

## DEVELOPING FUTURE MILITARY LEADERS: POTENTIAL PREDICTORS FOR STRATEGIC SUCCESS

BY

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STRATEGIC SUCCESS**

by

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## ABSTRACT

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To be successful, a strategic leader must exhibit a wide spectrum of competencies based on training, experience and education. Recently, multiple strategic leaders have not “survived” their strategic leadership tours. In the past three years, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has accepted the resignation of three, four star generals and one four star flag officer, three of which were assigned to Central Command (CENTCOM) when they resigned; a testament to the inherently diverse campaigns being waged in CENTCOM’s area of responsibility.

It is not enough to blame these resignations of very successful tactical and operational leaders on the complex nature of strategic positions or on the persistent state of war being waged by our nation. This paper looks at the biographies of the four generals/flag officers that resigned, and compares their civilian education, their joint staff experience, their combatant command staff experience, and their intermediate and senior professional military education to the careers of over 40 other four star generals/flag officers that are currently, or who have recently served in strategic leadership positions across the Department of Defense (DoD).



## DEVELOPING FUTURE MILITARY LEADERS: POTENTIAL PREDICTORS FOR STRATEGIC SUCCESS

Strength lies in differences, not in similarities.

—Stephen R. Covey<sup>1</sup>

Strategic leadership is not easy in any environment but in the military it is even more difficult.<sup>2</sup> A good military is not measured by quarterly earnings or profit margins but by the defense of national security, reducing loss of life, and protecting the rights delineated in our Constitution. To be successful, a strategic leader must exhibit a wide spectrum of competencies based on training, experience and education. Recently, multiple strategic leaders have not served their full strategic leadership tours.<sup>3</sup> In the past three years, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has accepted the resignation of three, four star generals and one four star flag officer, three of which were assigned to Central Command (CENTCOM) when they resigned; a testament to the inherently diverse campaigns being waged in CENTCOM's area of responsibility.

It is not enough to blame these resignations of very successful tactical and operational leaders on the complex nature of their strategic positions or on the persistent state of war our nation is now a part of. This paper examines the biographies of the four generals/flag officers that resigned, and compares their civilian education, their joint staff experience (below the level of Colonel and at the rank of Colonel or above), their combatant command staff experience, and their intermediate and senior professional military education to the careers of over 40 other four star general/flag officers that are currently, or who have recently, successfully served in strategic leadership positions across the Department of Defense (DoD).

For the purposes of this research and to ensure similar strategic operating environments were being compared, being strategically successful is defined as the leader not being fired or forced to resign/retire early from a strategic leadership billet. This somewhat simplistic definition was derived due to the volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) each strategic leader must face in their strategic leadership positions.<sup>4</sup> Also, only those four star general/flag officers that led during persistent combat operations, such as Desert Storm, Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom were included and analyzed in this study.

In today's complex world, strategic leaders face a dizzying array of issues. The U.S. Army's Field Manual 6-22 states, "In the strategic environment of extreme VUCA, strategic leaders must think in multiple time periods and apply more adaptability and agility."<sup>5</sup> These strategic characteristics make it difficult for the strategic leader to be effective. As Secretary of Defense Gates stated in his address to the Army War College in April 2009, "By the time a decision gets to the President, there are no good options."<sup>6</sup> In effect, the strategic leader must make a "least bad" decision because the leader rarely has all of the necessary information available.<sup>7</sup> If these strategic leaders waited for the perfect decision or for all of the information to come to light, their commands would be paralyzed by inaction and would not retain the necessary flexibility and foresight for success.

Strategic leaders must rely on a broad base of experience, both within and outside of the military, and fully understand all of the capabilities their commands have at their disposal to execute the mission successfully. If they approach strategic decision making the same way that they approached making decisions at the tactical and

operational level, they run the risk of not utilizing or including portions of America's diplomatic, informational or economic power bases that could make the difference between success and failure.

It is evident in the failures of the four strategic leaders selected for this paper that some part of their training, experience, or education was lacking and caused the need for the Secretary of Defense to facilitate the early dismissal from their strategic billet. Secretary Gates has stated, "The United States would not be able to sustain complex, protracted missions like Iraq and Afghanistan at such a high standard of military performance without the dedication of seasoned professionals."<sup>8</sup> These seasoned professionals exercise their trade in an environment never experienced before. "No major war in our history has been fought with a smaller percentage of this country's citizens in uniform full-time."<sup>9</sup> This stress on the men and women fighting the war, added to the agile, non-sovereign adversaries utilizing non-traditional tactics has drastically changed the necessary qualities required for successful strategic leadership. Today's strategic leaders must be better communicators with their political leadership and do a better job of supporting publicized national/political objectives.

By analyzing the careers of those that were successful in their strategic leadership positions and comparing them to those that were not, career broadening opportunities that show a trend for strategic leadership success will be identified in the areas of education and staff experience that this study deems necessary for officers to be successful at the strategic level.

