

*** DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE ***

ASOR

AIR & SPACE OPERATIONS REVIEW

SPECIAL FOCUS: TOXIC LEADERSHIP



ORGANIZATIONAL DYNAMICS OF TOXIC LEADING
TOXIC LEADING IN THE WORKPLACE
ORGANIZATIONAL TOXICITY
THE ADOO LOOP
“WE FEW, WE BAND OF BROTHERS”

VOL. 2, NO. 4 - WINTER 2023

ASOR

AIR & SPACE OPERATIONS REVIEW

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TRIBUTE

In January, Air University (AU) Press and the US Air Force bid farewell to Nedra Looney, the lead AU Press production specialist and one of its longest serving civilian members. Nedra devoted 37 years to supporting the Air Force, Air Education and Training Command, and Air University, the final 16 of which were at the Press, where she helped the organization excel at its mission to promote US Air Force and US Space Force scholarship.

Nedra, a native of Clanton, Alabama, first interned with the personnel detachment at Maxwell Air Force Base (AFB) during her college years at H. Councilll Trenholm State Technical College. After interning for the Air Force, Nedra was hired full time by the Montgomery Veterans Affairs (VA) office in 1986 as a clerk-typist in the accounting department, researching lost checks.

After a year in the VA accounting office, Nedra applied for and was hired to a position with the Air Command and Staff College (ACSC) at Maxwell AFB. During her years at ACSC, she was promoted through the positions of clerk-typist, secretary, and editorial assistant.

In 1995, Nedra was promoted to a higher-level editorial assistant position with the Air Force Institute for Advanced Distributed Learning (AFIADL) at Maxwell AFB-Gunter Annex. At AFIADL Nedra edited career development courses.

In 2007, Nedra was hired as a typesetter for Air University Press in support of the fledgling US Air Force scholarly journal, *Strategic Studies Quarterly* (SSQ). Upon retirement in 2024, Nedra's responsibilities at the Press included layout and production lead for books, papers, and journals. She retired as the Press' senior-most production specialist, having overseen the production of hundreds of influential books, papers, and journals.

Nedra holds an associate and applied technology degree in stenography from Trenholm State Technical College, and a bachelor of science degree in human services and technology management and an associate degree in general education both from Troy University. She received several civilian and team awards during her 37 years of exemplary service, including the 2019 Air University Headquarters Civilian Category II of the Year.

Over the course of her career and as the computer age dawned, her work tools transformed from microfiche, double carbon paper, electric typewriters, and paper-based filing systems to digital computing. She witnessed word processors and floppy disks become cloud-based software computing and communication platforms. Despite these monumental changes, Nedra showed a consistent ability to adapt and master new tools and systems.

Former SSQ editor Colonel Mike Guillot, USAF, Retired, recalled, "It was my privilege to have Nedra as production manager/typesetter for SSQ for nine years. During this time we NEVER published a late edition. In fact, due to her efforts SSQ arrived early. Nedra's



warm personality and cheerful disposition made our working relationship mutually supportive.” Dr. Adam Lowther, vice president for research at the National Institute for Deterrence Studies and a former colleague at AU Press, said “Nedra is one of those people who always has a smile on her face and a kind word, even on the days she may not feel chipper. In all the years we worked together, I always admired her ability to keep a positive attitude even during the toughest of times. She was a pleasure to work with.”

Reflecting on her career, Nedra returned steadfastly to the importance of prayer and faith, declaring that when times were tough, she stood firm on Philippians 4:13: “I can do all things through Christ which strengthens me.” She emphasized her gratitude for the flexibility of the Air Force and of the friends she made over the years. Her next life chapter includes a shared retirement with her husband of 36 years, Wayne, supporting their sons, Joseph, a US Army captain, and Nicholas, an area manager with Amazon. Nedra and Wayne will continue working on their family cattle farm in Clanton.

AU Press—*Ether* (formerly *SSQ*) and *ASOR* (formerly *Air & Space Power Journal*) in particular—have benefited in untold ways from Nedra’s expertise, adaptability, willingness to learn, exhaustive patience, compassionate spirit, and encouragement, all accompanied by good humor evidenced by a ready laugh. These qualities were ever present, even in the stressful times of looming and past deadlines, and when a certain editor requested yet another change to a table of contents, text, graphics, or title. We will miss Nedra’s collegueship and her commitment to the mission. Even more so, we will miss her as a rock solid Air University Press team member.

~The Editor

FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

The subject of leadership is perhaps one of the most important and compelling topics of study for military practitioners and scholars alike. The efficacy of the military depends precisely on the strength of the bond between leaders and followers. The fact that these roles are functionally interdependent assumes any conclusions and recommendations about one is incomplete without considerations of the other.

This dedicated issue of *Air & Space Operations Review (ASOR)* provides current analyses of the scholarship on leadership and followership, specifically on toxic examples of both. Bringing in research on toxic leaders, toxic followers, and organizational culture, both in and outside the military, the authors offer contributions to the literature, furthering the collective study of this critical topic.

I would like to thank the guest editors, particularly Dan Connelly, for their months of detailed work bringing this dedicated issue of the journal to fruition. Team *ASOR* appreciates Dan's endless patience with the deadlines and the editing process. We are pleased and privileged to help highlight and promote research on toxic leading, toxic following, and the role of organizational culture in the same.

~The Editor

DANIEL A. CONNELLY

Welcome to this dedicated issue of *Air & Space Operations Review* focused on the topic of the organizational dynamics of toxic leading in the military. While the problem of toxic leadership in the US military is not new, the use of the term and the growing literature on toxic leadership are relatively recent. Perhaps because of this recency, those concerned with the problem have not yet developed theories of the relationship between the dimensions of an organization and this kind of destructive leadership behavior.

In *Tarnished: Toxic Leadership in the US Military*, George E. Reed, an expert on toxic leading in the military and a retired Army officer, asks the reader to ponder whether the US military contains elements that “incubate or sustain toxic leadership.”¹ He then proposes that in any organization resides an “unholy trinity”—“toxic leaders, susceptible followers, and conducive environments”—that fuels the problem.² His example of how this trinity applies to any US military service also clearly comes from his own experience in the Army.

With Reed as one of a small number of esteemed subject matter trailblazers, in this issue, readers are encouraged to engage in critical thinking about toxic leading in the context of the organization. The people most directly involved—military practitioners and researchers in related fields—need to think more deeply, dialogue more openly, and write more freely about the exchange between toxic leaders and the organizations that keeps breathing life into this pathology. The vital work of identifying the organizational dynamics of toxic leading will not happen on autopilot, without conscious direction and effort. Nor can those of us invested in the maintenance of an effective fighting force afford to wait for others to pursue remedies.

While the task is urgent, it also demands great care. These same professionals will have to grapple with the uncomfortable truth that organizations often inadvertently foster toxic leadership in their struggle to survive and succeed. The argument behind this issue’s special focus is that just as the core reality of organizations is deeply buried and hard to ascertain, the tendency of organizations to mask or rationalize toxic leading is difficult to explain, thus frustrating diagnosis, treatment, and recovery.

Given all the literature stressing the power of organizational culture, the prospect of linkages between toxic leading and organizational dynamics is remarkably under-researched.

Dr. Daniel Connelly, Lieutenant Colonel, USAF, Retired, is associate professor in the Department of Leader and Research Development at the Air Command and Staff College.

1. George E. Reed, *Tarnished: Toxic Leadership in the U.S. Military* (Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books, 2015), 48.

2. Reed, 48–49.

Of the few studies which directly address this prospect, one written in 2009 states, “Toxic leaders thrive only in a toxic system.”³ It uses the term “organizational chameleons” to describe toxic military leaders, which stresses this point: There is a give-and-take that occurs between toxic leaders and their organizations and a process to how these leaders use and navigate their organization to remain camouflaged.⁴

The primary theoretical assumption on offer here is that on some level the culture must be conducive to this kind of harm, inadvertently providing mechanisms for leaders to hide their role and even to hide all evidence of the harm itself. Therefore, in these pages you will encounter new thinking on just how organizations cultivate and shape toxic leading.

The opening article of this dedicated issue advances three such mechanisms worthy of study at the level of a military branch: the military service’s key assumptions which stem from its worldview; its method of early survival, or the combination of habits that keep the organization alive in its infancy; and certain features of the service’s “personality,” namely the preferences, biases, and fears that founders, such as General Hap Arnold, tend to bake into the organization.

Next, a team of military authors including Danielle Stringer, Jeff Hurlbert, Michael Boswell, and Steven Barfoot, has selectively reviewed the current and relevant literature, both from the lens of what is available on toxic leading and which scholars are crucial to building this multidisciplinary focus. The article describes that effort and proposes a coherent, Air Force-specific definition of toxic leadership. Two of the authors are part of US Air Force efforts as a service to officially define toxic leading.

The next two articles examine the fascinating role of the follower in exacerbating or even creating toxicity, whether through or around the leader. Fil Arenas investigates the toxicity found in the leader’s entourage, while Matthew Wunderlich employs two case studies in the task of uncovering toxic followership and how its operations can corrupt the leader’s effectiveness.

The issue concludes with an examination of a popular television miniseries, *Band of Brothers* (2001). Amber Batura and Sean Klimek employ historical analysis as a contribution to toxic leading literature. Investigating whether toxic leading is a modern problem or one much older than that, they reveal the lessons history offers to help us understand the phenomenon.

The hope of every author, including myself, is that the reader will not only advance their knowledge of this problem, but also find strength in their organizations and in the good people within them to deal more effectively with toxic leading, to reduce such toxicity, and perhaps to even help leaders avoid it or repent of it! The fact that the military profession performs the indispensable role of national defense should motivate rather than intimidate those in the profession even more to succeed in these vital tasks of combating toxic leading.

3. Michael E. Kusy and Elizabeth L. Holloway, *Toxic Workplace! Managing Toxic Personalities and Their Systems of Power* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 10, qtd. in Reed, 49.

4. Kusy and Holloway, cited in Reed, 49.

Foreword

Regardless of the service, each of us connected to the US military and its vital role in national defense has an obligation to make our military even better than it is at this moment. Rooting out the problem of toxic leading in the military by identifying its contours, strengths, and weaknesses and producing effective responses—without hampering our services and what they do best—is one way to act on that obligation.

While there are so many more people behind the scenes of these pages that have provided invaluable support to the authors and to me, I would be neglectful if I failed to acknowledge at least some of these wonderful people. I could not have completed the work of organizing this issue without the amazing professional and personal counsel and encouragement of my wife, Cris Connelly. Lisa Beckenbaugh, chair of Air Command and Staff College's Department of Leader and Research Development, has been both a wonderful boss and a staunch supporter in all my research efforts—thank you so much! *Air & Space Operations Review* editor in chief Laura Thurston Goodroe and the journal's senior editor Lynn Ink have been champions and guides, and never missed a beat on providing stellar encouragement and guidance throughout the process.

Librarian Rachel Parlier at Air University's Muir S. Fairchild Research Library has provided outstanding support as our Air Command and Staff College liaison. Guest editors Fil Arenas and Dan Strand were generous with both their time and support to ensure quality and accuracy in these articles. We also had the pleasure of benefitting from hours of expert editing from the esteemed teacher and woman of letters, our guest editor Danni Connelly, who worked tirelessly to improve the quality and persuasiveness of our writing. Thanks to everyone who helped, including my friends in the Department of Leader and Research Development who listened to me, commented, and encouraged me—LaRD forever! →✳

Organizational Dynamics of Toxic Leading

Obstacles and Key Concepts

DANIEL A. CONNELLY

Across academic fields, from leadership studies to organizational psychology, theoretical development of toxic leadership has lagged, curtailing the utility of related empirical studies to military leaders and scholars alike. The study of organizational culture is a tremendous resource for advancing such research, but the relationship between toxic leading and organizational culture is underdeveloped and poorly understood. Studies of toxic leadership in particular often miss many organizational dynamics, focusing on the personal qualities of leaders and unwittingly obscuring the role of an organization's nature and processes. An analysis of limitations in the literature finds that the dimensions of an organization, such as its basic assumptions about reality or its personality, will affect the appearance, shape, and persistence of that organization's experience with toxic leading.

The military is at a crossroads on the topic of military leadership. As such, the study of toxic leading in the military is at a critical juncture. Our military has achieved many great accomplishments in its history, especially when it has steadfastly defended innocent life as in the Berlin Airlift of 1948–49, the Allied liberation of prisoners from the Nazi concentration camps at the end of World War II, and more recently the US Air Force's 2021 evacuation of 122,000 personnel from Afghanistan over a two-week period. Yet impressions of the world stage in the twenty-first century describe our present time as increasingly complex and dangerous, supposedly demanding more from the United States military than it has provided in the past.

Many voices claim the need for superior military leadership has never been greater. To these voices, the world is uncertain and unstable, and the threats in it are multiplying. At the same time, US military members have long testified to a lack of consistent mentoring across the ranks, suggesting the military is failing to transmit some of its best leadership lessons to its younger leaders. Does this constitute some sort of internal crisis, while externally the global environment is demanding ever more from our ranks?

Related to this query on the possibility of an internal crisis of leadership, the number of US military leaders removed for cause from command and other high-level responsibilities continues to climb. Some of these leaders became accountable for unethical behavior, including leaders who practiced destructive behaviors in the context of their leadership role. Professional military education can help here, with its assortment of

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brick-and-mortar and online courseware on leadership concepts, but it cannot shoulder the entire burden of developing a cadre of skilled, self-aware leaders—those who choose not to descend into unethical or destructive leadership. If the military is indeed failing in its efforts to reduce toxic leading, what knowledge is available outside the military, in academia?

Leadership studies is the most obvious home in academia for answers to a crisis of leadership, other than the study of history itself. Yet this is a field in some disarray. The manner of leadership theory's birth and development constrains its ability to respond to some of the most urgent current questions. A renowned leadership theorist in 2009 freely admitted the limitations of this field's achievements when he wrote "leadership is the most studied and least understood topic of any of the social sciences" and added that "never have so many labored so long to say so little."¹ A more recent leadership study from 2018 described the leadership literature as appearing "unmanageable—an endless supply of questions with very few solid answers." The authors see much scholarly activity in the field as "a scramble to produce new and relevant theories of leadership," and posit that this condition stems from the "chasing of prevailing social currents."² Such concerns are only part of the cause of the current state of the discipline of leadership studies.

Leadership Studies: A Short History

Leadership studies, having stood up on wobbly legs only in the twentieth century, developed from the assumptions of other social science disciplines almost as young—especially management studies. Thus, the leadership literature includes the virtues and vices of these other fields. Management studies, for example, developed during the early twentieth century. This field, featuring the work of Frederick Taylor, is rooted in the rising interest in efficiency and motion studies that organized around improving factory production. Management studies refine bureaucratic and hierarchical principles while seeking maximum efficiency, but the discipline's drawback is a disregard for all ends other than the goal of efficiency for the sake of increasing profit.³

This limitation has moral and ethical implications, affecting not only leadership studies globally, but also heavily contributing to the direction and limitations of the philosophy of education in the United States.⁴ The implications here are that management principles and management studies have curtailed the examination of moral development in leadership and leadership studies. For example, in 2019 a researcher argued that from the early twentieth

1. Warren Bennis, *On Becoming a Leader* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), qtd. in S. Benmira and M. Agboola, "Evolution of Leadership Theory," *BMJ Leader* 5 (2021): 3.

2. Fil Arenas, Daniel Connelly, and Michael Williams, *AU-26 Developing Your Full Range of Leadership: Leveraging a Transformational Approach* (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, 2018), vii.

3. Peter Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, 8th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2019), 53; and see also Christopher Toner, "Militia vel Malitia: How Can the Military Contribute to a Just Society?," *Logos* 13 (2010): 125.

4. Raymond Callahan, *Education and the Cult of Efficiency: A Study of the Social Forces That Have Shaped the Administration of the Public Schools* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

century onward, the effect of morally vacuous management principles on US military leadership has been significant and “has also degraded the culture of leadership in the military.”⁵

Decades after this early infusion of management culture into the US military’s culture, another researcher published an exhaustive study that revealed similar damage from management culture to the moral fiber of the private sector. He surveyed 1,700 business executives, organizing his questionnaire around one underlying query: How ethical are people in business? The data did not, in the researcher’s judgment, present a final answer, but the determination of “inconclusive” brought with it a hint of the problem in the business world—there was no sense of a coherent ethics in it.⁶

The words of one of the respondents capture the heart of this disappointing picture. The business executive “exists for only one purpose, to create and deliver value satisfactions at a profit to himself. . . . If what is offered can be sold at a profit (not even necessarily a long-term profit), then it is legitimate.” Another respondent summed up the gravity of the problem in his advice to colleagues: if you want to be ethical, “find an ethical boss.”⁷ The clear implication is that the lack of an ethical boss does not secure some sort of neutral ground morally, but rather indicates a need to quit or accept an inevitable slide into immoral behavior.

Thus, the influence of management studies has been to sidestep the examination of moral implications in the leadership literature, to the point of suggesting leadership is an amoral activity. For that matter, neither are psychology or sociology equipped for such a task. At the turn of the millennium, a scholar of leadership studies described much of the literature as essentially Macchiavellian at heart, meaning it concerned itself with questions of power and its increase absent any clear moral direction.⁸

Given the above ancestry, the field of leadership studies today is inadequate to the urgent task of aiding the comprehension, diagnosis, and remediation of the immoral harms of toxic leading. If leadership is primarily a question of power, as Macchiavellian thinking proposes, then any path that increases power is admissible, including moral and psychological harms that may occur along this path. In fact, within such a power mindset the only moral lapse might be a case in which a leader chooses not to increase their power, which indeed echoes Macchiavelli’s own judgment on a foolish or errant prince. In *The Prince*, he makes clear his view that the “virtuous” leader is one who increases his power to achieve his desires. The only moral offense in a leader is to consciously refrain from using or increasing power—for any reason.⁹

5. Leif Torkelsen, “Errand Boys and Grocery Clerks: The Roots of American Military Professionalism Reconsidered” (paper presentation, Air Command and Staff College Faculty Forum, 2019).

6. Raymond Baumhart, “How Ethical Are Businessmen?,” *Harvard Business Review* (Jul–Aug 1961): 6–19, 156–76.

7. Baumhart, 6.

8. Nathan Harter, “Macchiavelli: Father of Leadership Studies” (conference paper presentation, Eric Voegelin Society Annual Meeting, Washington, DC, September 1–2, 2000).

9. Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ed. & trans. Robert M. Adams (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1992), 47–49.

In order for the literature to catch up on this problem of toxic leading, researchers should seek out clues in organizational dynamics. The study of organizational dynamics provides a critical, untapped resource for the investigation of toxic leading. Specifically regarding the US military, a military service's experience of toxic leading is inseparable from the manner of its founding and early history. Following up on this idea, three basic concepts from the study of organization culture can serve as platforms for research programs: an organization's set of basic assumptions, its method of early survival, and the proposal of a service personality as a researchable construct.

