

Why senior military leaders fail

And what we can learn from their mistakes

BY LT. COL. DONALD DRECHSLER AND COL. CHARLES D. ALLEN (RET.)

In the first decade of the 21st century, the U.S. military observed the firings or resignations of the chief of staff of the Air Force, the secretaries of the Army and the Air Force, plus several general officers, including the commander of U.S. Central Command and most recently the senior American commander in Afghanistan.

Why did these smart and otherwise extremely successful senior leaders lose their jobs? Is there something we can learn from their experiences to improve ourselves as leaders and better serve the nation? Assuming that we can learn more from our mistakes than our successes, we may be able to learn by studying senior leaders who have failed in this new era.

We define “failed” by their outright firing, or the more euphemistic “asked to resign.”

The military traditionally places great emphasis on the roles of senior commanders, holding them accountable for all actions, success or failure, within their commands. While a failure can be caused by an error of a junior officer or a systemic issue that cannot be controlled by one individual, military culture holds the commander ultimately responsible. A military commander is given the power to influence events and lives of service members. It is legal authority reinforced by a professional culture.

Commanding large organizations with modern weapons, contemporary generals have more military power immediately available than the great captains of history. As commanders rise in rank and responsibility, they are no longer directors of the intricate dynamics of the battle. As Eliot Cohen and John Gooch wrote in “Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War”:

“... the modern commander is much more akin to the managing director of a large conglomerate enterprise than ever he is to the warrior chief of old. He has become the head of a complex

military organization, whose many branches he must oversee and on whose cooperation, assistance, and support he depends for his success.”

Today’s commanders, as senior leaders within complex organizations, develop and execute operational strategies and establish the conditions for success. In a society committed to civilian control of military affairs, those conditions require strategic alignment in purpose and direction with civilian leadership. Senior military leaders risk failure when they become disconnected from their bosses.

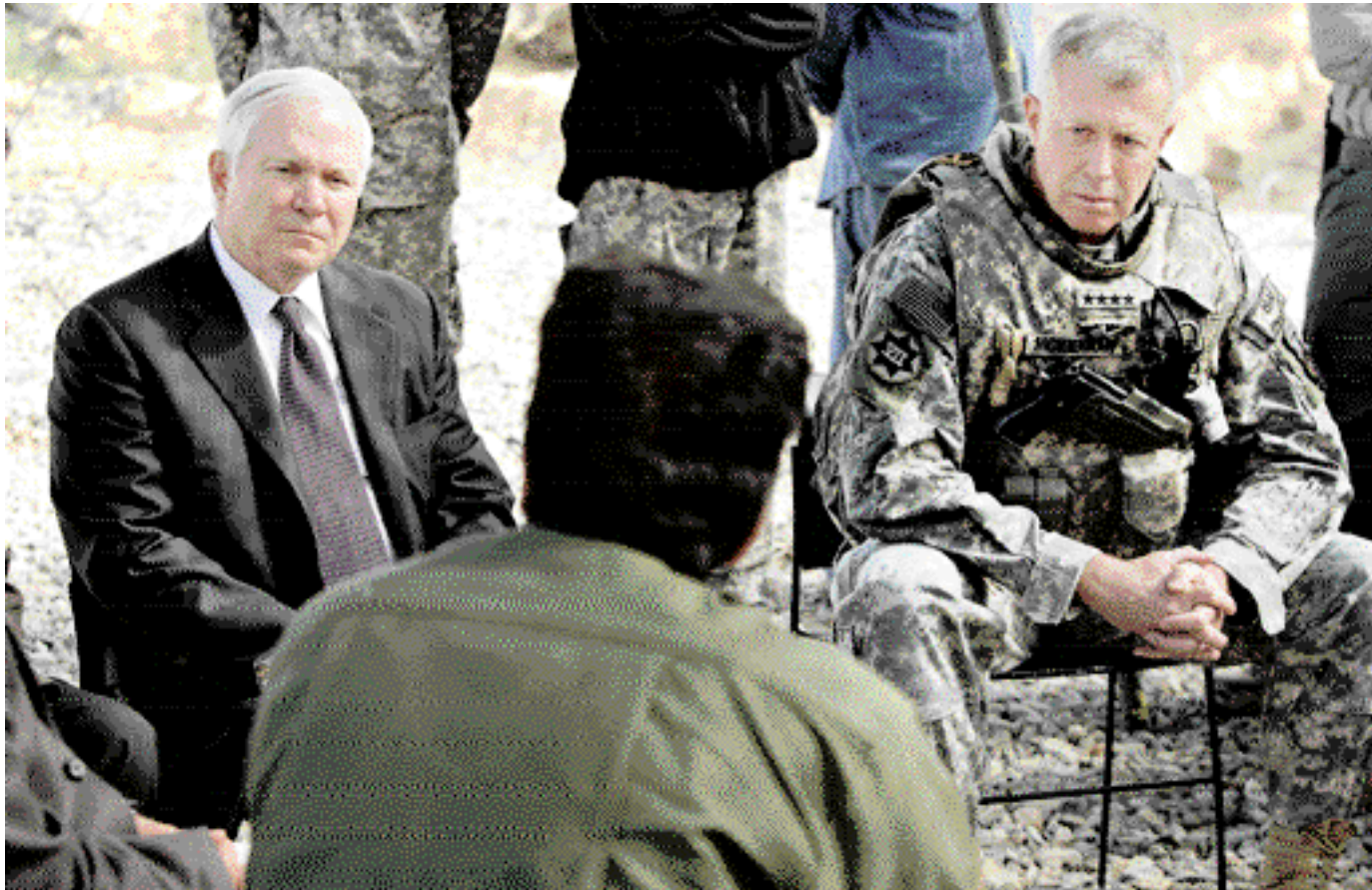
Political scientist Peter Feaver’s extension of “Agency Theory” to civil-military relations is based on principal-agent theory and addresses many of the factors that are not addressed by other failure models. Consider the problem of war aims and planning from principal-agent theory. The civilian principal knows what he wants done but is, to a degree, limited by his lack of knowledge of the agent’s (military’s) methods and means. Additionally, the agent typically has significantly more experience in defense and also has a major informational advantage over the civilian principal. The agent interprets the principal’s direction and presents the principal with a plan using the agent’s preferred way of achieving the prescribed goal through the use