The table on page 5 includes the information gleaned from the biographies of forty-six, four star general/flag officers that are currently serving, or who have served

since Desert Storm as strategic leaders while America has been in a persistent state of war. The rows depicted in the figure consist of the seven areas of each general/flag officer's experience which were analyzed. These areas are: received a civilian Masters as a full time student, received a doctorate, served in a joint billet (either on the Joint Chief of Staff (JCS) staff or on their respective service staff) before the rank of Colonel, served in a joint billet (either on the JCS staff or on their respective service staff) after the rank of Colonel, served on a Combatant Commander's staff, location they received their intermediate professional military education, and location they received their senior professional military education.

The columns within the table below group the general/flag officers according to the strategic leadership positions they hold or have recently held. These six groups are: JCS, Combatant Command Commanders, Air Force Major Command (MAJCOM) Commanders, Army MACOM Commanders, previous CENTCOM or International Security Assistant Force (ISAF) Commanders, and those general/flag officers that were forced to resign. The three, four star generals and one flag officer included in this last category are Generals Stanley McChrystal (resigned as ISAF/CC), David McKiernan (resigned as ISAF/CC), Michael Moseley (resigned as Chief of Staff of the Air Force, and Admiral William Fallon (resigned as CENTCOM/CC). Information for some of the categories was not obtainable for Navy and Marine Corps officers included in this study which causes some categories to include less than the total of forty-six officers.

Command	JCS	COCOM	AF MAJCOM	ARMY MACOM	CENTCOM & ISAF	Resigned
#	(10)	(10)	(9)	(6)	(7)	(4)
Civilian						
Masters	4	3	2	4	6	1
Doctorate	0	1	1	0	1	0
*Jr Joint Staff	1	6	7	3	4	2
**Sr Joint Staff	9	9	9	6	6	4
COCOM Staff	5	10	5	3	6	2
*** Intermediate	1 Svc	5 Svc	2 Svc	5 Svc	5 Svc	3 Svc
Professional	2 OS	1 OS	7 Corr	1 Jt	2 Jt	1 Jt
Military	2 Jt	2 Corr				
Education	1 Corr					
*** Senior	1 Svc	2 Svc	1 Svc	1 Svc	5 Svc	1 Svc
Professional	1 OS	4 Jt	8 Jt	4 Jt	2 Civ	2 Jt
Military	3 Jt	1 Corr		1 Corr		1 Civ
Education	1 Corr					

\* Jr. Joint Staff is defined as serving in a joint billet (either on the JCS staff or Service Staff) before the rank of Colonel

\*\* Sr. Joint Staff is defined as serving in a joint billet (either on the JCS staff or Service Staff) at the rank of Colonel or higher

\*\*\* Intermediate and Senior Service Education have five categories: same service (Svc), other service (OS), joint (Jt), correspondence (Corr), and civilian (Civ)

Regardless of category, when analyzing the experiences of these four star general/flag officers, it was readily apparent all of them had substantial command experience at the tactical and operational levels. For these reasons, tactical and operational leadership positions were not analyzed as an indicator for successful or unsuccessful strategic leadership.

The fact that each of these leaders had multiple command tours is not a surprise. Success in operations has been the identifier for many years in all services as officers moved up the ranks. In a study conducted in 2002 by the Industrial College of the Armed Forces, thirty-three general/flag officers were asked to rank the importance of five developmental processes: institutional education, mentorship, operational assignments, other developmental experiences, and self-development. Twenty, or almost two thirds, of these general/flag officers selected operational assignments as the most important factor in developing strategic leaders.<sup>10</sup> The reason given was that, “Operational assignments, were viewed as the most challenging experiences and hence as providing the best opportunity for altering a leader’s frame of reference.”<sup>11</sup>

In April of 2007, the Army initiated a Review of Education, Training, and Assignments of Leaders (RETAL) task force to, “...address the need to develop multi-skilled leaders at all ranks—especially at the senior levels.”<sup>12</sup> One issue they found was that a culture had been developed within the officer corps which discouraged assignments outside the current fight. The expectation was that officers would keep their boots muddy and, “...focus exclusively on the lethal fight.”<sup>13</sup> The limiting factor in this mindset, and what will be shown through the analysis of the data in the table on

page 5, is that, “strategic leadership requires a much broader skill set than leadership practiced at lower levels.”<sup>14</sup>

Receiving education at civilian organizations has not been as high of a priority as it was fifteen years ago. “In 1995, eleven out of thirty-six newly selected Army brigadier generals had attended full time graduate school earlier in their careers.”<sup>15</sup> The fact that civilian graduate school education was important to the Army is reflected in the careers of current and recently retired four star generals. Both the Chief of Staff and the Vice Chief of Staff of the Army attended civilian graduate schools as full time students. Five of the past six generals in charge of the troops in Iraq as well as four of the six current Army MACOM commanders have also been the benefactors of full-time civilian graduate school education. Despite this track record, “By 2005, the number of newly selected Army brigadier generals who had taken time out of their careers for full time graduate study had dropped to just three out of thirty-eight.”<sup>16</sup> This twenty-two percent drop in civilian graduate school education among brigadier general officers is a part of Army culture where improvement must be made if future strategic leaders are going to be successful. The RETAL task force recommended graduate level education at a civilian university, “...an initiative which seeks to identify successful officers (i.e., those most likely to command at the battalion and brigade levels) and give them an experience to improve their mental agility and broaden their horizons.”<sup>17</sup>