The Nature of Organizations

Some have said of particular military leaders "She's definitely Army!" or "He's all Marine!" This appears as a standard metaphor in the US military, assigning certain service culture-specific properties to someone's thinking and behavior. In the film *The Caine Mutiny* (1954), for example, the character Ensign Willie Keith says of the *Caine's* new captain, Lieutenant Commander Phillip Queeg, played by Humphrey Bogart, "Well, he's certainly Navy."

It may be that leaders—military or political—tend to reflect the characteristics of the cultures they come from in a variety of ways, at the level of a military service and even at the national level. A renowned historian once famously claimed a country gets the leader it shapes. From Alexander the Great to Winston Churchill, this scholar's work nimbly jumps across cultures and vast stretches of time to arrive at this singular finding—no leader, however startling or disruptive or talented, is an anomaly to the culture that bore them. Leaders are children of their cultural origins.¹⁰

If this view is right, that a national culture tends to produce leaders that have a common orientation and preferences, then military analyst Carl Builder's thesis in *The Masks of War* should be considered in proposing that military leaders undergo the same process—military service culture shapes its members.

As a RAND analyst in 1985, Builder was asked to investigate why one US military branch was better than another at strategic thinking and planning. His answer formed the entire basis of his book. Builder claims each US military branch exhibits particular behavioral patterns related to three factors—the problem that led to its creation—its origin, the way it prefers to fight, and its primary insecurity.¹¹ In short, services have unique personalities. Note that what is meant here by the word personality is more than just a term of convenience. From those personalities, the services may even have unique pathologies. These organizational dynamics influence each military branch's experience with toxic leadership. For example, consider the particular core ideas around which the three military services have formed over time—ideas fundamental to their development.

10. John Keegan, *The Mask of Command* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 2.

11. Carl Builder, *Masks of War: American Military Styles in Strategy and Analysis* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 8, 17, 127–29.

Air Force

The US Air Force exists as a technology and a platform of operations—specifically “air vehicles.”¹² Extrapolating from Builder and others, the Air Force exists as an independent branch to facilitate the fullest expression of a technology, in war and in national defense.¹³ Its deepest insecurity is fear of dependence, especially on other military branches, that will prevent the Air Force from doing what it wants. Note that the insecurity or pathology will relate to or stem from the personality, and that different branches will have different pathologies.

Army

According to Builder, the US Army sees itself as above all the nation’s servant, and then its keeper or storehouse of the skills of war. Its fighting preference, distinct from the Air Force, is to prove itself worthy in whatever it does in this servant role, to demonstrate its value as an institution.¹⁴ As such, the Army does not value independence above all other priorities like the US Air Force. Its deepest insecurities are its persistent identity crisis—is it infantry, artillery, armor, or what?—and its fear of irrelevance. This concern is especially so in the nuclear weapons age, given that the Navy and Air Force would deliver the bulk of nuclear warheads via Air Force aircraft and land-based silos and Navy submarines.¹⁵

Navy

The US Navy’s identity appears to be a direct function of its sense of its own stature. It sees itself first as the wielder of seapower. Immediately following this idea is the assumption that this is the most important power the United States has. Its fighting preference is to maintain an unrivaled role as the country’s first line of defense.¹⁶ Above all else, the Navy values independence as an institution, specifically independence of command. This uniquely Navy perspective seeks to set apart Navy commanders both from non-Navy authorities and from higher echelons within the Navy, treating each commander’s own authority in a special, even sacred context.¹⁷ While this imperative descends from the Navy’s long history and its traditions, it is just as resonant in today’s Navy.¹⁸ As nuclear weapons submarine commander Captain Frank Ramsey, portrayed by Gene Hackman, says in the film *Crimson Tide* (1995), “It may be the commander in chief’s navy, but this is my boat!”

12. Builder, *Masks of War*, 37.

13. US Air Force, *Counterair Operations*, Air Force Doctrine Publication 3-01 (Maxwell AFB, AL: Curtis LeMay Center for Doctrine Development and Education, June 15, 2023), 1–5.

14. Builder, *Masks of War* 33, 86–88.

15. Builder, 185–93.

16. Builder, 32, 74.

17. Builder, 31.

18. US Department of the Navy (DoN), *Naval Warfare*, Naval Doctrine Publication 1 (Washington, DC: DoN, March 2010), 1.

Builder's argument regarding service personalities can illuminate the topic of toxic leadership in the military. Following up his idea that each US military branch has a unique, persistent personality, and a pathology related to this personality, a service's personality and pathology will affect its experience of leadership in general and specific ways. Jean Lipman-Blumen, a leading scholar of toxic leadership, notes, "Our society determines how leaders will come to power and what constitutes good or bad leadership."¹⁹

One World War II historian writing about a toxic US Army officer observes "anyone who has ever been in the Army knows the type."²⁰ The practical point of *Masks of War* is that an astute observer can make some determinations about a military branch's patterns of behavior, institutional likes and dislikes, and fears. Builder was most concerned in his book with how a service's personality will shape its strategic thinking and analytical judgments. This leads to two questions: How does a military branch's personality shape the leaders it produces? and, How might a military branch's personality shape the destructive leadership that sometimes occurs within it?

Organizational Pathways and Latency

The claim that an organization's personality or DNA or culture shapes members' behavior is not new. For that matter, neither is toxic leadership. In an influential 2004 history of the Revolutionary War, a description of British General James Grant precisely matches the following comment from a recent toxic leadership article: "[Toxic leaders] can be quite responsive to missions from higher headquarters and obsequious to peers and especially to superiors, but their deficiencies are evident to subordinates."²¹ The historian described Grant as such: "His superiors thought well of him, and he was exquisitely sensitive to their wishes. . . . But men who served under him . . . hated and despised him."²²

Grant's destructive leadership caught up with him in New Jersey, where he commanded British forces. His failures were exceedingly costly to British fortunes in the war, inspiring a colonists' revolt and spreading internal dissension in his own ranks and between British soldiers and Hessian mercenaries.²³ Leading voice on organizational culture Edgar Schein has been arguing for just such an idea—the viral transmission of behaviors across an organization—through five editions of his classic text *Organizational Culture and Leadership*.

19. Jean Lipman-Blumen, *The Allure of Toxic Leaders: Why We Follow Destructive Bosses and Corrupt Politicians—and How We Can Survive Them* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 72.

20. Stephen A. Ambrose, *Band of Brothers: E Company 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne from Normandy to Hitler's Eagle Nest* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 15, qtd. in George Reed, "Toxic Leadership," *Military Review* (July–August 2004), 67.

21. Reed, 68.

22. David Hackett-Fischer, *Washington's Crossing* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004), 183.

23. Hackett-Fischer, 173–98.

Power of Organizational Pathways

Specifically, Schein insists an organization's culture provides commonly accepted pathways to goal achievement, including the rights and wrongs on how to behave. "We always do it this way." "We never do that." A careful reading of Schein includes an abrupt reality check—this repetition and enforcement of certain patterns of behavior reinforce both good and bad behaviors.

Sometimes a culture will reinforce behaviors damaging to its members and to the organization itself. One of the clearest examples of this in the military is an organization that prides itself on always getting the mission done, while its leaders consistently achieve the mission over the carcasses of those who work for them. This organizational approach that values "short-term metrics" jeopardizes the longer, more enduring mission that includes future mission readiness, unit health and morale, mutual respect between persons, and the common good of the community that the military exists to serve.²⁴

What is especially concerning about bad behavior is, just as an organization's pathology relates to its personality, as noted earlier, it may also be the case that an organization's bad behavior often is a distortion or inversion of the positive behaviors related to mission achievement—for example, think of how some units practice hazing as part of an onboarding process. While this bad behavior appears justifiable to some in its perceived relation to mission accomplishment, it usually leads to destructive consequences, and often permits members to simultaneously pursue self-oriented goals that will conflict on some level with the stated mission.

Schein roots the impetus to distort good practices or to distort positive goals and missions in a psychological need to reduce anxiety.²⁵ Leaders may be trying to solve problems that legitimate organizational pathways cannot effectively address. If the leader believes the normal, approved practices are failing, to reduce the tension from a perception of impending mission failure they may choose to practice the bad behavior.

Latency: How Toxic Leading Hides

The member also may be simultaneously pursuing alternative or "latent" functions or goals, which can be wide-ranging in their amount of distortion from the stated mission and in their amount of negativity, from goals such as organizational preservation all the way to a need to intentionally harm other people.²⁶ The unfortunate truth here is that the concatenation of good and bad behaviors in an organization tends to derive from the dynamics and structures of the organization itself.

While evil-minded people are still individually morally culpable for the harm they generate, the style and nature of the harm bears some consistency with the nature of the

24. Reed, "Toxic Leadership," 70.

25. Edgar Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 22.

26. Schein, 153–55.

organization—the harm flows from or is shaped by features—or pathways—in the organization. Indeed, the worst forms of bad behavior may be those that are insidious, even insulated from detection or elimination specifically because they appear to be aligned with organizational practices or missions.²⁷ For example, in many military settings, destructive leadership behaviors can masquerade as “tough” because of the real demands, dangers, and sacrifices of military service.

What accounts for this aspect of organizations, that bad behaviors can have an organizational flavor? Schein offers two answers. First, he identifies three levels of organizational culture. On the surface, the culture reflects artifacts—physical symbols of the culture; at a lower level it expresses beliefs, values, and attitudes; and at the third and lowest level, the culture reveals basic underlying assumptions so powerful and at the same time so natural that they steer organizational life in a way that members barely notice.²⁸ As Schein explains it, “Basic assumptions . . . have become so taken for granted that you find little variation within a social unit. . . . Members will find behavior based on any other premise inconceivable.”²⁹

Second, Schein highlights two primary problems of any organization: external adaptation and internal integration.³⁰ Bad behavior within an organization may have an organizational flavor because it may relate to either of these two imperatives, or both.

For example, unit members responsible for filling out reports in a US Air Force flying squadron may misrepresent mission complete rates out of a concern for external adaptation, specifically that their unit will lose recognition and resources to peer squadrons under the same operations group. A toxic leader in this scenario might browbeat subordinates into falsifying such reports by referring to the realities of external adaptation—that accurate reports will cause the squadron to lose its competition with peer units. This raises a question: Does an organization’s culture have the capacity to shape a certain type of toxic leadership common to it in any way? Or is every example of toxic leadership in an organization a one-off example—unique, anomalous, even opposite to the culture?

Toxic Leaders and the Appearance of Success

It is certainly the case that toxic leading that seems to fit the culture and the culture’s normal operations is hard to detect and even harder to root out. Excuses and rationalizations will proliferate.³¹ A related problem is that, as leading experts on workplace toxicity note, most toxic leaders still seek to thrive in their organization, and often succeed in thriving irrespective of their ability to harm their organization.³² This desire of the toxic leader to

27. See Reed, “Toxic Leadership,” 71.

28. Schein, *Organizational Culture*, 18.

29. Schein, 21–22.

30. Schein, 6.

31. Lipman-Blumen, *Allure*, 127.

32. See Reed, *Tarnished*, 49; and Reed, “Toxic Leadership,” 68.

work with the organization to gain desired benefits indicates these leaders will act in ways that appear responsive to their organization's needs, tendencies, and goals.

This process will create two significant effects: 1) the toxicity will be masked by the appearance that the behavior aligns with the organization; and 2) toxic leaders will carefully attune their behaviors to organizational norms. Taken all in all, there is considerable reason to suspect that organizations may experience some commonality in their toxic leaders, while still allowing for within-organization variability. Perhaps in some cases the toxic leader becomes a magnified version of the organization, exhibiting extreme versions of the best and/or worst in its culture.

In the US military, the toxic leader may actually be hailed by people and entire organizations as one of its poster children. This contradiction needs explaining. According to one researcher, the US military is especially susceptible to this kind of confusion because it tends to value self-assurance and decisiveness, and there is a "fine line" between these qualities and an autocratic or toxic leadership style.³³

A clear-cut fictional example of the problem is the character of US Marine Colonel Nathan Jessup in the film *A Few Good Men* (1992). Jessup is to all appearances the perfect Marine, destined for even greater things than commanding the Marine Corps division and base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. In this he both represents and magnifies in his reputation and behavior one possible essence of the Marine Corps: "Marines take care of their own."³⁴ A related US Marine Corps personality trait is complete self-sufficiency. In magnifying these essences, Jessup at some point steps over a line—the magnification becomes too extreme, becoming a pathology—and he ends up pushing subordinates into breaking laws and even toward suicide.

The point here is that the magnification of the organizational personality trait of a "perfect" Marine still resembles the organizational culture itself—Jessup and the Marine Corps will clean their own laundry, leading Jessup to seek to restore an image of perfection entirely under his own control, rather than transfer a problem Marine off the base. So, just as knowing the organizing idea of the Marine Corps helps to illuminate Jessup's dysfunction, knowing the organizational culture better informs the analyst on the nature of the toxicity, and how it might be dealt with. For example, a recent insightful article highlights some mechanisms for the manifestation of toxic leading particular to flying units, such as the presence of a rogue aviator.³⁵

33. Reed, *Tarnished*, 55.

34. Headquarters, US Marine Corps (USMC), *Marine Corps Operations*, Marine Corps Doctrine Publication 1-0 (Washington, DC: Headquarters, USMC, 2019), 1–5.

35. Joshua Bringhurst and Emma Palombi, "Toxic Senior Military Leaders in the Cockpit," *Air & Space Operations Review* 2, no. 2 (Summer 2023), 83, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>.

Service Personality and Toxic Leading

As discussed above, a military service's experience of toxic leadership will relate on some level to two factors: 1) its key assumptions, and 2) its method of early survival. Early survival refers to organizational behaviors that enabled the new organization to succeed competitively or to protect itself in infancy from detractors. This period and the prevailing manner of survival is important not only because this is when the organization's DNA forms and replicates, but also because survival anxiety builds resistance to change, increasing the likelihood of certain behaviors persisting long into an organization's history.³⁶

These factors, baked into the culture from the beginning, organize a service's personality, including its primal insecurity. Moreover, if Schein is correct, service leaders, including its toxic leaders, think according to these two factors that lead into the way each service prefers to fight according to a strategy it will understand.³⁷ For these reasons, a service personality is a reasonable and effective research construct for toxic leadership.

Military leaders' cognitive pathways form around the service's key assumptions and method of early survival, and in their behaviors—constructive or destructive—the leaders thus reflect the service's personality and its insecurity. This explanation of a service experience with toxic leading would address multiple problems seen in the current research, including but not limited to these three contributions: 1) improved scholarship on toxic leading, specifically via organizational dynamics; 2) awareness of the impact of what is called here organizational toxic latency; and 3) texture in the understanding of the in- and out-groups that form around the toxic leader. Latency here refers to a process wherein the toxic leader uses skill and charm to present toxic behaviors as mere patterns of accepted, tried, and true patterns of behavior that are common to the organization and how it solves problems. The toxic harm is thus masked by the appearance of conformity to organizational norms.

First and foremost, the argument that a service's toxic leaders dysfunctionally reflect their service's personality offers a distinctive theoretical basis for analyzing toxic leadership beyond the current default approaches, which are based on individual pathology—findings related to the unique history and psychology of the toxic leader.³⁸ According to one author, the persistent influence of the leadership literature's "Great Man Theory" has narrowed the study of and attention on toxic leading to the leader's personal qualities and actions.³⁹

One of the biggest limitations to such a single-minded approach is that the news of the toxic behavior tends to come across as a shock, without concrete elements, such as relevant organizational dynamics subject to study or remedy. Expressions of the shock range from "How could this happen?" to "Where did that come from?" and offer little assistance to organizations wishing to increase their resistance to toxic leading. This

36. Schein, *Organizational Culture*, 324–30.

37. Builder, *Masks of War*, 127–29.

38. See Reed, "Toxic Leadership: Part Deux," *Military Review* (November–December 2010): 58–64.

39. Ben Martinez, "US Army, Toxic Followership and the Balance of Responsibility," *Military Review* (July–August 2021): 102

shortsightedness may come from a failure to see or acknowledge the organization's critical role in facilitating toxic leadership, mandating a much closer study of both organizational psychology and organizational culture.

Undoubtedly, the organization itself plays a critical role: the toxic leader provides the motive and the organization the means and opportunity. As one business scholar recently observed, companies must enable the toxic managers within it.⁴⁰ Thus, the views and findings of studies on toxic leadership in the US military erroneously and inadequately focus exclusively on the individual leadership element in their analysis and recommendations.⁴¹

One such study claims that toxic leadership in the military is the direct result of the leader's "leadership style and temperament" and that toxic leaders "tend to be toxic regardless of their environment," while appearing to dismiss the relevance of "setting or conditions."⁴² The study's explanation for the high frequency of toxic leading in the military emphasizes the permissiveness of senior leaders.⁴³

The author's omission of the role of the organization curtails his scholarship: the findings do not include the benefits of organizational psychology's contribution. As a result, this necessarily limits the primary suggestion for mitigating toxic leading in the military to "confronting and reporting toxic leader behaviors when they occur."⁴⁴ This tendency to wait for casualties is inadequate, especially given the potential for latency, which can hide toxic harm for years. Yet, this same tendency is prevalent in many organizations.

For example, Jim Jones led the People's Temple for 23 years before his orchestrated mass suicide took over 900 lives. Many other examples of toxic leading, including multiple, high-profile cases, involve patterns of abuse that go unchecked for decades. While there may be a characteristic pattern in organizations to avoid deeper explanations for prevalent harms, possibly due to bureaucratic fears of change or simply inherent instincts to "keep the machine going," this is not an excuse.

Second, within this theoretical basis that a toxic leader will mimic the service's personality in a distorted way, the ability of a leader to get away with persistent destructive behavior in an organization makes more sense. The toxic leader can sidestep termination and even punishment or detection by operating in the organization's shadow as it were. Furthermore, and as previously noted, the leader can dysfunctionally mimic the organization's preferred and commonly seen leadership approaches—hence the latency. This shadow play engages the human and social psychological tendency referred to earlier to rationalize the harmful behavior through what Lipman-Blumen calls "control myths"—rationalizations that harden into scripts that trap individuals into allowing others to repeatedly harm

40. Lynne McClure, *Risky Business: Managing Violence in the Workplace* (Binghamton, NY: Haworth Press, 1996), cited in Reed, "Toxic Leadership," 70.

41. Anthony Hinen, "Toxic Leadership in the Military," *University of Florida Muma Business Review* 4, no. 5 (June 2020).

42. Hinen, 72–73.

43. Hinen, 74.

44. Hinen, 65.

them.⁴⁵ One falsely explains the damage to oneself as rational or even reasonable or worse—as justified.

Third, including the service's personality in the examination of toxic leading informs the study of the in- and out-groups that inevitably form, beyond merely the distinction between those who partly benefit from and those who only suffer from the toxicity.

In-Groups and Out-Groups

How the in- and out-groups function deserves much more attention in the literature, since subordinates' challenges under a toxic leader are defined and dominated by their group affiliation. The toxic leader's tendency to establish in- and out-groups is common knowledge.⁴⁶ What is less discussed or even absent from many studies of toxic leading is the critical role the organization plays in permitting the establishment and maintenance of these groups, and even their formation into a kind of dialectic that exacerbates the damage to persons, the organization, and its mission.