of military force.

As the agent, the military leader may not share the same preferences as the civilian concerning policy questions, which should cause him to reflect upon his professional ethics. The military agent may attempt to manipulate the relationship and, to some degree, has the capability to influence decisions and policies. For example, the agent can claim he has not trained sufficiently in counterinsurgency operations, thus informing the principal that he cannot effectively accomplish such missions without a significant risk. In principal-agency terms, this is called shirking responsibility. A military officer’s decision whether to shirk a task or policy decision is shaped by how negatively the military leadership views the task. If discovered, the civilian principal has some ability to control the military agent’s shirking and rectify the situation. Unfortunately, the principal is at an informational disadvantage in his ability to detect shirking and to correct the task avoidance. Ultimately, the civilian principal

Senior military leader failures occur when the civilian leaders and military commanders become disconnected.

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Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Army Gen. David McKiernan meet with local officials in Wardak province, Afghanistan, in May. Gates later asked McKiernan to resign as commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan.

can fire the military agent if he considers the shirking severe enough.

Since his appointment in December 2006, Defense Secretary Robert Gates has either fired, replaced or requested the resignation of several general officers. This should cause senior military leaders to examine and reflect on why the secretary has deemed it necessary to take these actions. We examine three short cases.

PUBLIC DISAGREEMENT

Adm. William “Fox” Fallon resigned in March 2008 as head of Central Command over perceptions that he was at odds with the administration’s policies concerning Iran and Iraq. Fallon spent nearly a decade as a four-star admiral, during which he commanded U.S. Pacific Command and then Central Command. Gates appointed Fallon as the first admiral to lead Central Command, replacing Army Gen. John Abizaid in early 2007. At Fallon’s retirement ceremony, Gates called the outgoing admiral “one of [the military’s] best strategic minds.”

The administration and Fallon were seemingly at odds over Middle East policy for nearly a year before he resigned. Esquire

magazine published an extensive profile of Fallon, highlighting him as the man within the administration who opposed war with Iran. Articles in The Washington Post highlighted this apparent disagreement between Fallon’s words and those of the administration, with Tom Ricks reporting, “Fallon has previously made it clear he has differences with the Bush administration’s foreign policy.”