In another study conducted by the RAND Corporation in 2010, twenty-eight general/flag officers were interviewed and asked what was necessary to grow strategic leaders for future military conflicts. “While not all interviewees experienced an education at civilian institutions, those who did, found it of the greatest value in their

evolution to strategic-level leadership.”<sup>18</sup> Others have echoed this claim and tied it to a concept which permeates our professional military education (PME); the need for officers to network and cross-dialogue with officers from other services they may work with in the future. Much like the vitality of networking when attending PME, the same can be said when pursuing civilian graduate degrees. Sending young officers who display potential to command as Lieutenant Colonels and Colonels to civilian universities, affords these future leaders the ability to network and cross-dialogue with potential civilian policy makers. It also exposes them to perspectives they would not otherwise experience had they not attended a civilian institution.<sup>19</sup>

As the responsibility and profile of General Mike Petraeus has risen, so has the opinion that much of his success can be tied to his career path. Unlike many of his contemporaries that stayed operational throughout their careers and rose through the ranks holding command at all levels, General Piraeus did not command at the Battalion level. Instead, he left the combat operations of the Army for four years to receive his masters and doctorate degrees before instructing at West Point. It is evident this small break from traditional army combat operations did not hurt his ability to command large organizations later in his career. In fact, many argue that it was the broadening experiences he gained while earning his masters and doctorate degrees that have served him so well as he moved up the ranks in the Army.

A study published in February 2010 by the Center for a New American Strategy recommends, “...the services to increase the use of sabbaticals to allow for officers to pursue higher education and additional experiences.”<sup>20</sup> This opinion has not always been the cadence that our military has marched to. In fact, former Secretary of the Air

Force, Michael Wynne stated, “The Air Force needs to give more of its officers the chance to earn a doctorate if it wants to be a real contender for joint theater commands.”<sup>21</sup> He readily admits he did not do this when he was Secretary but now that he has analyzed the situation from a distance, he believes officers with this experience and knowledge have an advantage in today’s VUCA environment.

The current Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) Commander, General Martin Dempsey has focused his command, and hence Army training, on the value of education and leader development by making these issues his command’s number one priority.<sup>22</sup> In a Leader Development Strategy which was released in October 2009, emphasis was made to, “ensure service schools reflect current realities while preparing for an uncertain operating environment.”<sup>23</sup> Though education and leader development are priorities, it will take the Army over twenty years to get an officer through a doctorate program and then rise through the ranks to a four star leadership position. Will strategic leaders of tomorrow be willing to invest in full-time civilian graduate programs knowing that the officers selected to earn a masters or doctorate today will not be strategic leaders for another twenty years?

Another experience that can be analyzed is staff experience and its affect on strategic leaders. Three different levels of staff experience were researched for this paper and are displayed in the table on page 5. The first, junior staff experience, is defined as serving on the JCS staff or on the officer’s respective service staff before the rank of Colonel. The second, senior staff experience, is defined as serving on the JCS staff or on the officer’s respective service staff at the rank of Colonel or higher, and the third category was serving on a combatant commander’s staff regardless of rank.

Based on articles in numerous periodical journals, it was a failure to understand or interact with civilian leaders in Washington D.C. that led to the resignation of all four unsuccessful general/flag officers looked at in this paper. All four general/flag officers disagreed by their actions or through the press with the guidance they were being given by their civilian leaders. Whether it was Admiral Fallon's *Esquire* interview questioning the competence of the stated policy on war with Iran, or General Moseley's public stance on the desire for F-22 fighters and not unmanned aerial vehicles; these leaders were unable to lead strategically while also meeting their civilian leaders' intent. Even though both of these leaders were very successful in their tactical and operational commands and had served multiple tours on joint staffs, they were unable to strategically follow their political leader's stated objectives.

Due to the inability of these four "unsuccessful" general/flag officers to interact with their civilian leaders, joint staff assignments were only considered if they were on the JCS or the officer's respective service staff. It was important to not treat all joint experiences as the same. Though all joint jobs are beneficial to officer development, the results had to allow for analysis of the importance of these general/flag officers understanding how the system worked inside the beltway as they served in strategic leadership positions. For this reason, no positions outside of the beltway were analyzed.

In today's VUCA environment, it is hard to imagine operations that are not joint in nature. Joint experience is vital to being a leader in military operations. The current Secretary and Chief of Staff of the Air Force believe that the key to being in strategic leadership positions is to maximize joint experience before the officer makes the rank of

general.<sup>24</sup> To ensure that future strategic leaders are getting vital joint experience early in their careers, Secretary Michael Donley said, “I lean toward placing our best people in joint opportunities.”<sup>25</sup>

Retired General John Shaud, former Chief of Staff, Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, agrees. He believes, “Mastering the art of success as a staff officer is very much a part of the process of mastering the art of leadership that will propel you into positions of increasing challenge and responsibility in all aspects of your profession.”<sup>26</sup> Most of the joint positions the general/flag officers in the table on page 5 held before the rank of Colonel were as executive officers in the office of their service chief of staff. These officers had been identified at an early stage in their careers as having potential for strategic leadership and were put in a job where they could gain experiences which would help them as they were promoted through the ranks.