The toxic leader's central role in forming the two groups is not in question here. The leader's use of harm forces an apparently dichotomous choice—do followers cooperate with the harm or suffer or die from it while trying to find some means of escape? A neutral position on the harm does not seem possible, at least in the subordinate's eyes. A researcher describes this predicament of the subordinate as a forced choice between “escape or emulation.”⁴⁷

While the spread of harm begins with this leader-driven process, as mentioned earlier in this article, the harm still requires the organization's “assistance” to persist, grow, and bring desired returns on the harm to the toxic leader, reinforcing the truism that toxic leaders require toxic organizations to support their penchant for harm.⁴⁸ This is not to say that the organization is corrupt as a whole, but only that it has gaps or fissures in its practices, or misalignments or internal contradictions in its culture. These factors work at cross-purposes that can create the above-mentioned shadow spaces for toxic leaders to practice and hide harm.

As a consequence of this formation and persistence of in- and out-groups in a supportive culture, and as the literature attests but perhaps not emphatically enough, the leader and subordinates are constantly distracted from what is most important—mission, excellence in performance, and one's personal and professional development. All activity increasingly revolves around pleasing, side-stepping around, or risking enraging the toxic leader.

The revolving nature of this activity, how organizational life organizes around the toxic leader instead of the mission, and how the in- and out-groups participate in a constant transaction rather than a mere opposition of forces, is precisely why what is happening here is called a dialectic. The effects of this dialectic are as wide-ranging as they are damaging. Similar to life in a cult or under a political ideology replacing reality and becom-

45. Lipman-Blumen, *Allure*, 127.

46. For example, see Lipman-Blumen, 139-60; and Reed, *Tarnished*, 29-30.

47. Reed, 39.

48. See Reed, “Toxic Leadership: Part Deux,” 60.

ing a new false reality, subordinates under the toxic leader and supportive in-group perceive only two choices for themselves: cooperate or die.

The pressure here is immense. Relating to the social aspect of human nature, Lipman-Blumen aptly describes the stakes within this dialectic: “Bolstered by the (in-)group, we become part of something. We gain meaning and worth. Banished from the group, our lives become devoid of sense and value. . . . [Staying within the in-group] is worth sacrificing almost anything.”⁴⁹

This predicament is stressful to all. In-group members by no means necessarily feel secure, recognizing that if caught in misbehavior—which the toxic leader defines—it may be a very short trip for them to the out-group. They will likely feel the pressure to demonstrate continual loyalty, usually at the expense of the out-group.

Meanwhile, out-group members experience perpetual social harm up to and often including periods of “social death,” with some perceiving no hope for escape, while others, eyeing the in-group, recognize the costs of trying to switch sides may be steep.⁵⁰ Costs for joining the in-group may include public humiliation, loss of a moral compass, betrayal of friends and associates, or other “moral inversions”—all for merely a different kind of instability.⁵¹

What already may be apparent is that, like any ideological movement with its camps for exiled outcasts, the toxic leader and in-group need the out-group for various reasons, thus completing the aptness of the term dialectic for in-/out-group dynamics. The toxic leader and in-group use the out-group as evidence of the costs of exile to perpetuate the practice of harms and maintain control. The division of the workplace into only two camps, complicit followers and targets, perpetuates the damage and even routinizes it. Both camps reinforce it: the sycophants by emulating it and the targets by their silent acquiescence.⁵²

The mere existence of only two options is actually part of the harm in that it suppresses so many of the nobler human faculties. Subordinates have no room for humane treatment of each other under these conditions. They have no opportunity to do anything positive outside of what pleases the leader, and every act is reduced to whether or not it supports or appears to contradict the leader. Inside this fearful environment, the leader and the in-group control knowledge and the means of communication, hiding the truth, which breeds confusion, doubt, and mistrust. Everything in life seems less important than whether or not one is a member of the “chosen.”

In summary, far from in-/out-groups being merely incidental to toxic leading, their formation is the pathology here. By dividing the workplace into these supporters, or toxic followers, and disfavored targets, the toxic leader thus organizes the basis and motive force of the harm they seek to perpetuate. Everyone is always either spreading or receiving the harm. Not only does the current toxic leadership literature undersell this point, but it has not yet captured the role of organizational dynamics in it.

49. Lipman-Blumen, *Allure*, 39.

50. Lipman-Blumen, 36–39.

51. Reed, *Tarnished*, 62.

52. Reed, 61.

The harm will subsume the higher needs and higher ends of the organization. Therefore, the toxic leader wishing to perpetuate the status quo will be more successful the more adept they are at creating the appearance that the workplace is still meeting these higher needs and ends, and that they are carefully following organizational norms and policies.

When toxic leaders start to slip up and become more vulnerable to detection and to censure, often that is because the leader or toxic followers have veered more sharply from these accepted practices, and the damage becomes more apparent or tips into a major disaster. In some cases the shadow practices that mimic sound organizational behavior pile up and become too numerous or too disturbing to remain hidden.

Conclusion

In any event, for the US military, no matter how much or how little the distance between healthy and toxic practices, the above examination suggests each military service will inadvertently shape the rules of the toxic dialectic—when present—according to its service personality. For that matter, it is not surprising that a military service would shape the rules of this dialectic, given the findings from Schein and many others on organizational psychology and organizational culture. Thus, scholars and practitioners desiring to advance the understanding of toxic leading in the military need to better understand the organization itself. This will allow them to better diagnosis the cause and process of toxic harms and to derive resolutions, including increased study of organizational psychology and culture, and of key concepts such as latency.

Scholars, with the assistance of practitioners, must merge research on organizations with the study of toxic leading. Key concepts such as organizational personality and the dialectic that forms from the exchange between in- and out-groups have much explanatory power to offer to the investigation of toxic leading. For example, the in-/out-group dialectic creates the conditions for toxic leading to thrive by keeping everyone tied to their role of either spreading or silently receiving harms via survival mechanisms, which subtly undermines accomplishment of the actual mission.

Finally, there is a larger dialectic, this one based on the exchange between the toxic leader and the organization itself—variables that interact in ways that can elude diagnosis and persist undercover, even for years or decades. The research on toxic leadership has come a long way, but work remains, especially when it comes to the military's understanding of the organizational dynamics of toxic leading. →*

Defining Toxic Leading for the Air Force

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An examination of current research on toxic leadership, including elements such as negative behavior, hostility, and demoralization, reveals areas requiring further exploration, including a universally accepted definition of toxic leading. Proposing a definition specifically for the Department of the Air Force, this article identifies toxic leaders as those employing negative tactics detrimental to organizational objectives, readiness, climate, and unit morale. The article also encourages expanding the discourse on this topic, principally by examining the intrinsic and under-researched link between organizational culture and toxic leadership.

In the intricate tapestry of organizational dynamics, toxic leadership has emerged as a pervasive and detrimental phenomenon that significantly influences the well-being and productivity of individuals in the workplace. As organizations strive for optimal performance and employee satisfaction, the destructive power of toxic leadership cannot be overstated. An examination of the many dimensions of toxic leadership, utilizing findings from leading experts in the field, creates a picture of its impact, especially in the realm of the profession of arms. Moreover, only an exploration that extends beyond individual leadership behavior fully acknowledges the profound influence of organizational culture on the manifestations and perpetuation of toxic leadership traits.

This article aims to illustrate the intricate interplay between toxic leaders and workplace culture, offering valuable insights for practitioners and organizational and military leaders seeking to foster healthier and more resilient work environments. Leaders must understand the dynamics toxic leading brings to the workplace in order to develop strategies to counter its detrimental effects.

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Background

History provides a background from which to survey leadership. Across the centuries, different types of leaders have shaped the path of world history, for example, Augustus Caesar, Napoleon Bonaparte, and Abraham Lincoln. Good or bad, historical figures have delivered valuable insights into how to lead and how not to lead. Similarly, countless authors from Sun Tzu in the sixth century BCE to contemporary leadership researchers such as Steven Covey and Simon Sinek have provided thoughts on what it means to be a “good” leader.¹

Yet it was not until 1990 that researchers applied leadership theory to explore the negative aspects of leadership, analyzing their adverse effects. In his analysis of the “dark side” of leadership, Jay Conger pointed to several elements to monitor for potential harm to an organization and its people: a leader’s exaggerated behavior, manipulative communication, and autocratic management style.² Sometimes, he contended, the positive outcomes a leader brings to an organization are far overshadowed by the negative consequences of their behavior. Additionally, Conger detailed leadership attributes that could contribute to a harmful working environment.

In 1996, political scientist Marcia Lynn Whicker first employed the term toxic leadership to label damaging leadership behavior that personally targets and harms employees. In her seminal study, she identified three leadership types: trustworthy, transitional, and purely toxic leaders.³ She described toxic leaders as exhibiting certain traits such as selfishness and malicious intent and focused largely on ameliorating the effects of such leadership.

Toxic Leading: Concept and Characterizations

In the three decades since the introduction of the term, the concept of toxic leadership has been more rigorously researched and analyzed. Although it has been heavily discussed and debated, a meta-analysis reveals a need for a more consistent and coherent definition of this provocative leadership theory.

From a practical perspective, there needs to be a shared understanding of toxic leadership. An argument can be made that leaders and followers desire a more robust and concrete standard against which to evaluate leaders for accountability purposes. The lack of a cohesive definition and understanding of toxic leadership enables toxic leaders to escape responsibility for their damage to the organization and its members. The following analysis of the current definitions for toxic leadership provides a foundation for a concise

1. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War* (Chichester, UK: Capstone Publishing, 2010); and see, for example, Stephen M. R. Covey, *The Speed of Trust* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2008); and Simon Sinek, *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action* (London: Penguin Books, 2011).

2. Jay A. Conger, “The Dark Side of Leadership,” *Organizational Dynamics* 19, no. 2 (1990).

3. Marcia Lynn Whicker, *Toxic Leaders: When Organizations Go Bad* (Westport, CT: Quorum Books, 1996).

and impactful definition for this concept that has universal application within academia and the US Armed Forces, specifically the US Air Force.

As with Whicker's analysis, subsequent definitions of toxic leading have centered on its impact to the individual and organization and the ways to resolve the negative outcomes more than specific, measurable markers of a toxic leader. In this sense, the scholarship offers helpful insights into the way toxic leaders may operate within an organization but tends to lack practical information that would enable organizations and individuals to identify toxic leading in the first place.

One such early attempt at defining toxic leading was offered by former active-duty Army officer and leadership scholar Karen Wilson-Starks. In presenting a framework to analyze toxic leading, she proposed this definition:

It is a leadership approach that harms people—and, eventually, the company as well—through the poisoning of enthusiasm, creativity, autonomy, and innovative expression. Toxic leaders disseminate their poison through over-control. They define leadership as being in control.⁴

The leader's objective is to seek control and therefore exert influence within the organization. In her analysis, a toxic leader is viewed as dispensing a type of professional or figurative "poison" detrimental to an organization and its members.

Additionally, the leader's negative attributes hinder their subordinates' ability to contribute to the greater organization by quashing their individuality, creativity, and motivation. According to this definition, toxic leaders view leadership, at its core, as a function of control, particularly the ability of an individual to wield power over an organization or group. Control in this sense is viewed in a negative light. Yet an argument can be made that successful leaders can maintain control in a way that does not harm the organization nor stifle a subordinate's autonomy and that can still lead to organizational success.

Although a number of other scholars present compelling discussions on toxic leadership, Jean Lipman-Blumen and George E. Reed are considered the leading researchers on this topic, approaching it with their own unique perspectives. Lipman-Blumen's follower-focused theory provides a road map to identify how individuals contribute to creating toxic leaders, how to break from the pull towards toxicity, and how to build the leader within oneself. Her analysis of the follower is rooted in political and corporate examples.⁵

Lipman-Blumen asserts that toxic leaders' personalities are the reason for the enduring harm suffered by their followers. She defines toxic leadership as a "process in which leaders, by dint of their destructive behavior and or dysfunctional personal characteristics, inflict serious and enduring harm on their followers, their organizations, and non-followers alike."⁶ Toxic leaders adversely impact those closest to them and curiously, individuals

4. Karen Y. Wilson-Starks, "Toxic Leadership," *Transleadership*, 2003, 1–4, <https://transleadership.com/>.

5. Jean Lipman-Blumen, "Toxic Leadership: A Conceptual Framework," in *Handbook of Top Management Teams*, ed. Frank Bournois et al. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), <http://dx.doi.org/>.

6. Lipman-Blumen, 214–20.

outside of their influence. Lipman-Blumen develops a strong higher-level definition; however, it is too broad for practical application in the workplace. As a primer, her definition is beneficial, but it needs to enable higher-level leaders the means to measure their subordinates' organizational impact, such as appraisals.

Reed's work, focused on toxic leading in the military, stands out by providing practical, simple methods to overcome toxic leaders that are applicable across organizations.⁷ His approach goes beyond the theoretical notions of leadership and uses military-based vignettes to highlight the impact of toxic leaders. Reed defines a toxic leader as "one whose demotivational behavior negatively impacts morale and climate."⁸ Reed thus demonstrates how toxicity at senior levels erodes healthy workplace environments, leading to the departure of talent, and in extreme situations, to tragedy.⁹

Still, as such an analysis demonstrates, the field of leadership studies has yet to truly identify a toxic leader's common attributes or a working definition of toxic leadership for practical application. The difficulty in capturing such a definition is perhaps best explained by Lipman-Blumen, who notes that "defining toxic leaders can prove vexing, at best, since one individual's toxic leader is another's heroic savior, given that context, history, and perspective weigh heavily in such judgments."¹⁰ In other words, toxic leading is subjectively defined, both by the perceptions of others and by the sociocultural and historical contexts in which it operates.

The Department of Defense also lacks a current coherent definition of toxic leadership. In 2017, the US Army was the first service within the Department to create a working definition for toxic leadership. The 2017 Army Regulation (AR) 600-100, *Army Profession and Leadership Policy*, noted that a toxic leader—distinct from other "destructive leaders" including "incompetent managers" and "criminals"—is a "toxic self-centered abuser." It explained further:

These leaders are also usually bright and energetic, as well as goal-oriented and boss-focused. Capable of producing spectacular short term results but are arrogant, abusive, intemperate, distrusting, and irascible. They are typically distrusting micro-managers, never burdened by introspection.¹¹

The Army updated this definition in 2019 under the umbrella term of counterproductive leadership.¹² For such leadership to be considered toxic, "counterproductive behaviors

7. Reed, *Tarnished: Toxic Leadership in the U.S. Military* (Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books, 2015).

8. Reed.

9. Reed, 35.

10. Lipman-Blumen, "Toxic Leadership."

11. Headquarters, Department of the Army (HQDA), *Army Profession and Leadership Policy*, Army Regulation 600-100 (Washington, DC: HQDA, April 5, 2017), <https://armypubs.army.mil/>.

12. HQDA, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, Army Doctrine Publication 6-22 (Washington, DC: HQDA, July 31, 2019), <https://armypubs.army.mil/>.

must be recurrent and have a deleterious impact on the organization's performance or the welfare of subordinates."¹³

While the other military branches grappled with the issues surrounding toxic leaders, the US Army led the way, defining such adverse leading and thus giving all tiers of its leadership the ability to understand this concept and ultimately hold those guilty of this behavior accountable. This article does not suggest that the other services are not holding those who create a toxic environment accountable; instead, it highlights the Army was the only service to officially define and address this concept within its regulations.

As opposed to the aforementioned academic explanations of toxic leadership, the 2017 US Army definition focused on identifying a toxic leader as it relates to their attributes. Yet to that end, this definition—as well as the Army's current one—does not create a mutually exclusive framework that distinguishes between a bad leader and a toxic leader. A leader can be intelligent, energetic, and boss-focused, and produce measurable results, and the same leader might also be arrogant, intemperate, and distrusted in the eyes of their subordinates. Such a leader might still not be considered toxic.

Indeed, rather than offering definitive answers, the Army definition raises further questions. Are all the stated characteristics of a toxic leader needed to make them toxic? Is the list exhaustive? Moreover, how exactly the Army definition relates to the toxic leader's impact on the greater organization and individual members remains unclear. How does one measure a leader's deleterious impact?

The Role of Followers

While much of the literature on toxic leadership includes a particular focus on the individual, some scholars have examined how followers' behavior affects toxic leadership. Perhaps reflecting this, the Army regulation does state that the subordinate is responsible for examining "his or her own behavior . . . to prevent or remedy counterproductive leadership."¹⁴

In line with her focus on followers, misplaced confidence in a leader is a cornerstone of Lipman-Blumen's work. She provides commentary against a backdrop of historical and corporate vignettes on why followers sometimes tolerate and emulate toxic leaders. Lipman-Blumen speaks to the human need for leaders, how followers create toxic leaders, and solutions to break out from the enabling environment that breeds toxic leaders.

Fear and uncertainty underpin the human desire for leaders. In part, seeking a leader who provides security and authority contributes to the development of an environment ripe for toxicity when coupled with the belief "that leaders know best, and followers should simply put themselves in their hands."¹⁵ Lipman-Blumen also finds followers unconsciously

13. HQDA, *Army Profession*, 8.

14. James W. Shufelt Jr. and Clinton O. Longenecker, "Practical Lessons Learned for Dealing with Toxic Leaders and Bad Bosses," *Military Review*, November 2017, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/>.

15. Lipman-Blumen, "Toxic Leadership," 78.

look for ways to increase and improve their self-esteem. Despite their toxicity, leaders who offer approval and validation fill the void created by low self-esteem.

The experience of working for a toxic leader presents differently for every person. Yet Lipman-Blumen and Reed posit similar reasons why individuals choose to stay in a toxic environment. In their works, both authors discuss how individuals want a sense of belonging. Lipman-Blumen validates this point with her discussion on humans' search for security. In this process, people often build up toxic leaders to be godlike figures, manifesting in the idea that they, as followers, are part of the chosen. Being a part of the elite group such as a US Air Force squadron gives an individual "reassurance that [they] live in a meaningful and orderly world in which [they] play a significant role."¹⁶ This elevation in status enables toxic leaders to exploit subordinates. Followers, in turn, endure more improprieties and misconduct by their leadership than they should since they feel at the center of essential affairs.

For Reed, an individual ascertains their tolerance for workplace toxicity on the motivation to seek membership in one group over another—his 4-F Theory of Affiliations: Funds, Fun, Fellowship, and Feelings.¹⁷ Individuals seek affiliation based on monetary compensation from group membership as well as the enjoyment, social bonding, and the sense of being a part of something bigger than the self. This theory directly applies to why individuals join the military and if they ultimately retire from the military. Importantly, the military provides connection in the form of comradery.

