

# Develop a Strategic Perspective—by Reading

By Lt. Gen. James M. Dubik, U.S. Army retired

When being assigned to a high-level staff, usually as a major or lieutenant colonel, officers sometimes ask me about developing a strategic perspective. Up until this assignment, rarely has that officer thought about self-development as the initial way to begin developing a strategic perspective. Each of us uses the first 12 years of our profession to become experts in the tactical aspects of our branches, and this is as it should be. The tactical dimension of our profession is the foundation upon which we build operational and strategic expertise.

But gaining tactical proficiency does not have to exclude taking the first steps to expand one's professional mind and develop a strategic perspective. A good reading program can do that.

Your initial goal should be to develop an operational and strategic perspective sufficient enough to serve senior officers on a high-level staff. You should have at least three objectives. First, gain an appreciation not just for applying force but also for how that force is generated and sustained. What happens on the battlefield is important, but equally decisive are decisions made and actions taken that get units to the battlefield and sustain them—and the public will—until one's political aims are achieved.

Second, understand linkages between what happens in capitals to what happens on the battlefield. The tactical, operational and strategic levels are intertwined. Actions at one level affect those at the other two. Nothing is static; all is dynamic.

Third, grasp leading and managing large organizations in alliances or coalitions. At senior levels, one leads through large organizations and complex bureaucracies. Senior officers you will serve at this level must be able to lead and manage these organizations to keep them focused. In almost every case, the senior officer must help the organization adapt to new circumstances and requirements.

## Two Books a Year

You will be able to achieve these objectives by reading two books a year selected from the four categories listed below. If you

keep to this program, by the time you make major, you will have read 12 books, maybe three from each category; that will have helped you begin developing a strategic perspective. Such a reading program will provide a good start well before you get to a senior service college.

Let's take each category in turn:

**1. HISTORY:** History is the database of our profession. When I was a junior officer, I asked one of my battalion commanders why he was reading about Peter the Great. He said, "It's good to know that others faced problems like yours and to know how they approached solving them." That pretty much sums up the utility of history. To develop a strategic perspective, however, you must read histories not of the battles fought but of wars waged.

Any of the following would provide a good start: *The Peloponnesian War* by Donald Kagan, *Conquered into Victory: Two Centuries of Battles Along the Great Warpath That Made the American Way of War* by Eliot A. Cohen, *How the North Won: A Military History of the Civil War* by Herman Hattaway and Archer Jones, *Grant* by Jean Edward Smith, *Guerrilla Leader: T. E. Lawrence and the Arab Revolt* by James J. Schneider, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954–1962* by Alistair Horne, *American Warlords: How Roosevelt's High Command Led America to Victory in World War II* by



Jonathan W. Jordan, *No End Save Victory: How FDR Led the Nation into War* by David Kaiser, *War and the Art of Governance: Consolidating Combat Success into Political Victory* by Nadia Schadlow and *How Wars End: Why We Always Fight the Last Battle* by Gideon Rose.

Reading several of these books will help you gain an appreciation for how the military and nonmilitary forces necessary to succeed in war—whether conventional, irregular or some combination thereof—must be generated and sustained. You will also appreciate how decisions taken by senior political and military leaders far from the battlefield affect what happens on the battlefield. And you will see how these “forces,” to include public will, always require nurturing.





You will also see how senior leaders you serve must continually adapt their decisions and actions to sustain both the forces and public will as a war unfolds in unpredictable ways.

**2. THE LOGIC OF FORCE(S):** Senior leaders must do a lot of explaining, justifying and persuading. Sometimes this must be done as part of leading subordinates in large organizations. In these situations, issuing orders or promulgating directives will rarely achieve coherent organizational action. Other times, explaining, justifying and persuading is necessary to convince one's bosses—whether military or civilian—that the course of action a senior leader wants to take is prudent and will achieve the desired results. In other circumstances, it's done in congressional testimony or public relations.

Regardless of situation, understanding the logic of force—what it can or cannot achieve, and why; how a variety of forces fit or don't fit together, and why; what sort of military and nonmilitary forces are necessary to accomplish a particular objective, and why—all form a core capacity for senior leadership and the staff who serve them.

The basic readings in this category are *On War* by Carl von Clausewitz and *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu. But there are

some others that I have found helpful: *The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective* by Hew Strachan, *The Cognitive Challenge of War: Prussia 1806* by Peter Paret, *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace* by Edward N. Luttwak, *Strategy* by B.H. Liddell Hart, *Lifting the Fog of Peace: How Americans Learned to Fight Modern War* by Janine Davidson, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* by Gen. Rupert Smith, *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything: Tales from the Pentagon* by Rosa Brooks, *Every War Must End* by Fred Charles Ikle, *The Logic of Failure: Recognizing and Avoiding Error in Complex Situations* by Dietrich Dörner and *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War* by Eliot A. Cohen and John Gooch.