Senior joint staff positions are almost mandatory for general/flag officers. For the forty-six general/flag officers looked at for this research, only three had not served on the joint staff in the rank of Colonel or higher; this made them the exception rather than the rule. The reason there is a propensity to ensure general/flag officers serve on joint staffs may be traced back to Clausewitz. He wrote, “The political object is the goal, war is the means of reaching it, and the means can never be considered in isolation from their purposes.”<sup>27</sup> It is crucial that strategic leaders understand what the political objects (ends) are. Today, war (or military means) is but one way to reach the ends. The strategic leader needs to have a firm understanding of what assets are at their disposal and utilize them to meet the political objectives. “By the time a person achieves a senior position, they should have achieved some understanding of grand strategy and

full integration of the nation's military, economic, and diplomatic/political instruments of power."<sup>28</sup> Everything cannot be solved with military power and the strategic leader must realize this to be successful.

Some have delineated what type of general/flag officer is needed in a counterinsurgency war. Today's military has had to conduct a lot of missions that have not traditionally been a part of the military's mission sets. It is the opinion of at least one published author that, "As a result, political generals do better in a counterinsurgency than gung-ho warriors."<sup>29</sup> These political general/flag officers have a better understanding of what the President and others in Washington D.C. want to achieve, and know the instruments of power outside of the military that can be used to meet the political ends. Without the experience gained inside the beltway, a strategic leader may focus on military capabilities which do not correlate directly to the political objectives. This disconnect can lead to a disagreement on how the strategic leader should support the stated political objectives and if an agreement can't be reached; the senior leader may be forced to resign.

The Air Force has not done a good job of developing strategic leaders with a strong joint background. Of the 120 joint theater commanders appointed since the Air Force was formed in 1947, only five have been filled by Air Force officers.<sup>30</sup> This statistic is understandable if you realize that many of the strategic positions have been in commands with a preponderance of land forces, thus requiring a land force general to lead them. This does not explain why a career Naval aviator (Admiral Fallon) was given command of CENTCOM or why a combatant command which requires a strong air component such as Pacific Command has never been led by an Air Force leader. A

more probable cause is the mindset the former Secretary of the Air Force, Michael Wynne had while running the Air Force. “Rather than offer up the most highly qualified three and four star generals for joint theater commands, I kept them in house for high profile billets within the Air Force.”<sup>31</sup> This approach was good for the internal efforts of the Air Force, but stunted the opportunity for a whole generation of Air Force strategic leaders to lead a joint force and garner experience as a senior officer on joint and combatant commander staffs.

Most of the general/flag officers included in the table on page 5 have also served on a combatant commander staff. Of the thirty-two who have served on a combatant commander staff, almost all of them had been a part of operational forces organized under a combatant command. Even though many were not a part of these staffs, the RAND Corporation study showed that, “...nearly every three and four star interviewee advocated staff time at a combatant command. They felt these tours gave mid-career officers an understanding of how to coordinate and resource theater-level operations and leverage interagency capabilities.”<sup>32</sup> Unfortunately, very few of the general/flag officers analyzed in this paper served on a combatant commander’s staff as a mid-career officer and had to learn the intricacies of strategic leadership while in the commander’s seat.

Where the general/flag officers in this study received their intermediate and senior PME was also analyzed. Based on criteria for promotion, every general/flag officer had accomplished intermediate and senior PME. The general/flag officers interviewed as a part of the RAND Corporation study on growing strategic leaders felt,

“PME was integral to leadership development, particularly when PME for majors or lieutenant commanders was with another service.”<sup>33</sup>

General Norman Schwarzkopf saw the benefits of PME as he put together a team to plan the Desert Storm Campaign. His team was composed exclusively of graduates of the School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS), a second year honors program at the Army’s intermediate PME course.<sup>34</sup> These planners, through their second year of study, had developed the ability to understand the VUCA nature of war and think strategically. Major General Scales (RET), currently president of a consulting firm specializing in land power, war gaming and strategic leadership feels as if, “We have too few of these officers because the services tend to accelerate the careers of officers who, early in their careers, show talent at the tactical level of war.”<sup>35</sup> In his professional opinion, these qualities were not necessarily the same qualities needed to be successful strategic leaders. It begs the question, are we promoting officers based on their demonstrated potential for operating at the next rank or are we rewarding them for past performance? In most instances, we are promoting based on past performance with the mindset that if the officer succeeded at the tactical and operational levels, there is no reason to believe they will be unsuccessful as a strategic leader.

Now that the criteria for choosing these categories has been explained and experts’ opinions as to the impact these areas may have on strategic leadership success or failure have been stated; analysis of the facts is required. Looking for trends in the information that was extracted from the general/flag officers’ biographies is necessary to try and pin point a template for developing future strategic leaders.