As mentioned above, Reed contends that toxic leading often results in adverse consequences for the organization as a whole—at the minimum, it leads to the loss of talent and, in worst cases, it leads to tragic consequences, including death.¹⁸ Before exiting a toxic situation, however, employees accept the behavior in question. In addition, Reed speculates that the military's very nature leads to higher toxicity tolerance. This tolerance is predicated on respect for the rank structure and chain of command and not necessarily respect for the toxic individual. Often in the military, a lower-ranking individual feels they do not have recourse to confront or elevate complaints about the misbehavior.¹⁹

This phenomenon is not uncommon, especially given the results-driven military environment. Individuals are rewarded for the operational and tactical outcomes they bring to the organization despite their behavior or how the outcome was derived. Supervisors of the toxic individual often do not see the questionable behavior, only the mission results.

Both scholars' commentaries on organizational culture and toxicity provide a foundational understanding of the correlation between the two; however, this topic warrants deeper exploration. Examining how an organization's culture contributes to toxic leadership is critical in understanding this destructive yet somewhat elusive phenomenon.

16. Lipman-Blumen, 52.

17. Reed, *Tarnished*, 30–33.

18. See, for example, Joshua Bringhurst and Emma Palombi, "Toxic Senior Military Leaders in the Cockpit," *Air & Space Operations Review* 2, no. 2 (2023), <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>.

19. Reed, *Tarnished*, 30.

The Role of Organizational Culture

As Lipman-Blumen and Reed have speculated, organizational culture contributes to toxic leaders. Lipman-Blumen supposes culture contributes to how leaders are identified and ultimately selected within an organization.²⁰ The standards and guidelines of an organization establish the criteria for the selection of leaders. At times, the acceptable norms are such that a toxic leader will thrive. Reed cites military-related experiences to relay the shared values and beliefs held in the military, which may cultivate an environment suited to breed toxic leaders.²¹ Their perspectives on the motivations behind leadership and followership provide the foundation by which an understanding on toxic leading's relationship to organizational culture can be built.

Although Edgar Schein, a founding father in the field of organizational psychology, was not writing specifically about toxic leadership, his work offers a spotlight on the less obvious influence of organizational culture on behavior. This framework helps in understanding the relationship between toxic leadership and organizational culture.

As Schein indicates, organizations are created to solve problems.²² Yet how an organization is structured often creates an inherent dysfunction in which toxic leaders can emerge. Organizational dysfunction exists within the gaps among Schein's three levels of culture: artifacts—visible evidence of company culture, such as a dress code or a logo—and behaviors, espoused values, and basic assumptions. Toxic leaders exploit these gaps under the guise of prioritizing manifest functions at the expense of latent functions. Reducing organizational anxiety to be consistent with organizational identity and cultural DNA is another apparatus that creates seams along Schein's three levels of culture that toxic leaders can exploit.²³ Toxic leaders emerge from and thrive within an organization's response mechanism to the problem it was created to solve.

For example, if the Air Force is trying to solve the problem of how it can win a war independently, it must develop processes that lead the organization toward its objectives. Developing, refining, and pursuing these processes offers an opportunity to perceive historical events, sometimes unknowingly, through a lens of confirmation bias and cognitive dissonance, reinforcing the necessity of finding a solution. Reinterpreting past events to identify lessons for future endeavors combines with an idealization that a service must execute its functions with absolute perfection and precision.

The marriage of these two elements creates a culture that demands "excellence in all we do."²⁴ This demand for continuous excellence can manifest into an organizational pathol-

20. Lipman-Blumen, "Toxic Leadership," 85.

21. Reed, *Tarnished*, 54.

22. Schein, *Organizational Culture*, 8.

23. Schein, 17–27.

24. Charles Q. Brown Jr., *A Profession of Arms: Our Core Values* [Blue Book] (Washington, DC: Department of the Air Force, May 2022).

ogy that focuses solely on the problem-solving results that serve the organization's purpose without considering how these solutions were derived.

The lack of inquiry into the actions taken to achieve solutions for organizational problems creates an opportunity for toxic leaders to thrive under the erroneous justification that their efforts and mistreatment of subordinates are purely in the best interests of organizational success. As Schein indicates, every organization has two challenges: solving the problem with which it was tasked and organizing internally to solve this problem.²⁵

In response to these challenges, an organization creates response mechanisms, developing an organizational culture that supports its structure. Military services tend to prioritize solutions to problems without significant inquiry into how these results were achieved. Schein suggests that when the results are congruent with the espoused beliefs and values of the organization, how the results were produced tends to be overlooked.²⁶

An organizational culture suffering from results-oriented myopia enables toxic leaders to embrace toxic behavior as a means to achieving organizational objectives. Because the desired results are achieved, the toxic leader is rewarded with praise and recognition from their superiors, which translate into validation of the toxic leader's behavior to continue. In other words, the organization tolerates toxic but productive employees.²⁷ This tolerance, under the caveat of productivity, seeps into organizational culture, creating a dysfunction that is difficult to correct.

A toxic leader thrives in this dysfunction by demonstrating superior performance consistent with the organization's characteristics.²⁸ This organizational dysfunction manifests itself in performance measurement and organizational identity. An example of performance measurement dysfunction becomes apparent by applying Schein's three levels of culture to the Air Force award system. As mentioned above, one of the Air Force's primary espoused beliefs is teamwork, yet awards are written for the individual to recognize individual accomplishments.

Schein finds this contradiction is common in organizations; however, the risk is these opportunities become available for toxic leaders to exploit because of the misalignment among the three levels of culture.²⁹ The result is a toxic personality that appears to be an effective leader who takes credit for team accomplishments through the reward system and maintains narratives consistent with organizational identity. Furthermore, recommendations to correct this dysfunction often appear inconsistent with an organization's identity and are thus ignored and interpreted as a threat to the organization's survival.

Every organization has a survival problem that is addressed through manifest and latent functions.³⁰ As Schein argues, manifest functions are the main mission of an organization.

25. Schein, *Organizational Culture*, 6.

26. Schein, 26.

27. Reed, *Tarnished*, 49.

28. Reed, 48–51.

29. Schein, *Organizational Culture*, 17–18.

30. Robert Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1957), 60–69.

For example, the Air Force is manifestly projecting combat airpower globally. Latent functions are “taken for granted and not publicly spoken of.”³¹ An example of a latent function of the service is the psychological welfare of its members. Returning to the idea of over-focusing on mission accomplishment (manifest function) at the expense of the psychological welfare of members (latent function), it is apparent how a cultural dysfunction begins to form. Feeding this growth are the efforts centered on neutralizing threats to an organization’s identity.

Organizational threats refer to anything that challenges the organization’s brand identity, thus requiring a response to mitigate these threats.³² For example, the land component has a stereotypical personality associated with its identity, and personalities that stray from the stereotype are often at odds with the service’s culture. The organizational response to these errant personalities is to “get with the program.” Senior leaders desire and reward efforts that support the organization’s survival (mission accomplishment and neutralizing threats to identity); little attention is paid to how these efforts are conducted.

The importance of organizational identity and survival is explained by Schein’s concept of anxiety reduction, which compels us to desire and subsequently develop a more stable and predictable view of how things are and how they ought to be.³³ Elements such as service members and external events that challenge an organizational culture’s status quo are interpreted as threats. Thus, employees who act consistently with organizational culture to mitigate these threats are typically rewarded for their behavior, regardless of its potential impact on coworkers and subordinates. The status quo preference stems from what Schein calls the cultural DNA of the organization.³⁴

Cultural DNA is the idea that the core beliefs, values, and behaviors that make a group successful in its early phases of existence become embedded in the organization’s culture and become basic underlying assumptions.³⁵ This notion explains why organizational culture is tied to an organization’s survival; what made it successful in the past must be repeated for the organization to continue to survive. This perception is similar to the “we’ve always done it this way” mindset. Over time, this way of thinking becomes cemented into the cultural bedrock of the organization. Any cultural changes inconsistent with its existing culture are viewed as threats and thwarted.

Lipman-Blumen highlights a further complexity in the relationship between toxic leadership and culture: she suggests that simply complying with organizational culture creates opportunities for toxic leaders to emerge.³⁶ Participating in and complying with the culture validates cultural norms and values even if the leader or follower is nontoxic. For example, upholding the core value of “excellence in all we do,” competing for awards,

31. Schein, *Organizational Culture*, 153.

32. Schein, 154–55.

33. Schein, 10–11.

34. Schein, 7.

35. Schein, 7.

36. Lipman-Blumen, “Toxic Leadership.”

and mitigating threats to the culture validate the culture's existence, especially when most of the leaders are nontoxic. This thought is not to suggest that members within an organization must be subjected to toxic leadership, but rather to recognize how organizational culture creates opportunities for toxicity.

How an organization responds to the problems for which it was created plays a significant role in developing its leaders. Demanding excellence in solving problems creates opportunities for toxic leaders to thrive by blurring the lines between serving the mission and being exceptionally tough or even toxic to subordinates. Forming a dysfunctional culture into a dysfunctional problem, seeking anxiety reduction, and prioritizing manifest functions over latent functions are all variables that contribute to a destructive organizational culture. Changing cultural DNA may not be feasible, so a more tactical solution is to address toxic leadership when it is encountered. Indeed, toxic leadership is commonplace where it is tolerated.³⁷

Organizational culture as the product of an organization's structure in response to a problem set offers opportunities for toxic leaders to emerge and thrive. The culture within an organization is not confirmation that toxicity exists or that the organization is flawed, only that consideration should be applied to the relationship between organizational culture and how it may support toxic leadership. Analyzing toxic leadership, including organizational culture, offers a complete understanding of why and how toxic leaders continue to develop and persist.

A Toxic Leadership Definition for the Air Force

Considering the limitations in past attempts by academia and the military to define toxic leadership, and the complexity of factors involved in toxic leadership situations, how can the US Air Force move forward to define and address the issue of toxic leaders within its own ranks? Combating toxic leading in the Air Force begins with creating an Air Force-specific definition of toxic leadership. Such a definition will not only help identify toxic leaders and hold them accountable but also determine if there are service-specific conditions and an organizational culture that cultivate an environment ripe for toxic leadership.

In defining toxic leading, it is important to note that toxic leadership is not reflected in a single attribute but rather in a combination of attributes tolerated relative to a particular environment. Arguably, in the case of certain traits labeled toxic by the literature, what may make someone toxic in an office environment could make them effective in a combat zone.

This is not to say there are not toxic leaders in combat, but high-stakes, high-stress jobs can create an environment where some common attributes to toxic leadership are acceptable and/or tolerated. As Lipman-Blumen suggests, perceptions along with context and history must be considered altogether. Ultimately, however, a foundational issue of a toxic

37. Reed, *Tarnished*, 49.

environment is the cost that toxic leadership imposes relative to the benefit the toxic behavior may have on the subordinate's ability to accomplish the mission.

To address these conceptual challenges, this article offers a coherent and concrete definition of toxic leadership for the Air Force. Such a definition demonstrates how toxic leadership runs counter to the Air Force core values of integrity, service before self, and excellence:

A toxic leader is an individual who utilizes negative, hostile, or destructive techniques or tactics that systematically degrade Air Force organizational objectives, readiness, climate, and/or unit morale. Toxic leaders display a host of counterproductive management and motivation styles; examples include and are not limited to fear, ridicule, belittling, bullying, and/or misplaced or unwelcome sarcasm.

Dissecting this definition and addressing all its elements are essential to understanding this leadership style with respect to the Air Force.

Negative Behavior

Negative or “bad” behavior in relation to leadership has generally been defined as any behavior that leads to harm in others, whether physical or emotional.³⁸ Individuals or leaders who exhibit negative behavior within the workplace display “hostility, aggressiveness, narcissism, lack of accountability or responsibility, rudeness, disrespect, [and] bullying toward colleagues or clients.”³⁹ Additionally, these leaders will make “actions or statements that undermine team motivation or business goals, as well as display resistance to change or criticism.”⁴⁰ As one study further reveals, such negative behaviors need not be overt or aggressive to be considered harmful; for example, “showing a lack of care for followers” can be harmful as well.⁴¹

Hostility

While this concept may seem intuitive or simply one in the list of negative behaviors, it is still worth exploring. In line with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's policy on harassment in the workplace, one author notes a hostile work environment “is a workplace that makes employees feel ‘uncomfortable, scared, or intimidated’ due to

38. See, for example, Harvey Hornstein, *Brutal Bosses and Their Prey* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), x–xi, 6–9; Barbara Kellerman, *Bad Leadership: How It Happens, What It Means, Why It Matters* (Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing, 2004), 15–21; and Reed, *Tarnished*, 6–15.

39. “How to Deal with Negative Behavior in the Workplace,” USC Annenberg, *Master of Communication Online* (blog), November 15, 2023, <https://communicationmgmt.usc.edu/>.

40. “Negative Behavior.”

41. Juliana Guedes Almeida et al., “Harmful Leader Behaviors: Toward an Increased Understanding of How Different Forms of Unethical Leader Behavior Can Harm Subordinates,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 180, no. 1 (2022), <https://link.springer.com/>.

unwelcome conduct.”⁴² Another study notes that hostile environments exist when “any employee becomes the target of disrespectful behavior by more organizationally powerful others.”⁴³ Toxic leaders thus create an environment that is negative at best and openly hostile at worst. In this sense, they work against Air Force guidelines to serve with dignity and to respect the self, others, and the organization.⁴⁴

Destructive Leadership Behavior

Lipman-Blumen defines the destructive behavior of toxic leaders as “undermining, demeaning, seducing, marginalizing, intimidating, demoralizing, disenfranchising, incapacitating, imprisoning, torturing, terrorizing, or killing.”⁴⁵ Another researcher argues these leaders’ behavior “undermines or destroys the effectiveness of a team.”⁴⁶ He also asserts effective leaders build up a team and its dynamics, which leads to success within the organization. Conversely, destructive leaders tear down the group through “bullying, harassing, exploiting, lying, betraying, manipulating—in short, denying subordinates their basic humanity.”⁴⁷ These leaders create catastrophic damage to both those they lead and the goals of the overall unit.

Degradation

In various academic literature and definitions, degrading behavior toward a subordinate is often a cornerstone of how others see toxic leading.⁴⁸ To that end, based on *Merriam-Webster’s* definition, degrading actions are those “intended to make a person or thing seem of little importance or value.”⁴⁹ When a toxic leader degrades a follower, they choose not to place value on the individual. In short, degrading behavior is a deliberate attempt to belittle, distort, or undermine an individual’s confidence within the toxic leader’s chain of command. Such behavior runs counter to the idea of teamwork that is integral to the Air Force core value of excellence, “to challenge and motivate each other to perform their best.”⁵⁰

42. “Harassment,” US Equal Opportunity Employment Commission (website), n.d., accessed January 10, 2024, <https://www.eeoc.gov/>; and Nikoletta Bika, “Horrible Workplaces: The Signs of a Hostile Work Environment and What to Do about It,” Resources for Employers, September 2023, <https://resources.workable.com/>.

43. Hornstein, *Brutal Bosses*, 9.

44. Brown, *Blue Book*, 10.

45. Jean Lipman-Blumen, *The Allure of Toxic Leaders: Why We Follow Destructive Bosses and Corrupt Politicians—and How We Can Survive Them* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005), 19.

46. Robert Hogan, “How to Define Destructive Leadership,” Hart: Unlocking Leadership (website), September 7, 2012, <https://www.hartconsulting.eu/>; and see also Robert Hogan and Joyce Hogan, “Assessing Leadership: A View from the Dark Side,” *International Journal of Selection and Assessment* 9, no. 1/2 (2001), <https://doi.org/>.

47. Hogan.

48. Gillian Flynn, “Stop Toxic Managers before They Stop You,” *Workforce* 78, no. 8 (August 1999), <https://workforce.com/>; and Wilson-Starks, “Toxic Leadership.”

49. *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “degrading,” accessed January 22, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/>.

50. Brown, *Blue Book*, 11.

Organizational Failure

The final aspect of this analysis is found in a toxic leader's ability to hamper an organization's overall objectives, readiness, climate, and/or unit morale. A toxic leader hinders the organization's overall goals through action or inaction.⁵¹ In the end, the higher-level leader may see some success, but it is limited and at the greater expense of other areas within the unit. In the end, subordinates perform at peak survival versus peak performance.

With a working definition in place, organizations, such as the US Air Force, and individuals can not only identify a toxic leader but they can also begin to understand the complex dynamics between the individual toxic leader and the organization. The perpetuation of toxic leading can thus be mitigated at individual and organizational levels.

Conclusion

Toxic leadership is a difficult problem, and it is unlikely the Air Force will ever completely eliminate it. To better combat this form of detrimental leadership, action must be taken sooner rather than later. Toxic leadership, which emphasizes the negative and harmful impact of leadership on the subordinate, continues to have a deleterious effect on both the civilian world and the military.

Examining the body of work on toxic leadership reveals the necessity for deeper exploration, including the need for a relevant working definition for the Air Force. Left unaddressed, this lack of a widely accepted definition will impede efforts to organize a coherent strategy for combating toxic leading in the service. Moreover, failure to establish a clear, doctrinal definition will add to the casualty count while perpetrators and units use various devices and rationalizations for explaining away the damage as anything other than toxic leadership.

The definition offered in this article serves as a starting point for the US Air Force to effectively address this issue by identifying the traits of a toxic leader as well as their impact on its members and the organization as a whole. While the US Army has made strides to capture the essence of toxic leadership, the Air Force as well as the other military services need to do more regarding research, analysis, and overall qualification of the concept for the everyday service member. If toxic leadership is ever to be properly addressed, leaders at every echelon would benefit from speaking about this problem in a similar language.

Furthermore, this analysis engages multiple research paths to offer invaluable insights into the multifaceted nature of toxic leadership. A principal takeaway emerges from understanding the linkage between toxic leadership and organizational culture. Organizational culture significantly shapes the emergence and persistence of toxic leaders. Schein's research delves into the inherent dysfunction within organizational structures that toxic leaders exploit, extending its purview to encompass performance measurement, organizational identity, manifest and latent functions, threats to identity, cultural DNA, compliance, and

51. Wilson-Starks, "Toxic Leadership."

variables shaping culture. The organizational culture of the Air Force must be considered when studying and ameliorating service-specific instances of toxic leadership.

The integration of insights from contemporary scholars and military-focused authors enriches the discourse, providing a holistic understanding of toxic leadership. The emphasis on addressing toxic leading in the broader context of organizational culture issues a compelling call for refined approaches and effective mitigation strategies. Readers are encouraged to contemplate the nature of toxic leadership, reflecting on the interplay of individual behaviors within the larger organizational framework and their own personal toxic experiences. Recognizing the imperative for comprehensive strategies beyond immediate corrective measures, the research prompts followers and leaders alike to advocate for healthier organizational cultures, thereby mitigating the risks associated with toxic leaders. →✳

Organizational Toxicity

Inner Circles of Harmful Leadership

FIL ARENAS

An examination of toxic leadership typically that reveals more than one lone organizational bully wreaks havoc on an institution. A look into elements of toxic leadership and a closer investigation of toxic followers or inner circles provide insights into the persistent staying power of toxic leaders, even in today's society of transparent social awareness and political correctness. Further, organizations must highlight ways to rid themselves of these abusive individuals and their willing entourages who inflict pain and suffering on individuals and organizations.

