

## LEADERSHIP, MOTIVATION, &amp; RESILIENCE

**Tarnished: Toxic Leadership in the US Military**

By George E. Reed

Reviewed by COL (Ret) Charles D. Allen, Professor of Leadership and Cultural Studies, US Army War College

Yogi Berra, the American baseball icon, is known for his paradoxical quotes. For Dr. George Reed, “You don’t have to swing hard to hit a home run. If you got the timing, it’ll go” is wholly appropriate. While an Army colonel, Reed was in the inaugural cohort of the Professor US Army War College program, earned a PhD in Public Policy Analysis and Administration, and returned to Carlisle to serve as the Director of Command and Leadership Studies. At the Army War College, he was involved in a study directed by the Army Chief of Staff to explore the phenomenon of toxic leadership. Needless to say, Reed and colleague, Dr. Craig Bullis did not have to swing hard or dig deep to confirm that toxic leadership does exist within the culture of the US Army and that it has an adverse impact on the profession of arms. Thus, the timing of the initial research effort and of subsequent investigations since have resulted in a series of journal articles and this important work, *Tarnished: Toxic Leadership in the US Military*.

Reed begins by addressing the familiar concepts of leadership and avoiding the imbroglia of leadership theories. To do so, he adopts and presents an elegant but simple definition crafted by Dr. Joseph C. Rost where “Leadership is an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes.” (viii) Reed also establishes his focus on toxic leaders who “engage in numerous *destructive behaviors* and who exhibit certain *dysfunctional personal characteristics*. ...[that] inflict some reasonably serious and enduring harm on their followers and their organizations.” (11)

Reed walks the reader through the various manifestations of bad behavior by leaders and the impact such behaviors have on their followers. He centers on two personality and psychological concepts that may explain why leaders are toxic—psychopathy and narcissism. Psychopathic leaders have a disorder that is hard to mitigate—not that the psychopath would have desire to change or even care about their effect on others. Narcissists may fall along a continuum and may be amenable to changing their behavior, given awareness of impact and prospects for still achieving their ambitions. After providing an understanding of potentially toxic personalities, Reed also suggests organizational culture may contribute to toxic behaviors based on the attention on results and near-term requirements. Given that the military has a bias for action and is all about tactical and operational results, it is easy to imagine how toxic leadership aligns with the stereotype of harsh military leaders.

While many military members have personal experience with bad leaders, some may discount the phenomenon by contending that, like beauty, toxic leadership is “in the eyes of the beholder.” Reed makes a convincing case that such leadership adversely affects organizational



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203 pages.

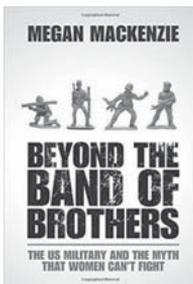
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outcomes. He also notes toxic leaders are sometimes paired with, or enabled by, toxic followers. If indeed for every two good bosses, we experience one bad boss and that becomes the primary reason for job dissatisfaction and organizational turnover, then acceptance of toxic leadership is imprudent. If leadership is an exchange relationship between leaders and followers, then followers share responsibility for the climate that exists around a focal leader.

Perhaps the most valuable contribution Reed makes is more than listing the coping skills to survive narcissistic leaders as he presents in chapter 6. Accordingly, he acknowledges “the safest course of action when confronted with toxic leaders is to suffer in silence or seek an expeditious exit.” (113) Such follower behavior perpetuates a negative climate for subsequent organizational members to endure or allows the toxic leader to carry that climate to the next assignment and organization. Reed is not Pollyannaish about the risks and consequences of confronting a toxic leader. The most adverse impact may be the backlash from the military culture that tacitly prides loyalty to commanders above all else.

*Tarnished* is an important book for several reasons. First, it provides the vocabulary and the concepts to describe a phenomenon that persists within US military culture. Such an initial conversation generated a research report by the Center for Army Leadership. Subsequent initiatives have established processes to assess the perception of toxic leadership and its impact through annual command climate surveys across the services. Second, Reed has attempted to link toxic leadership to the highly dysfunctional occurrence of sexual misconduct. Military cultures or leadership climates that allow such behavior inflicts “reasonably serious and enduring harm on their followers and their organizations” is inherently toxic and intolerable. Last, much has been made of the trust and confidence placed in the US military as a profession of arms. Toxic leadership, where it exists, “represents a violation of the unwritten contracts with the American people about how their sons and daughters should be treated while in service to the nation.” (26)

To close with Yogi Berra, “You’ve got to be very careful if you don’t know where you are going, because you might not get there.” Reed offers an essential discourse on what many may see as an unpleasant, but necessary reality of military culture. It is imperative to military professionals that they know where they going and that how they will get there is aligned with the values and the principles they espouse. Understanding and not tolerating toxic leadership is critical to stewarding the profession of arms.



## **Beyond the Band of Brothers: The US Military and the Myth that Women Can't Fight**

By Megan MacKenzie

Reviewed by Ellen L. Haring (Colonel, US Army Retired)

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**D**r. Megan MacKenzie’s newest book, *Beyond the Band of Brothers*, argues the exclusion of women from combat positions is rooted in ideas of male essentialism that are based on a myth. She convincingly