Analyzing the information contained in the biographies and then tying that info to successful or unsuccessful strategic leadership proved challenging. Though trends could be seen in the different categories, it was more difficult to associate those trends to success or failure. Secretary Gates felt success would go to those senior leaders who were, “principled, creative, and reform-minded leaders. It is these leaders who help their service adapt to a constantly changing strategic environment characterized by persistent conflict.”<sup>36</sup> Army Field Manual 6-22 defines success in a strategic leader as one who, “develops strong skills in selecting and developing talented and capable leaders for critical duty positions.”<sup>37</sup> The key is being able to associate the education, experience, and training which allows the strategic leader to develop these traits and capabilities.

The first category to be looked at was receiving a masters degree from a civilian organization. Only one of the four general/flag officers who resigned received their masters degree as a full-time student from a civilian university. Meanwhile, almost half of the successful strategic leaders attended civilian graduate school as a full-time student. There is little doubt that many of the successful general/flag officers were sent to receive civilian education based on the perception they were going to be successful professional officers. The officers who received masters degrees as full-time students still garnered the necessary leadership skills to be successful even though they had less time in operations compared to their contemporaries. The advantage they had over most of the unsuccessful general/flag officers was the broadening experience of attending a civilian institution and being exposed to the thought processes and mind sets of future civilian leaders. This experience is an advantage for strategic leaders

who need to deal with civilian bosses, civilian counterparts, and civilian subordinates. Though not necessary for strategic success, the numbers show that this experience was beneficial to successful strategic leaders and should be emphasized as a part of their future development. Despite this fact and the findings of the 2007 RETAL study, the Army is still sending officers to full-time graduate school with little or no analysis of future leadership potential. Of the 412 slots that are allocated each year, 155 go to those who will follow-on as instructors at West Point. The other 257 slots go to those officers who may need them to enhance their chosen career paths (i.e., public affair officers, foreign area officers, etc).<sup>38</sup>

The trend of a full-time graduate degree leading to strategic success did not continue in the category of earning a doctorate. Only three of the forty-two successful strategic leaders, and none of the four unsuccessful general/flag officers earned a doctorate. These numbers do not point towards a successful or unsuccessful trend when analyzing strategic leadership and the earning of a doctorate. There are too many cases of successful strategic leaders who do not have a doctorate to point to the fact that a doctorate would have helped the general/flag officers who resigned in their strategic leadership positions. Despite the love affair many experts have with General Piraeus' background, getting a doctorate does not seem to be as necessary as getting a masters in the development of strategic leaders. The time required in the pursuit of a doctorate may be better utilized in a joint staff or combatant command staff to learn strategic concepts.

Next, junior staff experience was analyzed. Both the successful and unsuccessful general/flag officers served on the joint staff at about the same rate of fifty

percent. Nothing points to a trend where there is a greater chance of success at the strategic level by serving in a joint staff position before the rank of Colonel. Though many experts and studies asserted staff experience for the mid-level officer as crucial to their development, this does not prove to be true based on the general/flag officers analyzed in this study. It can be said that the experience gained during junior staff tours enabled greater success in follow-on staff assignments but nothing points directly to a correlation between junior staff experience and strategic leadership success.

Senior staff experience was much more prevalent among the general/flag officers looked at in this paper. Though only twenty-three general/flag officers had served on the joint staff before the rank of Colonel, forty-three had served in the rank of Colonel or higher. This statistic is not surprising based on the large number of general/flag officer positions found on the joint staff and the fact that many of these positions are stepping stones to strategic leadership opportunities. Very similar to the statistics gleaned for junior joint staff experience, the numbers do not show a trend for targeted positions that lead to a greater chance of strategic leadership success or failure. What did trend as a factor was the timing of senior joint staff positions.

Of the four unsuccessful general/flag officers, two were not assigned to a joint staff position until they were generals. General McKiernan spent only twelve months within the beltway during his over twenty-six years of distinguished military service. He did not hold his first joint staff position (Deputy Chief of Staff, G-3) until the month prior to pinning on lieutenant general. When he first got to his joint position, he had been a commissioned officer for just over twenty-nine years. This drove him to, "...focus on being the operational commander and not sufficiently attuned to the political process

outside of his theater.”<sup>39</sup> I attribute this mindset to a lack of political experience and acumen driven by an almost totally operational career. For the first twenty-nine years of General McKiernan’s career, he developed and refined his leadership techniques based on operational factors and influences. He was not directly exposed to the political nature of some military decisions and thus did not factor this element into his actions. If he had been exposed to the political influence of military decisions while serving on a joint staff or combatant commander’s staff, he may have dealt better with the pressures and issues coming out of Washington D.C. In the end, this realization would have led to a better chance of success and the opportunity to avoid tarnishing an outstanding military career by resigning from his last command position.

General McChrystal first served in a joint staff position (Vice Director for Operations, J-3) as a brigadier general; twenty-six years after being commissioned. He only held this joint position for fourteen months before moving back into an operational command billet. He went back to the joint staff five years later and served for only eleven months before being named the ISAF Commander.