Have you ever complained about your boss to a friend only to find out that they have a similar story of someone who is equally abusive or maybe even worse? Everyone experiences bad moments in their daily lives when they may snap at someone or even lose their temper. Does that make that person abusive? Does that make that person a bully? Does that make that person toxic? Obviously, there is a huge gap between leaders who occasionally lose their patience and those who intentionally abuse their employees. Toxicity seems to be prevalent in all organizations; it must be understood before leaders can take steps to eradicate it.

Toxic leaders survive when they are supported by other leaders or toxic followers. A look at the relevant literature has revealed other types of abusive behaviors that are inextricably linked to toxic actions. This article will provide developing leaders with a background into harmful leadership and how it continues to thrive in organizations.

Background

In 2005, Jean Lipman-Blumen paved the way for academics and leadership researchers with her seminal work in the area of toxic leadership. She asserted that toxic leaders use a wide range of destructive behaviors to inflict enduring harm not only on their organizations, but also on their followers by damaging their morale, motivation, and self-esteem.

Further, her research considered the many levels of destructive and dysfunctional behaviors of a toxic leader that may include undermining, demeaning, marginalizing, intimidating, demoralizing, incapacitating, imprisoning, terrorizing, and torturing their subordinates, alone or with the members of their entourage or inner circles.¹ Unfortunately,

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1. Jean Lipman-Blumen, *The Allure of Toxic Leaders: Why We Follow Destructive Bosses and Corrupt Politicians—and How We Can Survive Them* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

these egregious organizational behaviors continue nearly two decades after Lipman-Blumen's groundbreaking research.

A 2009 study defined toxic leadership as “destructive, disturbing, and dysfunctional acts of supervision that spread among members of the workplace.”² In 2015, an analysis specifically on leadership in the military noted, “There is no consensus definition among scholars who study toxic leadership.”³ Moreover, after a brief overview of bad leadership, it described toxic leadership as a much more egregious level of abuse akin to “abusive supervision, petty tyranny, workplace victimization, bullying, workplace psychopathy, brutal and intolerable bosses, harassers, incivility, derailed leaders, and destructive leadership.”⁴

Apart from the other branches of service, the US Army actually defined toxic leadership within the Army Doctrine Publication 6-22 in August 2012, their primary leadership manual:

Toxic leadership is a combination of self-centered attitudes, motivations, and behaviors that have adverse effects on the subordinates, the organization, and mission performance. This leader lacks concern for others and the climate of the organization, which leads to short- and long-term negative effects. The toxic leader operates with an inflated sense of self-worth and from acute self-interest. Toxic leaders consistently use dysfunctional behaviors to deceive, intimidate, coerce, or unfairly punish others to get what they want for themselves. The negative leader completes short-term requirements by operating at the bottom of the continuum of commitment, where followers respond to the positional power of their leader to fulfill requests. This may achieve results in the short term, but ignores the other leader competency categories of *leads* and *develops*. Prolonged use of negative leadership to influence followers undermines the followers' will, initiative, and potential and destroys unit morale.⁵

Interestingly, the US Army recently revised its doctrinal definition of toxic leadership, elaborating on the notion of counterproductive leadership in their updated 2019 version of ADP 6-22.⁶ Yet all of the behavior descriptions remain “toxic” based on extant research. This manual further delineates multiple examples under five broad categories: abusive behaviors, self-serving behaviors, erratic behaviors, incompetence, and corrupt behaviors. According to the Center for Army Leadership, the Army agreed that one factor negatively impacting readiness is toxic leadership. Additionally, it stated that the word “toxic” is

2. Alan Goldman, *Transforming Toxic Leaders* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 139.

3. George Reed, *Tarnished: Toxic Leadership in the U.S. Military* (Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books, 2015), 10.

4. Reed, 10–11.

5. Headquarters, Department of the Army (HQDA), *Army Leadership*, Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) No. 6-22 (Washington, DC: HQDA, August 2012), 3.

6. HQDA, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, ADP No. 6-22 (Washington, DC: HQDA, July 2019).

considered a buzzword creating a lack of understanding regarding its meaning.⁷ As of this writing, the Army remains the only branch of service that has officially defined this type of leadership.

Scoping Abusive Leadership

Although there are many terms in the literature to describe abusive leadership in the United States, such as intimidation, toxic leadership, bullying, bad leadership, aggression, incivility, destructive behaviors, harassment, and many levels of abuse, this article considers these three closely related categories: workplace harassment, abusive conduct (bullying), and toxic leadership.⁸

Workplace Harassment

One of the earliest documented forms of destructive leadership, workplace harassment, is defined as “repeated and persistent attempts by one person to torment, wear down, frustrate, or get a reaction from another.” It is “treatment which consistently provokes, pressures, frightens, intimidates or otherwise discomforts another person.”⁹

Abusive Conduct (Bullying)

According to the Workplace Bullying Institute (WBI), workplace bullying is abusive conduct that is threatening, humiliating, and intimidating, often resulting in work sabotage or verbal abuse.¹⁰ A workplace bully is a global term that was defined at the turn of the twenty-first century and included harassment, intimidation, or aggressive or violent behaviors.¹¹ The most current *WBI US Workplace Bullying Survey* (2021) estimated 48.6 million Americans were bullied at work.¹²

Toxic Leadership

As Marcia Whicker, who coined the term toxic leadership in 1996, posited, such leaders are maladjusted, malcontent, malevolent, and malicious turf protectors who fight, control, and routinely tear down their followers as opposed to uplifting them. This type

7. Center for Army Leadership, “Talk Like a Leader,” US Army, accessed December 12, 2023, <https://www.capl.army.mil/>.

8. Theresa A. Daniel and Gary S. Metcalf, *Stop Bullying at Work: Strategies and Tools for HR and Legal Professionals* (Alexandria, VA: Society for Human Resource Management, 2016), 14.

9. Carroll M. Brodsky, *The Harassed Worker* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1976), 2.

10. “What is Workplace Bullying?,” Workplace Bullying Institute (WBI), accessed December 12, 2023, <https://workplacebullying.org/>.

11. Daniel and Metcalf, *Stop Bullying at Work*.

12. Gary Namie, *2021 WBI U.S. Workplace Bullying Survey* (Clarkston, WA: WBI, 2021), 7, <https://workplacebullying.org/>.

of leader typically stifles productivity and often has a powerful negative influence on organizational growth.¹³

Organizational Toxins

As one leadership expert contends, toxins in an organization—resulting from emotional pain that remains mismanaged or unresolved—are a type of institutional poison. Although toxicity is a normal by-product of organizational life, it can spread to individuals or systems often undetected. Toxins—or toxic behaviors—are generated throughout the organization, as exemplified in the model of the Seven Deadly INs: intention, incompetence, infidelity, insensitivity, intrusion, institutional forces, and inevitability.¹⁴ Effective leaders should always remain vigilant for any traces of toxicity within their purview.

Table 1. Seven Deadly INs.¹⁵

TOXIN	DESCRIPTION
INtention	Deliberate malice
INcompetence	No emotional intelligence
INfidelity	Betrayal, untrustworthiness
INsensitivity	Lack of empathy
INtrusion	No work-life balance
INstitutional Forces	Bad policies, offensive rules of engagement
INevitability	Weak crisis management

Intention: The Role of Malice

For a variety of reasons, most toxic bosses intentionally create pain in their followers through the continual use of humiliation, undermining, degradation, or verbal attacks. The *WBI Workplace Bullying Survey* found that 65 percent of abusive employees ranked higher in the organization than their victims.¹⁶ These destructive leaders may inflict such pain on their subordinates as a control mechanism to prevent any challenges or resistance. Some leaders target specific individuals within their purview for their vindictive onslaught privately or publicly by criticizing their performance at any opportunity.

Eventually without intervention by higher authority, the follower's inevitable decline comes to fruition as they break down and are either terminated or quit. The primary purpose of malicious behavior by a leader in an organizational setting is to deliberately

13. Marcia L. Whicker, *Toxic Leaders: When Organizations Go Bad* (Westport, CT: Quorum Books, 1996).

14. Peter J. Frost, *Toxic Emotions at Work: How Compassionate Managers Handle Pain and Conflict* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2003), 5, 36–50.

15. Namie, *Workplace Bullying Survey*, 36–50.

16. Namie, 14.

harm a particular person in order to fulfill a need to control or dominate. Some leaders may believe their use of malice is some form of motivation. Regardless of the reason, those on the receiving end of such toxic abuse suffer emotional scars from fear, anger, confusion, and resentment.¹⁷

Incompetence: Weak or Inadequate People Skills

Many leaders manage to rise to senior positions without any skills in building productive relationships, ironically becoming leaders of people without possessing people skills themselves. Leaders who are micromanagers or bad communicators, or who are cold, uncaring, unfeeling, out of touch, indecisive, moody, impatient, or arrogant lack the emotional intelligence (EI) skills to build productive relationships.¹⁸ By contrast, a leader who practices self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management, as exemplified in one EI model, will be able to read the room and eventually feel the mood of their followers, creating powerful leader-follower dyads.¹⁹

Infidelity: The Act of Betrayal

Toxic leaders are infamous for taking credit for their followers' ideas. Effective communication between leaders and followers assumes psychological safety and trust; betrayal occurs when the subject matter or ideas shared are used (stolen) for the leader's benefit or advantage without the follower's approval or consent. In another form of mistrust, toxic leaders share private discussions concerning senior leaders, peers, or subordinates for personal gain. Supervisors using betrayal trigger emotional responses that lead to fear, bitterness, and mistrust, ultimately destroying leader-follower relationships.²⁰

Insensitivity: Lack of Emotional Intelligence

As described earlier, toxic leaders have lower levels of emotional intelligence that otherwise would foster positive relationships not only among their followers, but also throughout the organization. Effective leaders incorporate powerful relationship skills that may be leveraged in both work and personal lives. Further examination of the EI model illustrates how its four domains develop leaders. Self-awareness defines one's strengths, weaknesses, and emotional triggers while enabling the understanding of the impact on others. Self-management promotes honesty and integrity by maintaining emotional control through temperance. Social awareness helps us read the feelings and emotions

17. Frost, *Toxic Emotions*, 36–38.

18. Namie, *Workplace Bullying Survey*, 39–40.

19. Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* (New York: Bantam Books, 2005).

20. Goleman, 40–41.

around us as well as our impact on others. Relationship management involves motivation and responsiveness to others, managing conflict, and practicing empathy.²¹

Intrusion

Toxicity of intrusion involves a superior who continually intrudes on a follower's personal time to accomplish so-called urgent tasks in the name of the organizational mission. This is a form of bullying. Work-life balance is a hot topic today, in a post-COVID environment where much of the workforce was sent home to work for nearly two years, routinely opening them up to after-hour interruptions. Although most workers were physically removed from the organization, telecommuting from home did not protect them from excessive bullying. The *WBI Workplace Bullying Survey* reported that in 2021, 61.5 percent of remote workers were affected by bullying—whether they were bullied themselves or witnessed bullying.²²

Potential violations of work-life balance, unless it is a life-threatening issue for one's occupation, include working during a holiday or special family event, or having a supervisor ask an employee to cancel vacation, evening, or weekend plans for a work project. Occasionally, the manipulating leader convinces a follower they are the only person who can save the day. These situations place a follower in a precarious position. If they refuse to accommodate their boss, they could suffer repercussions through administrative actions or risk termination. If they choose to acquiesce, it could be construed as a sign of weakness, allowing further bullying intrusions.²³

Institutional Forces: Contemporary Corporate Agendas

Toxic organizational policies or practices can offend or hurt the members they intend to protect. These institutional forces could appear as standards, rules, missions, visions, programs, or confusing directives from leaders. Further, this form of toxicity is usually unintentional but insensitive to the harm and impact on its members.²⁴

Inevitability

Future leaders must all face the fact that some emotional pain is inevitable regardless of their policies, leadership acumen, or level of emotional intelligence. In one personal example, a close colleague/friend went for a Sunday drive on a beautiful sunny day in the country on his new motorcycle and collided with a semi-trailer truck; he was killed instantly. My supervisor approached me that Monday morning in shock shortly after our colleague's wife had called him with the news of his death. The impact on our department was a

21. Goleman, 41.

22. Namie, *Workplace Bullying Survey*, 8.

23. Namie, 44.

24. Namie, 45–46.

deeply painful experience. These types of unpredictable crises, such as tornadoes, plane crashes, bombings, murders, and the like, are not planned by bad leaders. Yet although leaders cannot control the onset of such disasters or crises, they can help determine the level and duration of pain through a proactive approach to crisis management planning.²⁵

The Role of Followers

After reviewing the lists of abusive behaviors utilized by toxic leaders it becomes difficult to believe anyone could be drawn to such harmful human beings. Lipman-Blumen describes six psychological needs that may be the catalyst for this kind of leadership, including toxic leaders. The following section briefly describes each of these psychological needs.²⁶

Authority Figures

The need to fill a void left by parents, teachers, and other past authority figures may allow individuals to accept controlling leaders in the present. People are shaped and conditioned by these initial leaders and caretakers through a variety of styles, cultures, values, and methodologies. Positive role models teach acceptable values and standards, while dysfunctional caretakers teach individuals to accept their negative examples.²⁷

Security

For many, leaving the family circle and becoming independent for the first time can be a frightening experience. The burden of freedom may be overwhelming as it sometimes results in feelings of isolation, loneliness, and powerlessness. When freedom produces a sense of loneliness and fear, individuals can gravitate toward any leader who will make them feel safe and secure again.

Feeling Chosen

Toxic leaders may offer promises of safety and security while making people feel special or “chosen” in some way, leaving followers vulnerable and easy targets for manipulation.²⁸ For many unsuspecting victims, the illusion of being chosen is one of the most compelling yet dangerous scenarios a leader can leverage. Many religious and political leaders have lured chosen followers into their web of deceit under the guise of security.²⁹ At the extreme

25. Namie, 47–48.

26. Lipman-Blumen, *Allure*, 205, 29.

27. Lipman-Blumen, 30–31.

28. Lipman-Blumen, 34–35.

29. Lipman-Blumen, 35–36.

level, consider the mass suicides orchestrated by the Reverend Jim Jones in 1977, as he exploited his personal power as a parental figure to control his dependent followers.³⁰

Community

Another psychological force integral to not only accepting but also seeking out toxic leaders is an individual's "deep, positive human need for membership within a community."³¹ In addition to the need to feel special, most humans also have a strong need to belong.³² A chosen person is guaranteed membership into an elite group or community.

Ostracism and Social Death

Many individuals also experience the "dread of community's opposite face, ostracism and 'social death.'"³³ As opposed to a fear of physical death, the fear of social death may generate as much if not more anxiety within an individual. Social belonging is a powerful force, giving meaning and community acceptance to our lives.³⁴ Many followers hide dissent they may experience with a leader as their fears of possible isolation haunt them, forcing them to accept toxic leaders. Toxic leaders are especially adept at wielding ostracism or social death as weapons against discontented followers. Confronting toxic leaders is a risk for followers, and continuous resistance may lead to professional or social suicide.³⁵

Personal Weakness

Typically, followers of toxic leaders will acquiesce on topics or subject matter that they are completely against to avoid conflict. The fear of retaliation, humiliation, or termination is an additional psychological factor keeping followers from challenging their abusive leaders. Most followers feel too weak to challenge their leaders personally or their dysfunctional systems within organizations. Moreover, these followers feel alone and believe that contesting their harmful bosses would jeopardize their careers.³⁶

Toxic Leader Disciples

How do susceptible followers become toxic? Are some organizational structures more conducive to toxic interactions? The lack of understanding that most Americans have

30. Bernard M. Bass, *The Bass Handbook of Leadership: Theory, Research, and Managerial Applications* (New York: Free Press, 2008), 267.

31. Lipman-Blumen, *Allure*, 35.

32. A. H. Maslow, "A Theory of Human Motivation," *Psychological Review* 50, no. 4 (1943), <https://psycnet.apa.org/>.

33. Lipman-Blumen, *Allure*, 35.

34. Lipman-Blumen, 38–39.

35. Lipman-Blumen, 40.

36. Lipman-Blumen, 43.

about the day-to-operations of the US military has been called a “double-edged sword.”³⁷ The more successful the military is at executing its missions, the less interested the average citizen is in how the military does its job to defend the nation, leaving the military relatively free from excessive interference and scrutiny.

Unfortunately, toxic leadership is embedded in the framework of the profession of arms. Military culture places great emphasis on duty, a moral responsibility and obligation, regardless of the quality of the existing leadership. Military organizations provide structures that may “incubate and sustain toxic leadership,” allowing destructive leaders to thrive.³⁸ According to a 2010 study, “Toxic leaders, susceptible followers, and conducive environments represent an unholy trinity that can lead to destructive outcomes,” also known as the toxic triangle.³⁹

Importantly, toxic leaders can be difficult to locate within organizations due to the protection of their loyal followers and corporate disciples; these harmful leaders do not act alone:

They are empowered by, fueled by, and serve as players in webs of destructive behavior populated by colleagues, executive boards, policy makers, customers, and stakeholders. Productivity, profits, and quarterly reports rule. The quality of human relationships is swept aside. Emotional intelligence becomes a footnote, an afterthought. Greed and power plays emerge.⁴⁰

In fact, the *Workplace Bullying Survey* discovered that in 2021, 21 percent of harmful bullies were actually the victim’s coworkers or peers.⁴¹

Leader-Member Exchange Connection

A closer look at a relevant leadership theory may help developing leaders understand how toxic followers and other disciples form high-quality exchange relationships. Although the Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory has its roots in the early 1970s and has had several refinements over the last decades, the dyadic relationship between the leader and follower is still the most powerful influence on successful leadership. The premise behind LMX theory as a relationship-based approach holds that effective leadership grows when leaders and followers reach mature leadership relationships, or partnerships.

The earlier findings in the initial research described very different leader-follower interactions when dealing with the same leader. At one end of the spectrum, followers described so-called high-quality exchanges (in-groups), which involved high levels of trust, respect,

37. Reed, *Tarnished*, 4.

38. Reed, 48.

39. Paul W. Mulvaney and Art Padilla, “The Environment of Destructive Leadership,” in *When Leadership Goes Wrong: Destructive Leadership, Mistakes, and Ethical Failures*, ed. Brigit Shyns and Tiffany Hansbrough (Charlotte, NC: Information Age, 2010), 52–53.

40. Goldman, *Transforming Toxic Leaders*, xviii.

41. Namie, *Workplace Bullying Survey*, 14.

and obligation. In these high-quality exchanges followers were the equivalent of so-called trusted assistants for leaders. In low-quality exchanges (out-groups), members described low levels of trust, respect, and obligation. Since these followers were not viewed as trusted assistants or in-group members, they were treated as generic workers who simply conformed to their job descriptions and made no more effort.⁴²

When the high-quality exchanges blossomed into mature partnerships, both parties could count on each other for full loyalty and support. Further, the exchanges were not only behavioral, but also emotional with mutual respect, trust, and obligation, garnering nearly unlimited influence for the follower. Unfortunately, the followers with a low-quality exchange relationship had reduced access to the leader, resources, and growth opportunities.⁴³

Obviously not all in-groups foster toxic behaviors. The LMX theory helps unravel the complex relationships between toxic leaders and their followers. Attributions of toxicity will vary among followers based on their specific dyadic relationships; thus, some followers will not only tolerate bad leaders but also may “aid and abet” their toxic behaviors within organizations.⁴⁴ It is reasonable to surmise that because of the subjective nature of each leader-follower dyad, each relationship will be unique based on the compatibility of many factors, such as values, personality typology, expectations, and so forth. Many of these factors will help shape the type of leader-follower exchange, while also considering the follower’s needs described in earlier sections.

