arms Service Support School (CAS3) and command and staff course curriculums. The purpose is to create awareness, understanding, and lay the ground work for transition. The desired outcome is to create a broader depth and awareness that can be carried forward into future assignments.

\* Expose junior officers to practical experiences -- assignments -- early on that gives them an appreciation and feel for an organization's strategic environment. There is risk associated here because of the dependence upon potentially reluctant incumbent leaders to "share" their insights and provide subordinates the freedom to learn by doing without recrimination. This can be accomplished at varying levels with the intent of allowing the subordinate to interact with the environment and make sense out of their experiences. The outcome, here, would be to broaden their frames of reference, while developing confidence and technical competency.

\* Expand officer time-in-grade and time-on-station. This may appear to fly in the face of the first two recommendations and is more apt to be a natural result of the dramatic force reductions envisioned today, but it is critical to the professional development of junior

officers and the Army's future strategic leaders. Technical competence is the foundation of leader development and there is no substitute for it within an action-oriented institution such as the Army. Rapid advancement and short assignment tenures rob junior officers of the ability to truly hone their professional skills and become well schooled in the dynamics of their organizations. This initiative must be carefully balanced against the need to recognize and reward the truly "fast burners," but it is necessary to provide the requisite grounding needed to become a master of one's profession.

#### CONCLUSION

The role of the strategic leader is immensely important and complex. Strategic leaders must promulgate a vision of where the organization is going and what it will look like in the future. That vision must be clearly communicated and inculcate a sense of confidence throughout the organization. Subordinates must know that the leaders are on top of things and where they want to take the organization. That same vision must allow subordinate elements to align their own sense of purpose and direction, which is essential for building organization wide consensus, loyalty, and commitment. The strategic leader must also create an institutional culture that provides the necessary conditions for encouraging everyone to move in the same

direction, to operate at full individual capacity, and to do so willingly and enthusiastically. Lastly, the strategic leader must articulate and institutionalize a set of values that reinforces the vision and the culture. Getting the vision, culture, and values aligned and to cause the organization to move in a common direction is the role and challenge of the strategic leader. The strategic leader must commit his entire being to translating the vision into action within the existing situational, time, and resource constraints.

Unfortunately, no leader has perfect foresight. Envisioning the future is not a science of exactitude. It is more an art of continually assessing probabilities, applying sound judgment, and creatively applying resources to best meet the requirements of the existing or evolving situation. These variables have a profound effect on an organization. Particularly one such as our Army, which seems to be in a continual state of change. Consequently, visioning is characterized by both continuity and change. In the end, the success of one's vision is judged after the fact. If your vision is realized, then you are a success. If not, then you obviously lacked vision.

The next few years will be a period of considerable change, both at home and abroad. The environment in which the Army operates is undergoing a fundamental transformation. Extraordinary changes in global geopolitics have necessitated a thorough reassessment of US military

strategy, organization, deployment, and hardware. Our challenge is to accommodate change while preserving the essence of the great Army we have today. General Gordon R. Sullivan, Army Chief of Staff, has a vision of the Army as "a strategic force trained and ready to fight and achieve decisive victory wherever and whenever America calls." The major task is to reshape the Army while sustaining readiness. We must maintain the edge in order for the vision to be realized. It will not be easy. Our current leaders must take the vision of what must be done, communicate it in a way that the intent is clearly understood, and then be tough enough to ensure its execution. Without this, the vision will never be translated into reality.

Hopefully the strategic leaders of tomorrow are being prepared for future uncertainties today. As successors of the vision, they will be expected to bring it to fruition.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>US Department of the Army, Pamphlet 600-80: Executive Leadership (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 19 June 1987), 2.

<sup>2</sup>US Department of the Army, Field Manual 22-103: Leadership and Command at Senior Levels (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 21 June 1987), 3.

<sup>3</sup>Kenneth T. Walsh, "The Man of the Moment," U.S. News and World Report, 23 September 1991, 31-33.

<sup>4</sup>Field Manual 22-103, 7.

<sup>5</sup>Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus, Leaders (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 141.

<sup>6</sup>Burt Nanus, "Futures-Creative Leadership," The Futurist, May-June 1990, 14.

<sup>7</sup>Bennis and Nanus, 103.

<sup>8</sup>Bennis and Nanus, 107-108.

<sup>9</sup>Herman Kahn, William Brown, and Leon Martel, The Next 200 Years: A Scenario for America and The World (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1976), 209.

<sup>10</sup>John W. Gardner, On Leadership (New York: The Free Press, 1990), 130; Nanus, 17.

<sup>11</sup>Gardner, 131.

<sup>12</sup>Nanus, 16.

<sup>13</sup>US Department of the Army, Field Manual 22-100: Military Leadership (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 31 July 1990), 66-68.

<sup>14</sup>FM 22-100, 1-2.

<sup>15</sup>Maxwell R. Thurman, "Strategic Leadership," presentation to the Strategic Leadership Conference, US Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 11 February 1991.

<sup>16</sup>Thurman. As expressed during his presentation; working capacity or getting work done as a function (F) = (problem solving power) x (knowledge, skills, values, temperament, and wisdom).

<sup>17</sup>FM 22-100, vii.

<sup>18</sup> For a detailed discussion of the leaders cited see: Roger H. Nye, "Whence Patton's Military Genius?", Parameters, Volume 21, Number 4, Winter 1991-92, 60-73; Stephen E. Ambrose, Eisenhower: Volume 1. Soldier, General of the Army, President-Elect, 1890-1952 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 307-390; Forrest C. Pogue, George C. Marshall: Education of a General, 1880-1939 (New York: Viking Press, Inc., 1963).

<sup>19</sup> DA Pam 600-80, 3. Frames of reference are discussed here as the means to structure and interpret experiences.

<sup>20</sup> George B. Forsythe, "The Preparation of Strategic Leaders," Parameters, Volume 21, Number 1, Spring 1992, 42-44.

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