While on the joint staff, General McChrystal had a great opportunity to see the political process in action prior to taking over ISAF. In his seat as director of the joint staff, “He would have been privy to the internal discussions between Secretary Gates and Admiral Mullen, while having access to communications from the CENTCOM/CC. He would have known the points of concern and the hot-button issues for the most senior leaders of DoD and the White House.”<sup>40</sup> This advantageous insight did not alleviate the fact that General McChrystal still struggled with how to deal with civilian leaders. This lack of ability or recognition of the need for this competency fostered an

atmosphere at his headquarters where the President and his staff did not receive proper respect and their policies were publicly ridiculed. This fact does not take away from the great tactical and operational leadership General McChrystal had exhibited. It does point to the fact that successful strategic leadership is about a lot more than knowing tactics. A successful strategic leader must be able to understand the political objectives and motives from the current administration when in a strategic leadership position.

When analyzing the benefits of working on a combatant commander's staff, the interesting trend was how many only served on one of these staffs as the commander. Looking at the information included in the biographies, of the nineteen general/flag officers who command or have previously commanded a combatant command, just over half (10) had ever served on a combatant command staff before taking over command. Nine four star general/flag officers had zero combatant commander staff experience prior to taking command.

Of the twenty-two general/flag officers who served on a combatant command staff in a position other than commander, twelve of them served as aide-de-camp or executive officer. This experience is another indicator of the potential seen in these officers. It makes the case that the experience gained in this billet was beneficial to their careers and ability to lead as a strategic leader. In no way can it be pointed to as "the" reason their strategic leadership was successful. The other ten who served on a combatant command staff did so as general/flag officers.

Of the four unsuccessful general/flag officers, one served their only combatant command staff tour as commander and the other served as the three star air component commander. None had any experience on a combatant command staff as

part of their development. Again, not the sole reason for strategic leadership failure but a trend that shows the necessity of having well rounded strategic leaders with a broad set of experiences prior to commanding at the strategic level. This analysis shows that despite what general/flag officers answer when polled for RAND studies or other projects, only twelve of the forty-six served on a combatant command staff prior to making the rank of general/flag officer. Future strategic leaders need to garner either joint and/or combatant command staff experience before making general/flag officer. This broadening experience is crucial as the environment continues to become more complex in nature.

These statistics drive one to ask whether or not general/flag officers should grow up on joint or combatant command staffs in lieu of the standard operational job progression in place today. Very few will argue the need for future strategic leaders to be well rounded. "We can't expect officers to suddenly be strategic leaders when they are selected for promotion to colonel if the wide foundation was never established earlier in their careers."<sup>41</sup> Future strategic leaders who, "expect their experience in one job to carry them to the next may use ill-fitting or outdated strategies"<sup>42</sup> Too much of either (staff or operations) can be a detriment to the need for a well-rounded officer. As the RAND Corporation study declared, "If they (future strategic officers) are to develop the skills and abilities required to fill senior leadership positions in the joint force, programs and policies able to identify the right officers at the appropriate stages in their careers for mentorship and experiential broadening are necessary."<sup>43</sup>

The final two categories to be analyzed were intermediate and senior PME. Most strategic leaders attended both intermediate and senior PME in residence. Out of the

78 chances (information was only available for 39 of the general/flag officers in their bios) for these officers to attend PME in residence, in only 12 instances was PME done in correspondence. Of these twelve, only three general/flag officers accomplished senior PME via correspondence. In no case, did a general/flag officer accomplish both intermediate and senior PME by correspondence. Timing was a factor for most of those that did not attend in residence PME. These officers were pushed to a command or high visibility job in lieu of taking a year out of the operational field to attend PME.

Another trend is the high number of strategic leaders who were selected to attend joint senior PME. Only six out of thirty-nine went to joint intermediate PME while twenty-one went to joint senior PME. This supports the idea that these senior officers require as much exposure to the other services as possible in today's coalition and joint environments.

When comparing successful to unsuccessful strategic leaders, their selection rate for joint and other service schools was at a similar rate. Though attending PME is an indicator for strategic success, attending a joint, other service, or same service school does not indicate whether or not a general/flag officer will achieve strategic success as a leader based on those analyzed in the table on page 5.

The world is changing at an unprecedented rate and the military is not immune. These changes in a VUCA strategic environment require changes to a system which has recently produced unsuccessful strategic leaders at a rate not seen in the past sixty years. As was stated in a 2010 report from the Center for Strategic & International Studies,

The DoD and military services must enlarge the aperture on what is considered relevant experience and expertise if they wish to preclude the

ingenuity gap. They must fundamentally shift the basis for promotion eligibility from a system focused on time (in service or in grade) to one predicated on competencies, with “competency” defined as a broad set of interrelated knowledge, skills, and abilities in a given area.<sup>44</sup>

This need for a broader set of competencies combined with the changing landscape has driven the current Secretary of Defense to focus on reducing DoD inefficiencies. In August of 2009, Secretary Gates stated, “The current and planned defense budgets represent the minimum level of spending necessary to sustain a military at war and to protect our interests and future capabilities in a dangerous and unstable world.”<sup>45</sup> To be able to protect our interests and future capabilities, Secretary Gates announced four initiatives which directed his department to strive for more efficiency. As a part of his initiatives, Secretary Gates, froze at FY10 levels the number of general/flag officer positions. He cited that, “since September 2001, the number of general/flag officers had grown by more than 100—including 40 four-star positions.”<sup>46</sup> He also assigned a senior task force to assess the number and locations of these senior positions.<sup>47</sup>