If the leader views the follower as competent, dependable, and likeable, the member will most likely share a high-quality exchange relationship with the leader and all of the benefits and rewards of that LMX status. In the case of toxic leadership, members who earn a high-quality exchange relationship with that leader trust the leader to act in their best interest and do not perceive the leader as harmful or threatening.

Conversely, subordinates that do not reach the same level of communication with their leader will most likely garner a low-quality exchange relationship with the leader and will not be entrusted with the same scope of responsibilities, resources, or access to the leader as in-group members. Followers at this level typically are less satisfied with their leaders and perceive them as ineffective. Moreover, these subordinates often feel distanced or excluded from the important work and are more likely to report their leader’s actions.

Members of the out-group are also likely to retaliate or respond to actions from the toxic leader, establishing a balance of equity stemming from the low-quality exchange relationship, unlike the protector mode demonstrated by in-groups.⁴⁵ The Leader-Member

42. George B. Graen and Mary Uhl-Bien, “Relationship-Based Approach to Leadership: Development of Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory of Leadership over 25 Years: Applying a Multi-Level Multi-Domain Perspective,” *Leadership Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (1995): 227.

43. Graen and Uhl-Bien, 232–33.

44. Kathie L. Pelletier, “Perceptions of and Reactions to Leader Toxicity: Do Leader-Follower Relationships and Identification with Victim Matter?,” *Leadership Quarterly* 23, no. 3 (2012): 413.

45. Pelletier.

Exchange theory illustrates how leader-follower dyads are formed within toxic or nontoxic relationships. The trust and loyalty of in-groups support both sides of the spectrum.

Leader's Entourage

In addition to the leader-member exchange groups, the leader's entourage is another support system for toxic and nontoxic leaders. The most powerful group of followers according to Lipman-Blumen is the leader's entourage. This tightly knit group is analogous to President John F. Kennedy's "Irish Mafia," a select few entrusted friends—and his brother, Bobby—who were in key administration roles during his term. The overall functions of the entourage are to protect the leader, gather information, and act as trusted key advisers on a daily basis. Additionally, the entourage will shield the leader from any harm or blame under any circumstances and will voluntarily take the blame for any wrongdoing.⁴⁶

Crucially, Lipman-Blumen observes that members of the entourage "are leaders in-training, who act in the leaders name." The entourage is devoted to serving the leader and executing all critical tasks regardless of the members' affinity for the leader. The mission of the entourage is to keep the leader in power; members derive their status and "raison d'être" based on their loyal relationship with the leader.⁴⁷

Toxic leaders are more comfortable with their inner circles, knowing they share interests and goals. Further, the leader can easily identify the entourage members and can count on their loyalty to do whatever is necessary for the cause. Finally, members of the entourage may be called upon for the honorary role of standing in for the leader; no other follower group has this privilege. The outer circle of the entourage acts as a retainer—those subordinates that attend to the personal needs of the leader. Although outside members may have similar aspirations or goals within the organization, they may not be trustworthy. Often retainers working for toxic leaders remain in their positions for other benefits, such as empowerment, status, and respect from other departments that fear their leader's power and control.⁴⁸

It is imperative to underscore that toxic leaders do not act alone; they need a support system of their own to survive, while in the process creating toxic followers of the future. These entourages must be transformed or eradicated at the lowest levels to prevent the spread of organizational toxicity.

Summary

Toxic leaders thrive precisely because they are not alone; they have support from their trusted inner circles. Moreover, these in-group members may be toxic leaders in training. Further, the entourage or disciples represent a powerful alliance that overpowers

46. Lipman-Blumen, *Allure*, 150–51.

47. Lipman-Blumen, 151.

48. Lipman-Blumen, 152–54.

their targeted victims and is shielded by their toxic leaders. Toxic networks will continue their abusive leadership unless higher authority holds these abusers and their inner circles accountable.

The out-groups also have a responsibility to support each other, document, report, and use the formal complaint system to expose these harmful leaders. Additionally, leaders may arm themselves with continual education in the areas of leadership development, personality typology, and emotional intelligence, while establishing a culture of toxic awareness.

A deeper look into the murky networks of toxicity reveals this darker side of leadership whereby abusive leaders are protected by trusted followers or assistants to carry out their deeds. Many innocent workers become victims of toxic manipulation. Unfortunately, the price to stop bullying is paid heavily by the targets themselves. The 2021 *Workplace Bullying Survey* reported that 23 percent of the targeted victims quit their jobs, 17 percent were forced out in what was made to appear as voluntary separation, 12 percent were actually terminated, and 15 percent transferred to another organization. Sadly, the gist of these statistics reveals that the targeted victims of toxic leaders had a 67 percent chance of losing the jobs that they once loved.⁴⁹ The unfortunate victims of toxic leaders may carry the scars of emotional abuse for the rest of their lives; organizations owe it to them to eliminate toxic leaders and disband destructive follower groups.

The sad truth is that humans are imperfect. With this fact comes the good, bad, and sometimes abusive toxic leader. How we choose to eradicate this dark side of leadership must stem from awareness, education, and a lexicon that enables workers at all levels to recognize toxicity. We often wonder how toxic senior leaders develop. It is incumbent upon all of us to stop toxicity at the lowest levels and transform these susceptible followers into viable leaders of tomorrow. ✈️

49. Namie, 21.

The ADOO Loop

A Decision-Breaking Cycle of Toxic Followership

MATTHEW C. WUNDERLICH

Toxic followership lurks unacknowledged across governmental organizations, endangering America's national defense and corrupting bureaucracies from within. Employing an iterative pattern to avoid, deviate, obstruct, and observe (ADOO), toxic followers undermine leaders and defeat missions from inside an organization or team. This study presents two historic examples showcasing toxic followership at the highest levels of US national security. The ADOO loop examines decision-breaking behaviors through the lens of personal agency. Mitigating toxic followership can assist leaders in rebuilding team dynamics, restoring decision-making functionality, and galvanizing the national security enterprise by recognizing and neutralizing this previously unacknowledged threat.

When strategies fail, nations lose wars, or plans collapse, the blame often falls upon flawed leadership caused by overzealous ambitions, incomplete awareness, or inept commanders. This approach ignores the possible roles of those who operate under the leader, those followers whose actions can negatively impact the overall strategy. Just as teamwork can boost a leader's desired outcomes, toxic followership can undermine a leader's decision-making cycle with adverse consequences. Optimizing team dynamics while preserving desired decision-making systems mandates understanding toxic followership and mitigating decision-breaking behaviors.

John Boyd's four-phased loop for decision-making depicts an idealistic and iterative cycle wherein competitors seek to observe, orient, decide, and act (OODA) more rapidly against one another to gain relative advantage and achieve objectives.¹ Unfortunately, this model fails to incorporate systems considerations: it focuses on simple unitary actors while discounting follower agency, the complexities of team dynamics, and the inertia inherent to bureaucracies. The OODA loop enables a reductionist approach to tactical engagements—that is, making sense of fighter aircraft fundamentals in a dogfight—while neglecting to incorporate strategic and operational realities.

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1. Frans P. B. Osinga, "The Enemy as a Complex Adaptive System: John Boyd and Airpower in the Postmodern Era," in *Airpower Reborn: The Strategic Concepts of John Warden and John Boyd*, ed. John Andreas Olsen (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2015), 58.

A modification of Boyd's acronym, the ADOO loop—avoid, deviate, obstruct, and observe—provides a model in which decision-making effectiveness is iteratively decreased through toxic followership mechanisms that actively undermine a commander's intent. This model derives from case study analyses of the leader-subordinate incompatibilities between President Abraham Lincoln and General George McClellan, and of the widespread team dysfunctionality within President Ronald Reagan's administration relative to the Iran-Contra Affair.

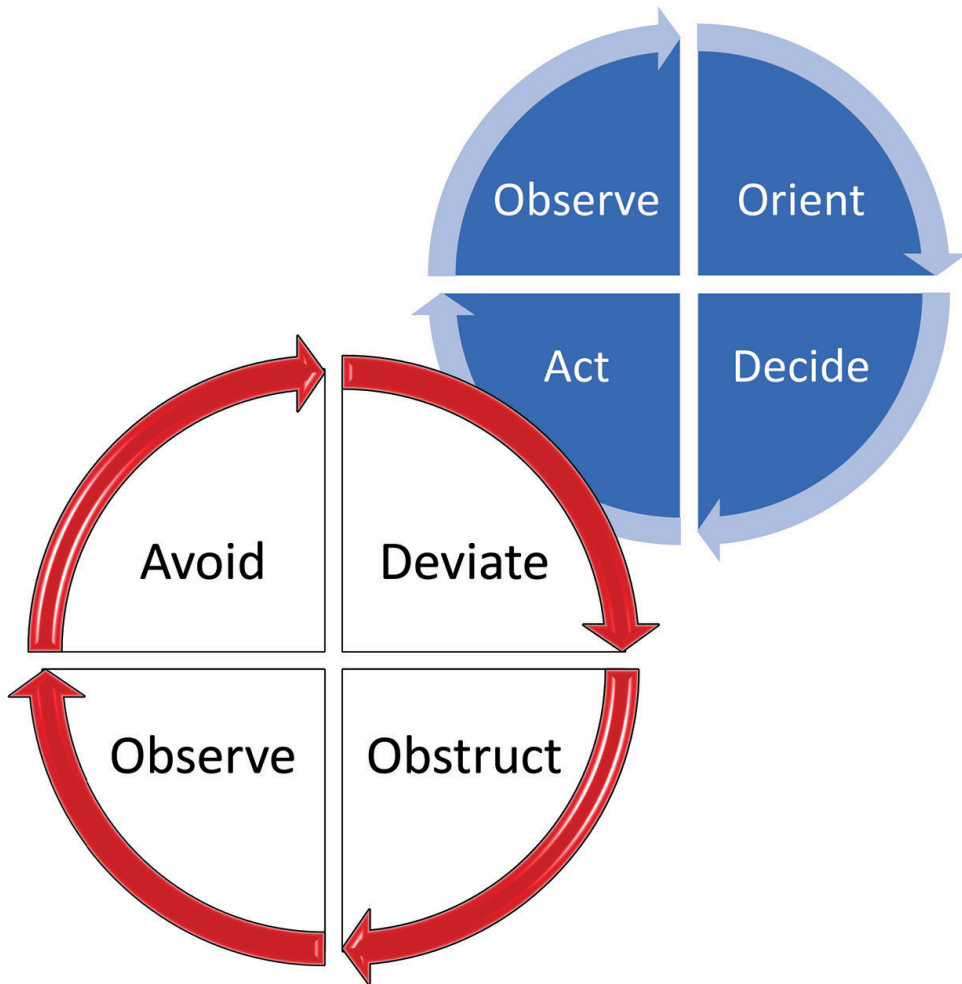


Figure 1. Toxic followership

Toxic Followers

The ADOO loop models toxic followership. This concept derives from the definition of toxic leadership—destructive or dysfunctional supervision that spreads within a team

or an organization.² Toxic followers intentionally apply detrimental behaviors to undermine leader intent and degrade team effectiveness relative to desired organizational outcomes.

The complexities inherent to modern products and services mandate cross-functional teams to leverage the varying skills and technologies spanning business, government service, and political arenas.³ Teams achieve results by working toward common goals and incorporating diverse perspectives to validate the idea that the whole of an organization is greater than the sum of its individual parts. Despite the overwhelming benefits of working as a group, negative behaviors, which endanger effectiveness either immediately or over time, can readily manifest within a team.

Toxic followership expands beyond mere laziness or shirking behaviors. Instead, toxic followership deliberately breaks an organization's decision-making cycles by deviating from a leader's intent while reorienting team efforts toward alternate outcomes.⁴ Toxic followers act in pursuit of personal agency, ignoring team or leader equities while focusing on increasing personal power, diminishing superiors' authority, or serving a combination of personal and hierarchical status interests.⁵

Despite an overarching intention of breaking or corrupting a decision, the toxic follower keenly desires to preserve the existing decision-making apparatus. System preservation ensures toxic followers retain bureaucratic status and influence as the organization exists to achieve objectives beyond the capacity of an individual actor or leader.⁶ Throughout their formation and maturation, bureaucracies develop unique characteristics subject to the regulations, norms, and member traits.⁷ This identity enables the bureaucracy to displace organizational aims via traits of toxic followers and create an entirely divergent purpose over time.⁸

Toxic followers thrive in bureaucracies because these organizations and their collective systems can subvert original aims while deriving an internal identity through process inertia, risk aversion, and authority deferment. Tempering the complete destruction of a bureaucracy is the understanding that eliminating a decision-making cycle altogether endangers the bureaucracy. Instead, toxic followers seek to erode the process from within

2. Alan Goldman, *Transforming Toxic Leaders* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 168.

3. W. Gibb Dyer Jr., Jeffrey H. Dyer, and William G. Dyer, *Team Building: Proven Strategies for Improving Team Performance* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 12.

4. Adam K. Greene, "Building a Foundation on Sand: The Demise of Leaders Resulting from Toxic Followership" (Fort Leavenworth, KS: School of Advanced Military Studies, 2016), 5, <https://apps.dtic.mil>.

5. See, for example, Gene Dixon, "Getting Together," in *The Art of Followership: How Great Followers Create Great Leaders and Organizations*, ed. Ronald E. Riggio, Ira Chaleff, and Jean Lipman-Blumen (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008); Ira Chaleff, "Creating New Ways of Following," in *Art of Followership*, 74–75; and Robert E. Kelley, *The Power of Followership: How to Create Leaders People Want to Follow and Followers Who Lead Themselves* (New York: Doubleday Currency, 1992), 110.

6. Robert K. Merton, "Bureaucratic Structure and Personality," *Social Forces* 18, no. 4 (1940): 563.

7. Merton, 563.

8. Merton, 563.

by deviating from a leader's intent or corrupting the system so thoroughly that the leader entirely abandons any efforts towards positive change.⁹

Toxic followership exists beyond formal bureaucratic structures. The capacity for subordinates to challenge hierarchical structures with destructive or dysfunctional behaviors to undermine a superior's intent can exist within any team or group of teams.

The first case study exploring toxic followership is the leader-subordinate dynamic between Lincoln and McClellan during the American Civil War. This case study highlights the role of individual agency and the deliberate mechanisms toxic followers employ to undermine decisions. The second case study analyzes team dysfunctionality through the Iran-Contra Affair during Reagan's administration. This case study explores the behaviors within a bureaucracy that corrupt an organization's aim and ingrain inertia into decision-making processes, behaviors that ultimately fostered scandal at the highest levels of American governance. The behaviors and processes inherent to toxic followership are captured in the ADOO loop model of avoidance, deviation, obstruction, and observation which can then illuminate corresponding measures to mitigate follower toxicity and restore decision-making effectiveness.

Leader-Subordinate Dysfunction: Lincoln and McClellan

The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present.

Abraham Lincoln, December 1, 1862¹⁰

When Lincoln was elected to the US presidency in 1860, he faced monumental challenges in containing secession, regulating federal institutions, and assembling teams of civilian and military leaders capable of ending the burgeoning Civil War. With military experiences limited to brief service in the Illinois militia, Lincoln initially relied heavily on the military expertise provided by General Winfield Scott, the commanding general of the United States Army at the Civil War's onset.¹¹

Having served as the commanding general since 1841, Scott developed the Union's grand strategy to defeat the Confederate rebellion. Despite his military aptitude, Scott did not have the physical capacity to command troops on the battlefield.¹² As the first of Lincoln's generals during the Civil War, Scott's interactions with the commander-in-chief were often strained but never toxic.

9. Paul S. Adler and Bryan Borys, "Two Types of Bureaucracy: Enabling and Coercive," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (March 1996): 61.

10. Abraham Lincoln, "Annual Message to Congress," December 1, 1862, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler et al. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953).

11. James Lewis, "The Black Hawk War Phases, Black Hawk War of 1832," Northern Illinois University Digital Library, accessed December 14, 2023, <https://digital.lib.niu.edu/>.

12. John S. Eisenhower, *Agent of Destiny: The Life and Times of General Winfield Scott* (Oklahoma City: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 360–63.

As a veteran and victor of the Mexican-American War, Scott held a military reputation that nearly propelled him into the presidency in 1852, when he earned the Whig Party's nomination but failed to garner widespread support, ultimately losing the election to Democrat Franklin Pierce.¹³ After the election, Scott resumed his duties as the commanding general of the Army—remaining politically connected but committed to defending the United States even after his native Virginia seceded from the Union.¹⁴

The Civil War challenged the status quo responsibilities of and relationship between the president and his commanding general. Tracing back to America's revolutionary development, the duty to outline overarching political interests fell to the chief executive, while campaign execution and tactics belonged to the general.¹⁵ Whereas the US Constitution codified the president's status as commander in chief, the predominant responsibilities for organizing, training, and equipping armies devolved to Congress.¹⁶

Prior to the Civil War, the Mexican-American War anchored this civil-military norm as then-President James Polk outlined the war's political objectives, Congress funded the military forces, and Scott executed the campaign abroad.¹⁷ Throughout the Civil War, Congress imposed War Department Committee oversight and budgetary constraints to balance constitutional responsibilities across the government.¹⁸ Yet despite Congress' adherence to the existing wartime norm, the Civil War strained the paradigm of civilian and military relations as Lincoln immersed himself in tactical affairs when his generals failed to deliver desired outcomes. These inadequacies included stalled campaigns, divergent political aspirations, and competing personal agendas that hindered Lincoln's decision-making process.

In 1861, given Scott's age and poor health, Lincoln appointed General Irvin McDowell to lead the Union advance toward the Confederate capital at Richmond.¹⁹ Supported by Congress, Lincoln ordered this attack despite Scott's concerns that the Union Army was not ready for combat.²⁰ McDowell's sound defeat at the First Battle of Bull Run stunned the Union and forced Lincoln to reassess his Army and its leadership.²¹ By November 1861, Lincoln had fired McDowell, approved Scott's retirement, and appointed McClellan as commander of the Federal Army.²²

13. Elbert B. Smith, *The Presidencies of Zachary Taylor and Millard Fillmore* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988), 237–39.

14. Eisenhower, *Agent of Destiny*, 355.

15. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), 156–57.

16. Huntington, 169.

17. Huntington, 181.

18. Huntington, 170.

19. Brett F. Woods, *Abraham Lincoln: Letters to His Generals, 1861–1865* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2013), 9.