Fallon disagreed with those in the administration over the approach with Iran, and he emphasized diplomacy over conflict. Fallon also endorsed further troop withdrawals from Iraq and quietly opposed a long-term surge in Iraq because the decision tied down assets, making a comprehensive strategy for the Middle East difficult. He also voiced his concern that the U.S. had lost its focus on Afghanistan. That voice was not simply his perception of speaking truth to power within the institution. His remarks were clearly visible to the public.

While the administration and Fallon may not have differed in the objectives of the policy towards Iraq and Iran, they differed in their approach. The Esquire article highlighted comments the admiral made to the Arab television station Al-Jazeera. “This constant drumbeat of conflict ... is not helpful and not useful,” Fallon was quoted as saying. “I expect there

will be no war, and that is what we ought to be working for.”

Fallon was also criticized for telling Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak that the U.S. would not attack Iran. This became a banner headline in the Egyptian Gazette and landed him in trouble with the White House. Additionally, White House officials were concerned about the reported friction between Fallon and Army Gen. David Petraeus, then U.S. commander in Iraq.

The Esquire story was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. On March 11, 2008, only one week after the Esquire article was discussed in The Washington Post, Fallon announced his resignation, calling reports of such disagreements an untenable “distraction.” His offer of resignation did not produce discernible efforts to persuade him to remain in command. As with Gen. Douglas MacArthur's relief of command during the Korean War, several members of the political party opposing the president were quick to praise Fallon and criticize the presidential administration. Feaver, a former member of the National Security Council staff, noted that while private policy debate is permissible, the public disagreement between Fallon and the president made it necessary for him to resign. Fallon, a distinguished officer with 41 years of service, was reportedly disconnected from his boss and many in the presidential administration.

WALTER REED ACCOUNTABILITY

In a period of three weeks in the spring of 2007, the secretary of the Army and two general officers were fired over problems at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, Washington, D.C. Army veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan were brought to Walter Reed to be treated for injuries and to recuperate. In February 2007, The Washington Post published a series of articles documenting problems in soldiers' housing and the medical bureaucracy at Walter Reed. The newspaper provided the Army six days of advance warning of much of the material in the article. The Army public affairs office attempted to use this advance information to pre-empt the story. Unfortunately, the Army violated the first rule in dealing with a negative story: Admit when you have made a mistake and tell the world what you are doing to correct it. The Army's pre-emptive briefing, an attempt to manipulate the media, backfired and spurred other publications to carry the story nationally.

Attempting to correct factual errors after the publication of the negative news story is the ethical and pragmatically prudent course of action. Army Secretary Francis Harvey toured

the building and noted “a failure ... in garrison leadership.” The Army surgeon general (and previous commander of Walter Reed), Lt. Gen. Kevin Kiley, also stated that the problems found at Walter Reed “weren't serious and there weren't a lot of them,” according to a Post article. After a visit to Walter Reed, Gates promised that those responsible for the problems would be “held accountable.”

On March 1, pressure reached a head and Harvey relieved Maj. Gen. George Weightman, the commander of Walter Reed, citing inadequate treatment of wounded soldiers. In comments following Weightman's dismissal, Gates stated, “I will insist on swift and direct corrective action and, where appropriate, accountability up the chain of command.” Subsequently, Kiley assumed command of Walter Reed.

Stories soon surfaced that many of the problems at Walter Reed actually grew during the command of Kiley. Gates fired Harvey the next day, clearly showing he disagreed with the Army secretary's judgment in appointing Kiley and that Gates felt the Army leadership was not taking the problems at Walter Reed seriously enough. This perception may have been reinforced since Kiley had been “accused by critics of long knowing about the problems there and not improving outpatient care,” according to ABC News.

On March 12, 2007, the day that the Army released a report to Congress detailing more problems with the administration of the Army medical system, Kiley resigned. Sen. Claire McCaskill, D-Mo., stated she was pleased with Kiley's resignation: “It's been clear over the past several weeks that the culture of command that Lieutenant General Kiley established within the Army Medical Command led to many of the deficiencies at top Army medical facilities.” Two commanders and one secretary were relieved for what was deemed a violation of non-negotiable principle with Gates: care for our wounded warriors. To some extent, Kiley's comments in public indicated that he was disconnected from the defense secretary and the importance Gates placed on caring for service members.