After almost fifteen months of analysis, Secretary Gates announced his department’s future manning decisions in January 2011 based on the findings of this task force. “Elimination and downgrade of 100+ general/flag officer positions, including twenty-eight post 9/11 positions focused on Iraq and Afghanistan; reduction of the current Army, Navy and Air Force European Commands to the Three-Star Level with implementation occurring after 2015.”<sup>48</sup> It is in this budgetary constrained environment that strategic leaders will have to do more with less against an ever-changing adversary unconstrained by the borders of a sovereign nation-state. These strategic leaders will have a greater scope of responsibility and will have to make better use of the other

elements of power (diplomatic, informational, and economic) than is being used by today's larger general/flag officer population.

### **Conclusion**

The seven "competencies" looked at in the table on page 5 are not all encompassing but do highlight some trends that require further discussion. First, a civilian graduate school education gave successful strategic leaders an edge. Three out of four unsuccessful strategic leaders did not earn a masters at a civilian institution and lost out on invaluable diverse education exposure. These leaders did not fail due to a lack of tactical or operational experience. Two years out of their career to earn a masters as a full-time student would have given them perspectives and experiences they could have utilized when challenged as strategic leaders.

Another identified trend is timing for joint and combatant command staff tours. Though most of the officers were on a staff, many of them did not serve until they were at the rank of general/flag officer or higher. As the RAND Corporation study recommended, "...recurrent joint assignments and assignments on theater and strategic level staffs in proximity to senior military and civilian leaders"<sup>49</sup> are necessary for successful strategic leadership. Only one of the unsuccessful leaders served on a combatant commander's staff in their career. Two of the four unsuccessful strategic leaders did not serve on a joint staff until they had over twenty-six years of service...much too far along in their careers to do a year or less inside the beltway prior to commanding at the strategic level. These leaders needed a much better understanding of how the political machine operated. "A theater commander must be politically savvy and nonpolitical."<sup>50</sup> With this understanding, these general/flag officers

could have better served the administration and worked in concert with their civilian leaders towards achieving national political objectives. If a strategic leader wishes to be successful, they must have a vision and strategic intent that matches that of their civilian boss.<sup>51</sup> Without being exposed to the nuances inside the beltway, a strategic leader is prone to many of the same mistakes the four unsuccessful leaders committed as strategic leaders.

The American people put an extraordinary amount of trust in the military and the profession cannot afford for this trust to be eroded. The systems in each service require some review and adjustments. As Secretary Gates told future officers at West Point in 2008,

In order to succeed in the asymmetric battlefields of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and in the dominant combat environment in the decades to come, in my view, our Army will require leaders of uncommon agility, resourcefulness, and imagination; leaders willing and able to think and act creatively and decisively in a different kind of world and a different kind of conflict than we have prepared for over the last six decades.<sup>52</sup>

These characteristics have changed since many of today's general/flag officers joined the military. In his 1974 State of the Union Address, President Nixon focused on the fact that the war in Vietnam was over and that the armed services were going all-volunteer.<sup>53</sup> No mention was made of the necessity of the leadership qualities that were required. Twenty-five years later, Chief of Staff of the Army General Reimer told West Point's graduating class of 1999 that they would have to deal with change. His thoughts were along the same lines as Secretary Gates when he stated the role of leadership, "is to turn challenges into opportunities" and that they would need, "to have the mental agility to "think quick" and to turn inside and enemy's decision cycle and be able to checkmate him everywhere he turns."<sup>54</sup>

The world is changing at a pace that has never been seen before. This has driven a strategic environment where the leader must be cognizant of much more than just tactical or operational issues. Their relationships with non-government organizations, regional organizations, coalition partners, other strategic leaders, and national leadership is of utmost importance to their success. These leaders must have better qualifications to meet the needs thrust upon them based on required relationships. The changing world necessitates a changed set of competencies for future strategic leaders. The competencies detailed above highlight where changes can be made to give future strategic leaders the best chance for strategic success.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Brian Ward, editor. *Excellence 2.0 Best Leadership Quotes: Empathetic Leadership*. [http://www.excellence2.com/leadership-vision/Best\\_Leadership\\_Quotes.shtml](http://www.excellence2.com/leadership-vision/Best_Leadership_Quotes.shtml) (accessed December 8th, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> For the rest of this paper, when the term strategic leadership is used, it refers to strategic leadership in the military.

<sup>3</sup> I have categorized a strategic leadership tour as a four star general or flag officer position. These include all positions on the JCS, all combatant commanders, all Air Force MAJCOM and Army MACOM commanders, and the CENTCOM land component commander billets.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen J. Gerras, editor. *Strategic Leadership Primer*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. USAWC, 2010, 1.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of the Army. *Army Leadership: Competent, Confident, and Agile*, Field Manual 6-22 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Army, 2006), 12-1.