20. Ronald C. White Jr., *A. Lincoln: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 2009), 429.

21. Woods, *Abraham Lincoln*, 9.

22. Woods, 38.

McClellan was a distinguished military officer and successful businessman who volunteered at the onset of the Civil War and rapidly earned an appointment as the commander of the Department of the Ohio.²³ Connected to political and military leaders alike, McClellan quickly rose through the ranks while developing his own elaborate plans to defeat the Confederacy.

After his subsequent command over the newly formed Army of the Potomac in Northern Virginia, McClellan began to quarrel with his former mentor, Scott.²⁴ With divergent strategies toward prosecuting the war, McClellan's forceful attitude and organizational acumen gradually secured the previously mentioned appointment to commanding general of the Army and promulgated Scott's corresponding retirement.²⁵

As commanding general, McClellan refined a pattern of toxic followership throughout 1862. Focusing on securing resources and political support from Congress, McClellan infuriated his commander in chief as Lincoln grew exasperated at the lack of action from the Army of the Potomac.²⁶ Despite frequent meetings between the two, and with direct orders to advance, McClellan continued to delay the offensive in the Eastern Theater.

Lincoln's decision-making process and McClellan's decision-breaking preference degraded the Union's strategic effort. Oriented toward political outcomes and accelerated by factors ranging from preserving the cohesion of the remaining United States to developing the conditions to ensure the European powers stayed out of the war, Lincoln required military action.²⁷

Notwithstanding at least 57 meetings between the duo, McClellan avoided Lincoln's direct orders, opting instead to consolidate and amass his forces.²⁸ Similar behaviors within Lincoln's cabinet and across Congress enabled McClellan's inaction and resulted in Lincoln firing his secretary of war and publicly asserting the first presidential-directed general order for action.²⁹

Despite Lincoln's clear guidance, McClellan continued to obstruct his commander in chief—overtly insulting the president and simultaneously disregarding Lincoln's intent. McClellan exerted personal influence within Lincoln's cabinet through Salmon Chase, the secretary of the treasury and McClellan's political patron.³⁰ Thus, by subverting his leader's guidance and tainting the overarching bureaucracy, McClellan formed a pattern of behavior that drove Lincoln to establish his own war council and eventually strip

23. Stephen W. Sears, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1988), 72.

24. Carl Sandburg, *Storm over the Land: A Profile of the Civil War* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1942), 62.

25. John F. Marszalek, *Lincoln and the Military* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2014), 24.

26. Marszalek, 33.

27. Marszalek, 23.

28. Stephen W. Sears, "Lincoln and McClellan," in *Lincoln's Generals*, ed. Gabor S. Boritt (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 37; and Marszalek, 25.

29. Marszalek, 25

30. Sears, "Lincoln and McClellan," 23.

McClellan of the title of commanding general, leaving him with only the Army of the Potomac and finally coercing an advance through the Peninsula Campaign.³¹

The relationship between Lincoln and McClellan continued to devolve throughout the Peninsula Campaign as the Union finally went on the offensive in Virginia. McClellan's halting operational tempo, strained by intelligence errors, ceded the tactical initiative to the Confederacy while frustrating Lincoln's strategic objectives.³² In July 1862, Lincoln boarded the USS *Ariel* and conducted his own battlefield assessment.³³ Inspecting the Army of the Potomac, analyzing the terrain, and assessing the enemy situation, Lincoln reoriented his understanding and decision-making processes to the operational realities.³⁴ During this visit, McClellan subverted his commander in chief's guidance, pursued his personal political agenda, and issued an ultimatum voicing the preservation of the institution of slavery directly to the president.³⁵

Breaching civil-military protocols, McClellan's toxic behaviors and operational failures prompted Lincoln to appoint General Henry W. "Harry" Halleck as general in chief and eventually fire McClellan altogether in September 1862, when the latter failed to obey presidential orders, once again, after the Battle of Antietam.³⁶

The relationship between Lincoln and McClellan progressively eroded throughout the Civil War. As Lincoln refined his strategic understanding and corresponding decision-making processes, McClellan actively pursued his own agenda for political gain. McClellan exhibited the toxic follower methodology of avoiding the president's intent, deviating efforts toward self-interests, obstructing bureaucratic functionality, and observing Lincoln's countermoves in an iteratively decremental cycle. This dysfunctional relationship demonstrates the toxic follower methodology inherent to the ADOO loop, as negative effects increase exponentially when toxic followership manifests in a team environment. Such a team dynamic, distinct from a leader-follower dynamic of the Lincoln-McClellan case, is illustrated through the Iran-Contra Affair.

Team Dysfunction: Iran-Contra Affair

A few months ago, I told the American people I did not trade arms for hostages. My heart and my best intentions tell me that's true, but the facts and evidence tell me it is not.

Ronald Reagan, March 4, 1987³⁷

31. Sears, *George B. McClellan*, 160.

32. Ronald H. Bailer, ed., *The Bloodiest Day: The Battle of Antietam* (Alexandria, VA: Time-Life Books, 1984), 107–13.

33. Walter Coffey, "Lincoln Visits the Virginia Peninsula," Civil War Months (website), July 8, 2022, <https://civilwarmonths.com/>.

34. Coffey.

35. Sears, "Lincoln and McClellan," 38.

36. Sears, 44.

37. Ronald Reagan, "Address to the Nation on the Iran-Contra Controversy," March 4, 1987, transcript, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/>.

When Reagan assumed the presidency in January of 1981, he immediately faced Iran- and Nicaragua-related challenges that became increasingly problematic through toxic followership within his National Security Council.³⁸ America's foreign relations challenges with Iran took a decided turn for the worse during the 1979 Islamic Revolution as allies became adversaries and 52 Americans were taken hostage in Tehran during Jimmy Carter's presidency.³⁹ After multiple failed rescue attempts and a 444-day effort, the hostages were released to Reagan's newly-inaugurated administration. US-Iranian economic and diplomatic relations further deteriorated during this period as Iran entered an eight-year war with Iraq.⁴⁰

When the Iran-Iraq War was in its second year, officials within the Reagan administration documented an opportunity to restore US-Iranian relations by providing Iran with weapons and military supplies—despite standing arms bans by the United States and regional partners and Allies.⁴¹ Individuals with unbridled ambitions within the Reagan administration actively pursued equipping the Iranian military, in hopes of possibly toppling the theocracy, with the intent to remove Iran from the Soviet Union's Cold War sphere of influence.⁴²

As these rogue actors within the Reagan administration formulated ideas for US-Iranian normalization, events in Nicaragua similarly stymied policymakers within the executive branch. In 1981, the revolutionary Sandinista National Liberation Front, which had direct ties to communist Cuba and the Soviet sphere, ruled the government of Nicaragua.⁴³ Therefore, Reagan voiced support to Contra rebels out of Honduras who sought to overthrow the democratically-elected Sandinistas.⁴⁴

Despite Reagan's objective to arm the Contras and dislodge the Sandinistas, the US government did not support funding an insurgency.⁴⁵ By passing three acts of legislation between 1982 and 1984—collectively termed the Boland Amendment—the US Congress directly limited American assistance to the Contras.⁴⁶ Despite clear guidance from Congress and no documented presidential imperative, individuals within Reagan's National Security Council disregarded the law in an attempt to promote US interests in Iran and Nicaragua.

The National Security Council was the team primarily responsible for the Iran-Contra Affair. The primary personality in the affair was Robert "Bud" McFarlane, Reagan's former

38. Vincent Boucher, Charles-Philippe David, and Karine Premont, *National Security Entrepreneurs and the Making of American Foreign Policy* (Montreal, Quebec: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020), 155.

39. Boucher, David, and Premont, 154.

40. Efraim Karsh, *The Iran-Iraq War: 1980-1988* (Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, 2002), 7-8.

41. Boucher, David, and Premont, *National Security Entrepreneurs*, 154.

42. Boucher, David, and Premont.

43. Peter Kornbluh and Malcolm Byrne, *The Iran-Contra Scandal: The Declassified History* (New York: New Press, 1993), 216.

44. Kornbluh and Byrne, 216.

45. Kornbluh and Byrne.

46. Bruce D. Hicks, "Presidential Foreign Policy Prerogative after the Iran-Contra Affair: A Review Essay," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (1996).

national security adviser, an individual with seemingly unchecked authority.⁴⁷ Described by his peers as a career bureaucrat with unquestionable loyalty, McFarlane was a Marine veteran who had served two combat tours in Vietnam.⁴⁸ Working as a White House fellow and then as a military assistant during the Nixon administration, McFarlane witnessed Henry Kissinger's whirlwind diplomatic approaches and associated National Security Council effectiveness.⁴⁹

McFarlane's ambitions and dedication to government service brought him to Reagan's attention. While he was not the president's primary choice for national security adviser, McFarlane filled the role vacated by Zbigniew Brzezinski in 1983.⁵⁰ McFarlane's failure to establish a robust rapport with Reagan distanced the national security adviser from the president's decision-making processes and associated policy outputs.⁵¹ Despite his lack of personal connection with the president, McFarlane established the groundwork for the Iran-Contra Affair by seizing and exploiting Reagan's concerns over a new Iranian hostage crisis in the summer of 1985.

The 1985 hostage situation was connected to deteriorating US-Lebanese relations that only worsened due to Iranian influence. In 1975, Lebanon entered into a 15-year civil war that was exacerbated by conflicting US-Soviet Cold War interests, escalating Sunni and Shia religious tensions, and the changing situation in Iran.⁵² In April 1983, separatists bombed the US Embassy in Beirut; in October of that year, a suicide bomber attacked a US Marine barracks there, killing 241 service members.⁵³

The Lebanese Civil War also resulted in the kidnapping of US and European citizens, six of whom were American, which posed a grave concern for Reagan as he met with his cabinet and trusted agents throughout 1985.⁵⁴ The Iranian-supported Lebanese Hezbollah militant group held the six American hostages in Lebanon. This new crisis pressured the Reagan administration to restore diplomatic relations with Iran.

As Reagan's interest in rescuing the hostages grew, McFarlane saw an opportunity to kickstart US munitions shipments to Iran and simultaneously support the Contras in Nicaragua. Bypassing the Boland Amendment, McFarlane cobbled together an initiative to have Israel sell its US-provided munitions to Iran with backfill from US stocks, expecting that hostages would be released in Lebanon while financial proceeds would go to the Contras in their fight against the Sandinistas.⁵⁵

47. Boucher, David, and Premont, *National Security Entrepreneurs*, 154.

48. Boucher, David, and Premont, 156.

49. Boucher, David, and Premont, 157.

50. Boucher, David, and Premont, 158.

51. Boucher, David, and Premont, 159.

52. Rodney P. Carlisle and J. Geoffrey Golson, *Turning Points—Actual and Alternate Histories: The Reagan Era from the Iran Crisis to Kosovo* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2007), 127.

53. Carlisle and Golson, 127.

54. Carlisle and Golson, 127.

55. Carlisle and Golson, 129.

The National Security Council secured a second fund source for the Contras via Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North, a US Marine detailed to the National Security Council, who routed Saudi Arabian financial support to the Contras via off-shore accounts in the Cayman Islands.⁵⁶ Throughout 1985, North and select members of the National Security Council secured numerous nation-state donors as dozens of flights moved clandestine funds to the Contras, and the “enterprise” continued to grow. North hired retired Air Force General Richard Secord to lead the aerial resupply mission that spanned bases across Central America, bridging overt and covert actions with governmental and nongovernmental agencies across the region.⁵⁷

The efforts to equip the Iranians with American munitions—despite an ongoing multinational arms ban led by the United States, its partners, and its Allies—encountered multiple complications throughout 1985.⁵⁸ Shipping issues, diplomatic basing hurdles, and logistics roadblocks meant that the US-Israeli effort delivered only a meager resupply of arms consisting of 2,000 antitank missiles, 18 surface-to-air missiles, and limited spare parts.

With only a partial resupply, Iran coordinated the release of just three American hostages. Meanwhile, two more Americans were abducted as North began raising missile costs to increase revenue for the Contras. The operation was spiraling beyond the control of the enterprise, when the Sandinistas recovered a crashed US aircraft containing Contra resupplies, and press leaks in Middle Eastern newspapers unveiled US-Israeli collaboration to arm Iran with munitions.⁵⁹

In November 1985, conscious of the scandal’s implications, Reagan publicly outlined the Iran-Contra Affair to the press. He relieved North, accepted McFarlane’s resignation, and ordered a wide-ranging investigation called the Tower Commission. The investigation resulted in dozens of indictments and prison terms; the guilty parties included officials in Reagan’s cabinet, the National Security Council, and various federal departments and agencies.⁶⁰ By unveiling the Iran-Contra Affair to the American public, Reagan acknowledged personal accountability despite not knowing the details and actions undertaken by his toxic followers.⁶¹

McFarlane demonstrated toxic followership by manipulating Reagan’s intent while diverting US policy towards alternate ends. Unlike the Lincoln-McClellan case study, oriented to the leader-follower dynamic, the Iran-Contra Affair depicted toxic followership behaviors within the team environment. McFarlane seized upon Reagan’s concern over the hostages to insert a different agenda, rapidly arming the Iranians and the Contras in pursuit of alternate aims.

56. Carlisle and Golson.

57. Carlisle and Golson, 130.

58. Carlisle and Golson, 132.

59. Carlisle and Golson, 134–35.

60. Carlisle and Golson, 135.

61. Reagan, “Iran-Contra Controversy.”

In the case of Iran, McFarlane believed rearming the military would promulgate a coup to dislodge the Islamic Revolutionary government. Within McFarlane's team, North pursued his own isolated agenda, deviating from clearly codified US laws established by Congress under the belief that he served the greater good, despite dallying in criminal activities. North's agents, such as Secord who was running the Contra airlift network, became proxies even further removed from the president's decision cycle through masked bureaucratic layers—capable of pursuing alternate and even nefarious ends under the guise of executive fiat.

McFarlane's team exhibited the ADOO loop of toxic followership by avoiding the clear elements of Reagan's guidance while deviating from the law and exploiting suitable gaps in the president's agenda. The team obstructed the truth wherever possible by creating loose subordinate echelons or actively manipulating the press and foreign governments under the guise of US interests. McFarlane's team completed the ADOO cycle by observing their environment and responding to foreign and domestic efforts that nearly cost Reagan his presidency and ultimately failed to dislodge the Sandinistas or achieve regime change in Iran.

Team dynamics accelerated toxic followership, as strong personalities within an organization can distance the team from the leader's intent and decision-making processes. The Iran-Contra Affair case study demonstrates the ease through which a rogue team deviates far enough from the leader's decision-making apparatus that relationships invert, and the leader becomes responsible for behaviors they themselves did not plan or approve.

Whether the leader-follower example or the leader-team variant, the capacity for toxic followership requires active controls to preserve leader decision-making functionality.

Mitigating the ADOO Loop

The four-phased ADOO loop iteratively employs avoidance, deviation, obstruction, and observation to undermine decision-making processes. During the avoidance phase, toxic followers actively disregard a leader's guidance and intent. This leads to the deviation phase wherein followers deliberately pivot to alternate objectives and methodologies that counter the leader's decision.

Followers then obstruct the leader's directed path—understanding that inaction is a proven method for invalidating decision-making effectiveness. The toxic follower completes the ADOO loop by observing and subverting any counteractions by the leader, within the team, or across the bureaucracy. The loop continues, characterized by cycles of a follower or followers incrementally avoiding, deviating, obstructing, and breaking a leader's decision-making cycle to pursue personal agendas.

Toxic followers seek to preserve the system within which they operate as this system affords a power base and identity. Rather than destroying the system, toxic followers merely promote the status quo by shirking work and increasing inertia within the organization. This methodology directly feeds the ongoing ADOO loop as the toxic followers consistently undermine and break decision-making processes.

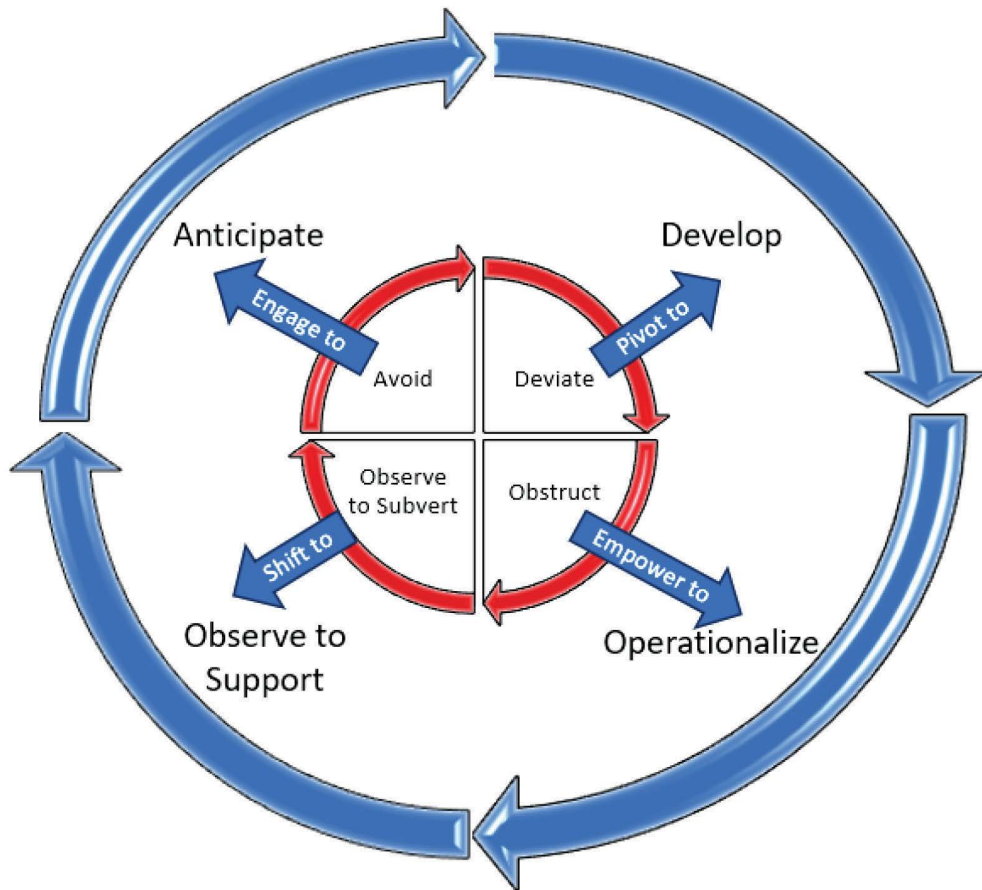


Figure 2. Active Leadership model

Mitigating toxic follower behaviors outlined in the ADOO loop requires deliberate methods within each phase to restore decision-making effectiveness. The Active Leadership model (fig. 2), a different, but desired “ADOO” loop—anticipate, develop, operationalize, observe—targets and reverses toxic follower behaviors in each step of the ADOO loop, curtailing decision-breaking mechanisms while restoring decision-making effectiveness. The model’s first phase requires active leadership to pivot behaviors from avoidance to anticipation. Rather than allowing followers to avoid decisions, leaders drive consensus through shared understanding, empowering subordinates to accelerate decision-making cycles even further by fostering anticipation throughout the team.