You won't agree with everything in these books, but each will make you think. And each will further develop your ability to explain, justify and persuade—important skills you will need to serve senior leaders, and when you become a senior leader.

**3. CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS:** Ultimately, using forces, military and nonmilitary, is a subordinate and instrumental activity. Forces aren't used for themselves. Rather, they are used in service of some political objective. Every congressional visit to a wartime theater should remind us of this fundamental fact: Using force is and must be a civil-military activity.

The core theories concerning U.S. civil-military relations center around *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* by Samuel P. Huntington and *The Professional Soldier: A Social and Political Portrait* by Morris Janowitz. Analysis and criticism of and departures from these basic theories include the following: *American Civil-Military Relations: The Soldier and the State in a New Era* edited by Suzanne C. Nielsen and Don

M. Snider, *Soldiers and Civilians: The Civil-Military Gap and American National Security* edited by Peter D. Feaver and Richard H. Kohn, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* by Eliot A. Cohen, *Armed Servants: Agency, Oversight, and Civil-Military Relations* by Peter D. Feaver, *Warriors & Citizens: American Views of Our Military* edited by Kori Schake and Jim Mattis, and *Just War Reconsidered: Strategy, Ethics, and Theory* by yours truly.

Three excellent histories of American civil-military relationships are *Presidents and Their Generals: A History of Command in War* by Matthew Moten, *The Pentagon and the Presidency: Civil-Military Relations from FDR to George W. Bush* by Dale R. Herspring and *Running the World: The Inside Story of the National Security Council and the Architects of American Power* by David Rothkopf.

As before, reading any of these books will find you arguing with what the authors present. In the end, however, they will help you understand the complexity and necessity of civil-military relationships. You will start to see that what happens in capitals—amid the relationships between senior political and military leaders, as well as between the executive and legislative branches of government—affects what happens on the battlefield. You will begin to see how tactical, operational and strategic levels are intertwined.

**4. ORGANIZATIONAL THEORY:** Reading in this last category will begin to help you grasp the complexity and difficulty of leading and managing large organizations, especially in alliances or coalitions. Leading and managing large organizations and complex bureaucracies is hard, but this skill is the base requirement for a senior leader, and some level of understanding is necessary for those on the senior leader's staff. So, as a field grade officer, you must prepare yourself intellectually before your assignment.

What follows are some of my favorite books, ones that I have found most useful in expanding both my understanding of how large organizations work and my repertoire of leadership and management behaviors to help me contribute at this level. These are books that I go back to over and over again: *Leadership Without Easy Answers* by Ronald A. Heifetz, *Hope*

*Is Not a Method: What Business Leaders Can Learn from America's Army* by Gordon R. Sullivan and Michael V. Harper, *Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done* by Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan, *The Power of Alignment: How Great Companies Stay Centered and Accomplish Extraordinary Things* by George Labovitz and Victor Rosansky, and *The Attention Economy: Understanding the New Currency of Business* by Thomas H. Davenport and John C. Beck.

Some others I have used repetitively include: *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* by Peter M. Senge, *Thriving On Chaos: Handbook for a Management Revolution* by Tom Peters, *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World* by Margaret J. Wheatley, *Leading Change* by John P. Kotter, *The Strategy-Focused Organization: How Balanced Scorecard Companies Thrive in the New Business Environment* by Robert S. Kaplan and David P. Norton, *Think to Win: Unleashing the Power of Strategic Thinking* by Paul Butler, John Manfredi and Peter Klein, and *The Speed of Trust: The One Thing That Changes Everything*

by Stephen M.R. Covey with Rebecca R. Merrill.

There are plenty of other good books on leading and changing large organizations. New ones come out every week, but these books can form a good start to expanding your understanding of working within a large organization and complex bureaucracy. And if you read with fellow officers, the discussions will enrich the content and your learning.

### Solid Foundation

As I said at the start, this self-development program is in addition to the important and primary work an officer must accomplish in his or her first 12 years of service: a solid foundation of tactical leadership and proficiency. My claim is not that these four categories are exhaustive. Rather, only that reading in these categories will help you begin to expand your understanding of the profession, adding a war-waging perspective to a warfighting one.

Nor is my claim that the books I've listed

above are the only ones that would provide a good start. There are many other equally good sources, especially autobiographies, biographies and memoirs of strategic leaders or members of their senior staffs, like Doris Kearns Goodwin's recent book *Leadership in Turbulent Times*.

The ones I have listed are illustrative of the kinds of books you should read in each category. Following a 12-year, two-books-a-year program using these categories will set you up well for the field grade phase of your career. Once you become a field grade officer, you can expand the categories and perhaps commit yourself to more than two books a year.

Good reading, and have fun growing your professional perspective. ★

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