NUCLEAR FALLOUT

Two nuclear weapons-related incidents occurred in 2006 and 2007 that Gates said highlighted significant “leadership failures associated with the control of nuclear weapons and equipment” within the Air Force. The first incident involved the unauthorized weapons transfer of six Advanced Cruise Missiles with intact nuclear warheads on a B-52 from Minot Air Force Base, N.D., to Barksdale Air Force Base, La., in August

2007. In effect, the Air Force lost positive control of six nuclear warheads for the first time in its 60-year history. The incident was so serious that the president and defense secretary were immediately informed. Fortunately, the problem was recognized and the warheads were properly secured. This breakdown in previously well-established accounting, issuing, loading and verification procedures was shocking to the Air Force, its civilian leadership and the American public. The Air Force had a rich history of establishing and maintaining a nuclear-ready force with strict discipline to positively control nuclear weapons. Unfortunately, the Air Force and its leadership failed to learn from its own rich lessons of the past as it de-emphasized nuclear operations.

The Air Force's second nuclear incident involved the shipment of four Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missile electrical nose-cone fuses to Taiwan. These events highlighted deficiencies in supply chain accountability and handling of critical nuclear weapons components. The incidents at Minot-Barksdale and Taiwan revealed substantive erosion of Air Force discipline and expertise, and indicated a failure in strategic leadership. The challenge for civilian and military leaders within the Defense Department was to understand why these errors occurred, quickly correct problems, and work to restore faith and confidence in American's nuclear deterrent capability.

Upon investigation, it became clear that significant changes in the international environment and perceived threats led to the decreasing focus and emphasis on the nuclear mission. The end of the Cold War, with nuclear bombers coming off alert, indicated a significant change in the world's geopolitical balance of power. The Air Force mission focused on supporting theater commanders at a time of significant resource constraints across the Defense Department. To better accomplish this mission, the Air Force deactivated Strategic Air Command, splitting its strategic nuclear forces into Air Combat Command and Air Mobility Command (and later Space Command). The unintended consequence was a fragmentation of the nuclear mission and a decreased national emphasis on nuclear weapons, in large part because of the perception of a diminished threat from the former Soviet Union.

Nuclear expertise eroded as commanders spent less training time on nuclear operations proficiency. As the Defense Department report noted, "Moreover, as the size of the nuclear arsenal was reduced and emphasis shifted to conventional missions, the Air Force failed to articulate the continuing value

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Lt. Gen. Kevin Kiley, the Army surgeon general, speaks to reporters Feb. 22, 2007, following reports of poor conditions and administrative problems at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. Kiley was appointed commander of the facility on March 1, but resigned on March 11.

of the nuclear deterrent."

The Air Force's investigation into the B-52 incident in 2007 led to the disciplining of about 65 personnel, including several commanders at the rank of colonel and lieutenant colonel. Raising concerns that Air Force leadership may have limited blame primarily to midlevel officers, Gates asked retired Air Force Gen. Larry Welch (former Air Force chief of staff and commander of Strategic Air Command) to conduct a larger review of procedures and policies regarding the handling of nuclear weapons. Welch indicated that the decline in nuclear mission focus was "more pronounced than realized and too extreme to be acceptable." He also noted: "Military units responsible for handling the bombs are not properly inspected and, as a result, may not be ready to perform their missions." The culture of accountability and rigorous self-assessment required to handle nuclear weapons had eroded.

Gates also asked Adm. Kirkland Donald (previously director of naval nuclear propulsion) to investigate the Taiwan incident. In late May 2008, Donald's report indicated systemic and cultural problems in the Taiwan incident similar to the

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Minot-Barksdale B-52 incident: “the gradual erosion of nuclear standards and a lack of effective oversight by Air Force leadership.” Gates further believed that “the Air Force had not been sufficiently critical of its past performance.” These two factors indicated a failure in strategic leadership, leading Gates to ask for the resignation of the Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. T. Michael Moseley and Air Force Secretary Michael Wynne on June 5, 2008 — an action unprecedented in U.S. military history.

While the systemic problems developed over the tenure of several chiefs of staff and Air Force secretaries, Moseley and Wynne were held accountable. As one reads the several news articles leading up to the firing, it is obvious that a disconnect existed between the Air Force leadership and the defense secretary. They had differing visions of force capabilities and requirements — F-22, unmanned aerial surveillance, etc. — that occasionally surfaced in

public forums. The senior leader disconnect came to light most vividly with the speech that Gates made at Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala. His comments at Air University indicated he was not satisfied with the performance and direction of the Air Force. The failure to fix the nuclear problem rapidly enough was the last straw. Gates later made other statements which attempted to place his comments in context. Arguably, a senior leader disconnect contributed significantly to firing of the Air Force chief of staff.