<sup>6</sup> Robert M. Gates, "Speech to the Army War College," (United States Army War College, April 16, 2009), 5.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Robert M. Gates, "Lecture at Duke University," Defense.gov, (Durham, North Carolina, September 29, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Mark A. McGuire, "Senior Officers and Strategic Leader Development," *Joint Force Quarterly* 29, (Autumn 2001-Winter 2002), 93.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>12</sup> Review of Education, Training, and Assignments of Leaders (RETAL) Brief, April 2007. Received in e-mail October 18<sup>th</sup>, 2010, 2.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Gerras, *Strategic Leadership Primer*, 10.

<sup>15</sup> Leonard Wong, *Fashion Tips for the Field Grade*, Op-Ed for Strategic Studies Institute October 2006 newsletter, <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=731> (accessed October 25<sup>th</sup>, 2010), 2.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Review of Education, Training, and Assignments of Leaders Brief, 5.

<sup>18</sup> Barak A. Salmoni, Jessica Hart, Renny McPherson, and Aidan Kirby Winn, "Growing Strategic Leaders for the Future Conflict," *Parameters* 40, no. 1 (Spring 2010), 77.

<sup>19</sup> Kathleen A. Mahoney Norris, Letter to the Editor in response to, The Contact Sport Senior Leaders Must Play, *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (Summer 2009), 150.

<sup>20</sup> Center for a New American Security, *Keeping the Edge: Revitalizing America's Military Officer Corps*, (February 2010), 5.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Hoffman, "AF Four Stars Left Out of Top War Jobs," *Air Force Times* (November 2010), 26.

<sup>22</sup> Ann Roosevelt, "Army Leader Development Strategy Coming, Officials Say," *Defense Daily* 243, no. 62 (September 28, 2009).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Hoffman, "AF Four Stars Left Out of Top War Jobs, 26.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>26</sup> John A. Shaud, "The Staff Experience and Leadership Development," *Airpower Journal* (Spring 1993).

<sup>27</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*. Edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, eds. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 81.

<sup>28</sup> Jeffrey D. McCausland, *Developing Strategic Leaders for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Strategic Studies Institute (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2008), 86.

<sup>29</sup> Hew Strachan, "Strategy or Alibi? Obama, McChrystal and the Operational Level of War," *Survival* 52, no. 5 (October 2010), 164. In this quote, the author defines political as being non-partisan and meaning that the officers have to be able to negotiate, be sensitive to others' cultures as well as be able to fight or be gung-ho.

<sup>30</sup> Hoffman, "AF Four Stars Left Out of Top War Jobs," 26.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>32</sup> Barak A. Salmoni, Jessica Hart, Renny McPherson, and Aidan Kirby Winn, "Growing Strategic Leaders for the Future Conflict," 78.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>34</sup> Major General Robert H. Scales (ret.), "Return of the Jedi," *Armed Forces Journal*, (October 2009).

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Robert M. Gates, "Speech to the Air War College," (United States Air War College, April 21, 2008), 1.

<sup>37</sup> U.S. Army. Field Manual 6-22, 3-8.

<sup>38</sup> E-mail information received from the Army's Advanced Education Programs Branch, February 3, 2011.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>40</sup> Charles D. Allen, "Lessons not Learned: Civil-military Disconnect in Afghanistan," *Armed Forces Journal* (September 2010), 31.

<sup>41</sup> Scott T. Nestler, "Developing Strategic Leaders for the Army," *Army* 56, no. 9 (September 2006), 15.

<sup>42</sup> U.S. Army. Field Manual 6-22, 10-8.

<sup>43</sup> Barak A. Salmoni, Jessica Hart, Renny McPherson, and Aidan Kirby Winn, "Growing Strategic Leaders for the Future Conflict," 86.

<sup>44</sup> Maren Leed and David Sokolow, "The Ingenuity Gap: Officer Management for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," *A Report of the Center for Strategic & International Studies*, January 2010, vii.

<sup>45</sup> Robert M. Gates, "Statement on Department Efficiencies Initiative," Defense.gov, (The Pentagon, Washington D.C., August 9, 2010).

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Robert M. Gates, "Summary of January 6, 2011 Statement on Department Budget and Efficiencies," e-mail attachment to author, January 10, 2011.

<sup>49</sup> Barak A. Salmoni, Jessica Hart, Renny McPherson, and Aidan Kirby Winn, "Growing Strategic Leaders for the Future Conflict," 86.

<sup>50</sup> Charles Allen, "Lessons not Learned," 33.

<sup>51</sup> Donald Drechsler and Charles D. Allen, "Why Senior Military Leaders Fail and What we can Learn From Their Mistakes," *Armed Forces Journal* (July/August 2009), 44.

<sup>52</sup> Robert m. Gates, Secretary of Defense, Remarks at West Point, April 22, 2008, <http://www.stripes.com/article.asp?section=104&article=54260> (accessed November 1, 2010).

<sup>53</sup> Richard M. Nixon, State of the Union Address, January 30, 1974, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=4327> (accessed February 3, 2011).

<sup>54</sup> Dennis J. Reimer, West Point Class of 1999 Commencement Speech, May 29, 1999, <http://www.usma.edu/Class/1999/GradSpeech99.asp> (accessed February 3, 2011).