LESSONS LEARNED

As the above cases demonstrate, a senior military leader cannot afford to have a vision and strategic intent that differ significantly from those of his civilian boss. Civilian control, particularly at the strategic level, remains correctly non-negotiable. As described in Feaver’s application of Agency Theory, having a different strategic direction is a matter of degree and is not inherently unac-

ceptable. As long as the boss is sufficiently satisfied with the outcomes, and his public strategy or operational desires are not undermined, he is likely to provide the senior leader with appropriate latitude. The primary challenge for military leaders is to recognize when they are sliding toward disconnection. Good communications with the boss, reasonable self-awareness and a sensitivity to strategic context should prevent the serious disconnects that led to these cases.

The senior leader also needs a dynamic team of trusted advisers who are willing to communicate difficult news. This team can include a trusted deputy, an external peer or a commander’s advisory group. A sharp, well-connected staff, loyal to its senior leader and the mission, is extremely valuable. These trusted agents may become aware of divergence in directions between the staffs before their commanders. However, the senior leader must also welcome forthright, difficult

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When the senior leader realizes he has a different vision and strategy intent than his boss, he can attempt to persuade his boss to alter his vision or the execution of the strategy. If the boss does not change his vision, the senior leader has three possible decisions. First, he can abandon his own vision and follow his boss's vision. Second, he can quietly shirk his boss's vision to some degree and work his own agenda, but he does so at risk that his boss will discover his actions and make overt corrections — the senior leader effectively becomes intentionally disconnected from his boss. As with the cases of MacArthur and Fallon, openly voicing concerns contrary to the boss's vision can result in quick removal from command, disciplinary action and termination from service. Finally, the senior leader can decide not to pursue the boss's vision, instead choosing to leave the position or retire. Regardless, the choice is rarely easy. In these case studies, the most common reason for firing or being replaced was a “disconnect” between the senior leader and his boss. There was neither insubordination nor disrespect for the office, but clearly different expectations and interpretations of mission criticality and resource priority.

There are other times when senior military leaders are replaced before completing a full command tour. Such was the case when Gates announced May 11 that he asked for the resignation of Army Gen. David McKiernan after 11 months as the senior U.S. military commander in Afghanistan. There are no public reports of a disconnect between McKiernan and his bosses, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. Mike Mullen and Gates. When asked what signaled replacement was necessary, Mullen stated that “there wasn't an ‘it.’ ... It was my judgment over a period of months in dealing with him.” Mullen went on to explain that a new strategy with a new presidential administration required “fresh thinking.” The replacement of McKiernan reminds us that senior leaders have prerogative to build the team they feel is best suited to execute the selected strategy.

Success in modern war requires a

keen ability to lead a large, complex military organization to tackle complex and often “wicked” problems. The commander will not be able to solve each and every problem, but to achieve success, he must instill in his personnel an attitude and ability to learn and adapt to an ever-changing environment. Failure to achieve organizational results was a necessary, but not sufficient condition for these leaders to be removed from their position. Only after these leaders became disconnected from their bosses and demonstrated their inability to propose and enact a new strategy (and the boss had a suitable replacement) were they relieved.

The toughest questions to answer are the counterfactual ones. What if we had chosen a different leader for Central Command in 2007, a different Army surgeon general or a different Air Force chief of staff? Would the outcomes have been different? We will never know the answer because the failures that occurred influenced the attitudes of leaders who were their successors. How much are new leaders responsible for the organization's improved performance? Too often, we assess “success” or “failure” without considering the context of the situation and factors that made the leaders successful. Would they have been as successful (or at all) under different circumstances?

At a minimum, we know that senior military leaders must bring not only their vast stores of expertise and experience, but also their professional judgment. Their assessment of the environment, the mission and the strategic intent of the civilian leadership is necessary to develop a common vision with their bosses. Senior leaders have a great responsibility to embed within their organizations the capability to adapt to the context while remaining true to their professional codes. Senior leaders and their soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines would be wise to learn from the mistakes of others and be prepared to adapt and innovate to achieve victory.

As Field Marshall William Slim said in Burma in 1942: “Remember the lessons to be learned from defeat — they are more than from victory.” **AFJ**



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