The Active Leadership model’s second phase compels leaders to strengthen follower behaviors away from deviation toward development. Whereas unchecked follower behaviors deviate from the leader’s decision-making apparatus, assertive followers develop a decision and accelerate Boyd’s observation, orientation, decision, and action cycle inherent

to an effective organization or team. Active leadership conveys intent, emboldens forward-thinking through anticipation, and inspires champions to develop ideas into reality.

In the third phase, the leader pivots teams from obstruction to operationalization. Rather than erecting obstacles to achieving desired aims, an effective follower operationalizes the commander's intent and produces results. This instrumental phase of team dynamics realizes the desired intent and surmounts challenges through collaboration to achieve objectives.

In the model's final phase, leaders propel followers and overarching team dynamics to observe with purpose. Rather than a toxic behavior of observation to shirk, stall, or break a decision, effective teams employ observation through deliberate feedback mechanisms to consolidate gains and focus collective efforts. Debriefing through feedback helps to frame team efforts while focusing bureaucracies back to their originally designed and desired purpose as active leaders mitigate toxic behaviors and optimize performance.

Conclusion

The ADOO loop models the decision-breaking behaviors of toxic followership that impede decision-making effectiveness. Demonstrated by the leader-follower case studies of Lincoln and McClellan during the US Civil War and the team dysfunctionality inherent to the Iran-Contra Affair, the ADOO loop depicts the tendency of toxic followers to avoid, deviate, obstruct, and observe decisions in an iterative pattern. Toxic followers exploit inertia-laden bureaucracies while corrupting team dynamics in pursuit of personal agendas at the expense of organizational success.

Effective leaders mitigate toxic behaviors within each step of the ADOO loop through the steps outlined in the Active Leadership model, which pivots followers from avoidance to anticipation, deviance to development, obstruction to operationalization, and finally, from negative to positive observation. Overcoming toxic followership galvanizes the decision-making cycle inherent to Boyd's OODA loop and ensures vibrant and resilient team performance for the future. →✳

“We Few, We Band of Brothers”

Organizational Toxicity in History and Film

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Toxic leading is by no means a modern problem—it is a human problem. As such, scholars can take a historical view in their analyses of toxic leading, enriching the study of this problem with additional resources. The authors present an example of this broader scholarly approach in the film study of leadership, using the dramatized World War II television film series *Band of Brothers*, which compares the leader behaviors of several characters along a spectrum of harm. Among other suggestive conclusions, the analysis indicates that toxic leading combines a disregard for one’s organization and a disregard for other people, and that habitual practice of virtuous behavior inhibits progress along a spectrum of harm that would otherwise result in chronic toxic leadership.

Since the term toxic leader came into popular use and scholarly application in the mid-1990s, the toxic leading literature has tended to organize around a small number of topical interests, none of which has necessarily emphasized toxic harm conceived on a spectrum. One of the earliest such examinations, representative of work in the related fields of public administration and management studies, emphasizes qualities and traits of various kinds of leaders and assesses the impact of these qualities.¹

Another work typical of investigations of toxic leading in various psychological fields attempts to distinguish between leaders who are justifiably demanding and those who are inexcusably harmful.² Research on the prevalence of toxic leaders in the military usually involve explanations of the challenges of the profession of arms and how these challenges can push or invite leaders to become toxic, or can trigger toxic behavior via the leader’s past experiences or personality tendencies.³

Scholars from multiple backgrounds have studied the interaction between toxic leading and other constructs, such as narcissism, to determine the effects of these other constructs on leader behavior.⁴ One team of researchers developed the “Toxic Triangle,” a model that

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1. Marcia Whicker, *Toxic Leaders: When Organizations Go Bad* (Westport, CT: Quorum Books, 1996).

2. Harvey Hornstein, *Brutal Bosses and Their Prey* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996).

3. George E. Reed, *Tarnished: Toxic Leadership in the U.S. Military* (Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books, 2015).

4. Joe Doty and Jeff Fenlason, “Narcissism and Toxic Leaders,” *Military Review* (January–February 2013); and see also Birgit Schyns, Barbara Wisse, and Stacey Sanders, “Shady Strategic Behavior: Recognizing Strategic Followership of Dark Triad Followers,” *Academy of Management Perspectives* 33, no. 2 (May 2019).

assumes toxic leading results from the interplay among three factors: destructive leaders, susceptible followers, and a conducive environment.⁵

While the toxic triangle broadens the scope of investigation by highlighting the interaction among multiple variables including some that are not leader-centric, the above representative literature tends to conceive of toxic leading within a yes-no framework: Has harm from the leader's behavior occurred or not? In part, the film study below is intended to generate investigation of the idea that toxic leading occurs along a spectrum of harm. The possibility of such a spectrum could increase the potential for further research to aid organizations in stopping or reversing toxic leading.

In examining toxic leadership in the profession of arms through the lens of film and history, few works of entertainment have rivaled the impact of the HBO miniseries *Band of Brothers*, created by Tom Hanks and Steven Spielberg and based on Stephen Ambrose's history by the same name. *Band of Brothers* portrays the historical experience of the paratroopers of E Company, 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne Division—or “Easy Company”—during World War II. Its ten episodes have affected millions in the United States and worldwide; it deserves its place as a profound and enduring statement of the meaning and sacrifice of that war effort and of the veterans who gave themselves to it. This miniseries provides an excellent context for the study of virtuous leadership characteristics—especially in combat, which may be the ultimate test of leadership and conviction.

Within that topic of study, the article investigates the incidence of toxic leadership by examining the *Band of Brothers* series to compare the qualities of some of the military leaders featured in it. It also juxtaposes the fictionalized versions of these men with their historical experiences to better understand the implications of their leadership behaviors. Which leaders consistently displayed virtuous behavior under stress? Which leaders wavered, at times resisting temptation and at other times succumbing to an unvirtuous passion or to a vice? Finally, which leaders crossed a line and resembled today's understanding of a toxic leader?

Part of the study's intent is to explore history and film to suggest that toxic leading is not merely a modern problem, but that it attends to persistent human conditions and human frailties. Modern work environments certainly exacerbate the effects and characteristics of toxic leading. But, just as surely, the temptation exists to see toxic leadership as a solely modern problem and to accept an overly reductive context within which to examine such toxicity. For example, a toxic leader may abuse their staff via cell phone texts on the weekend, but analysts may miss that the transgressive behavior is not the use of cell phone technology or how modern offices function—instead, it is the violation of group or organizational culture and accepted workplace norms (weekends are personal time), which can be a constant problem across time and technology.

5. Art Padilla, Robert Hogan, and Robert Kaiser, “The Toxic Triangle: Destructive Leaders, Susceptible Followers and a Conducive Environment,” *Leadership Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (2007).

Another related intention of the article is to open other mediums and genres, including this dramatized historical series, as part of the body of literature on toxic leading. If this problem has always been with organizations, researchers can learn more about it by adding historical analyses to those of the present and very recent past. Finally, this article suggests understanding toxic behavior as a spectrum could potentially allow the organization to moderate toxic leading in significant ways—to lessen it, combat it, and sometimes prevent it—if unvirtuous and problematic behavior is identified early and rehabilitated.

The film study asks a number of questions. First, which leaders in the miniseries display a persistent intent to harm others in the organization and seek evidence of that harm? Second, to what degree did these leaders align the markers of harm with the organization’s culture and practices? Third, what is the relationship among virtuous behaviors, unvirtuous behaviors, and the identified toxic leadership examples? This last question reveals the authors’ follow-on intent, related to future research directions, which is to examine whether toxic leading occurs in the absence of virtuous practice, and relatedly, whether researchers should pursue the utility of presenting virtuous behaviors as a remedy to reduce the frequency of toxic leading or to prevent leaders from “crossing the line.”

Intent to Harm: The Fictionalized Sobel

In the premiere episode of *Band of Brothers*, a group of soldiers including Joseph Liebgott and his fellow Airborne recruit, Shifty Powers, address the rumors involving the competence of their unit leader, Captain Herbert Sobel:

Soldier: He screwed up one maneuver.

Liebgott: I’m always fumbling with grenades. It would be easy if one went off by accident, you know.

Powers: Well, now, they must have put him in charge for a reason.

Liebgott: Yeah, ‘cause the Army wouldn’t make a mistake, right, Shift?⁶

For Liebgott and the men of Easy Company, the Army does make that mistake in placing Sobel in a position of leadership. This exchange of dialogue encapsulates the anger, frustration, and resentment the men feel toward their commander and his toxic behavior. Up to this point in the episode, Sobel is petty and harsh, lacking any compassion or empathy toward his men. He causes harm and seemingly enjoys doing so—traits often associated with toxicity and characterized as such.

The Army defines toxic leadership as “a combination of self-centered attitudes, motivations, and behaviors that have adverse effects on subordinates, the organization, and mission

6. *Band of Brothers*, season 1, episode 1, “Currahee,” written by Erik Jendresen and Tom Hanks, directed by Phil Alden Robinson, aired September 9, 2001, on HBO.

performance.”⁷ Incidentally, the most current Army doctrine publication has removed “toxic” from its doctrine and instead categorizes such behavior as counterproductive leadership. Sobel’s seeming lack of virtuous traits such as understanding, mercy, and justice damages the men’s trust, jeopardizing their confidence in their leader and the organization.⁸

The exchange between Liebgott and Shifty also highlights the role the Army as an organization has in developing a leader like Sobel. The Army placed him in charge of the men and rewarded him through promotions. An analysis of the different examples of leadership in *Band of Brothers* reveals that it is Sobel who demonstrates an intent to harm and a satisfaction in the harm caused, his actions enabled by the fact the Army promoted him.⁹

The first introduction to Sobel is his inspection of Easy Company, as he uses any perceived violation to take away passes. What starts as revoking individual passes for creases in pants, rust on equipment, or dirt in the rear aperture turns to a revocation of passes for the entire company and a run up Currahee, the mountain for which the episode is named.¹⁰ Sobel’s training is tough and harsh and often portrayed as unnecessarily difficult.

One clear demonstration of his intent to harm follows his and Dick Winters’ promotions. Sobel suggests to Winters to reward the men with a special meal of spaghetti on a day planned only for lectures and instruction. After the men gorge themselves, Sobel cancels instruction and forces the men on another run up the mountain, reminding them in their sickness that they could give up and there would be “no more Captain Sobel.”¹¹ It is this kind of behavior, where he purposefully places the men in situations that should be rewarding but end up as punishment, that engenders the anger, resentment, and hostility voiced by Liebgott.

Many of Sobel’s actions, while harsh, could arguably be understood as an attempt to prepare the company for the realities of war. In one instance, he forces the men to march twelve miles with no water, and then forces a repeat march when one of the men drinks water. While this is an excessive order, he could have been attempting to prepare the men for the austere and desperate situations experienced during combat.

Yet the episode does not portray Sobel as ultimately having good motives toward the men. Instead, his character and motives are often portrayed as selfish and self-serving, as when he criticizes Winters for making him look bad because the company was late on a night march. While the company is the best at Currahee, Sobel’s harmful intent is to reflect glory on himself—a form of vanity—and not necessarily to better his men and the

7. Headquarters, Department of the Army (HQDA), *Army Leadership*, Army Doctrine Publication 6-22 (Washington, DC: HQDA, 2012), 3.

8. See Michael Skerker, David Whetham, and Don Carrick, eds., *Military Virtues* (Havant, Hampshire, UK: Howgate Publishing Limited, 2019).

9. Reed, *Tarnished*, 69.

10. *Band of Brothers*, “Currahee.”

11. *Band of Brothers*.

company. This behavior further alienates his men, destroying trust and jeopardizing the organization.¹²

While his training and behavior are harsh, what further drives the men of Easy Company to view Sobel as toxic are his own failures in leadership situations and a perceived incompetence at necessary skills. The series depicts instances where Sobel often makes poor leadership decisions in training that could lead to death in real-world combat. In one example, Sobel ignores the advice of Winters and others and forces the men out of a protected ambush position despite protestations, only for those men to be immediately killed in the exercise, highlighting his impatience and inability to plan a successful maneuver.

In Europe, Sobel is unable to read a map correctly, leading his men to get lost and ultimately miss the rendezvous for a coordinated attack during an exercise.¹³ The combination of his perceived selfishness, his lack of necessary skills and behaviors under the pressure of combat, and the degradation of connection with his troops results in his ultimate toxicity as he loses the men's trust.¹⁴

While Sobel demonstrates problematic behavior, much of it falls within the norms of Army training. Sobel is able to conduct many of his punishments and actions with little official scrutiny from superiors as such behavior reflects the values and goals of the organization. The men of Easy Company boast the highest performance rates in the battalion and some of the best officers. This is seen as a reflection of their training and their commander, and Sobel is rewarded through promotion by the organization.

It is not until Sobel attempts to punish Winters for failing to complete contradictory orders that he crosses a line that causes the organization to notice a problem in the company. Sobel offers Winters two options for his supposed failure: accept Sobel's punishment or face trial by court martial. Winters refuses to take the punishment on principle, to Sobel's surprise, and faces the court martial to keep his reputation as an officer intact.

Though both options Sobel provided were within his authority and technically allowed by Army discipline, Easy Company interprets the actions to be vindictive and spiteful. The attack on Winters, whom the men trust, respect, and view as competent, becomes the impetus for a mutiny. While they lose respect for Sobel as a man and lose trust in his abilities as an officer in combat, his attempt to remove the one person they felt could lead them forces a group of noncommissioned officers to resign to the battalion commander. This mutiny drives higher leadership to evaluate Sobel's effectiveness as a leader and ultimately remove him from Easy Company to a training position at jump school in Chilton Foliat.¹⁵

12. Jean Lipman-Blumen, *The Allure of Toxic Leaders: Why We Follow Destructive Bosses and Corrupt Politicians—and How We Can Survive Them* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2006), 18–22.

13. *Band of Brothers*, "Currahee."

14. Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser, "Toxic Triangle," 179.

15. *Band of Brothers*, "Currahee."

Sobel's leadership in *Band of Brothers* demonstrates the intent to harm and to seek evidence of that harm, one of the key elements of toxic leading.¹⁶ He utilizes his position and his knowledge of the norms and acceptable behaviors within the organization to hide the extent of his harm and punishment on the men of Easy Company. Moreover, he is rewarded by the organization for doing so with a promotion to captain as his company continues to perform outstandingly, despite the brewing discontent and mistrust.

The men in Easy Company, also products of the culture of the Army, do not make many efforts to challenge Sobel's tactics until they lose confidence in his abilities in combat. Ultimately, Sobel's commander uses the same organizational practices to continue to retain Sobel but removes him from a position to exact greater harm.

While the organization's culture created an environment in which Sobel, and others like him, could thrive, it also had ways of removing him, short of firing, from a position that might get men killed. This so-called solution is representative of many military and nonmilitary organizations that tolerate toxic leading and allow it to perpetuate through the process of diverting it, as a kind of partial damage control—people are moved to positions in other organizations rather than disciplined or terminated.¹⁷ The goal in these cases clearly is mitigation rather than elimination of the problem.

Intent to Harm: The Historical Sobel

While this analysis focuses on the fictionalized version of Captain Herbert Sobel, there are real men and events behind the actors and stories in *Band of Brothers*. Juxtaposing the historical events with the fictionalized version in the series reveals more nuance around toxic leading behavior and its effect on the leader, subordinates, and the organization. While several men of Easy Company agree with the miniseries' characterization of Sobel, there are also contradicting experiences that argue Sobel was not as bad or as incompetent as he was made out to be in the series. Bill Wingett, a machine gunner, recalled, "I'll argue hands down with anybody who says Sobel was the SOB they often say he was. He was tough, yes, he was as tough as anybody you'll ever know. But he was not a bastard."¹⁸

After Sobel was transferred from Easy Company, most lost contact with him. He never attended a reunion with the 101st, with some claims that he held resentment toward the men. Sobel eventually attempted suicide, surviving, but severing his optic nerves. His family never knew or understood the reason for it. He died in a Veterans Affairs hospital, where he lived the remainder of his life with little contact with his immediate family beyond his sister, who attended to the details of his passing.¹⁹

16. Reed, *Tarnished*, 69.

17. Tony Kern, *Darker Shades of Blue: The Rogue Pilot* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1999).

18. Bill Wingett, in Marcus Brotherton, *We Who Are Alive and Remain: Untold Stories from the Band of Brothers* (New York: Berkley Publishing Group, 2009), 55.

19. Michael Sobel, in Brotherton, 252–58.

While Sobel earned a reputation for harsh and petty treatment and strict training, the series leaves questions as to his intent and his goals in how he trained the men. Clearly Sobel’s leadership style created a fissure between himself and Easy, leaving some issues unresolved. His toxic leadership style ultimately separated him from Easy Company during World War II, and from men who might have understood him better later in life.²⁰

Sobel’s life provides a lesson for organizations. When functions of the organization persist in hiding toxic leadership traits by covering over them or lessening their effects without addressing the toxic leader and the problematic behavior directly, harm may not only extend to the subordinates but may also adversely affect the toxic leader and those around them. In this case, it appears the Army never confronted Sobel regarding his hidden intent to harm others in the act of accomplishing the mission. This removed the possibility of an official intervention that might have prompted him to reflect and rehabilitate some of his behaviors to become a more effective leader.

Despite how well Easy performed under Sobel, the majority of men lost trust in his ability to lead them in combat. Ultimately this harmed Sobel with a loss of career opportunities and a separation from his fellow troops.

A Spectrum of Toxicity

While Sobel’s character remains the leader with the most intent to harm in *Band of Brothers*, there are other examples of toxic leadership or unvirtuous behavior throughout the series, such as a leader’s cowardice, neglect of his subordinates’ welfare, or violation of others’ basic human rights—acts which scholars have agreed open doorways to sustained toxic harm.²¹ In observing this, it seems more useful to assess toxic leadership on a spectrum, taking into account virtuous behaviors, unvirtuous behaviors as potential early indicators of toxic leading, egotistical or negligent leading, and the intent to harm and seek evidence of harm as the extreme. Elements such as the disregard for people, the disregard for the organization, and a perceived level of competency contribute to the toxicity. By thinking about toxic leading as an outcome rooted in a spectrum of behaviors, it may be possible to identify warning signs or understand the development of toxic leadership over time.

Unvirtuous behaviors can provide organizations with warning signs that some leaders may be heading toward toxic leading if there is not an intervention or confrontation. In other cases, neglectful or egotistical leaders cause harm to their subordinates, but might not have the intent to cause that harm or seek evidence of it. If leaders show unvirtuous behaviors or negligent/egotistical leadership, is there a possibility that they can still be good leaders or that they can be redeemed? Are they as toxic as the leader, like Sobel’s character, who has an intention of harm? *Band of Brothers* provides examples of this leadership in Lieutenant Norman Dike and in Captain Ronald Speirs and Captain Lewis Nixon.

20. Sobel, 252–58.

21. Alan Goldman, *Transforming Toxic Leaders* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 6–7, 52–53; and see also Lipman-Blumen, *Allure*, 19–22.

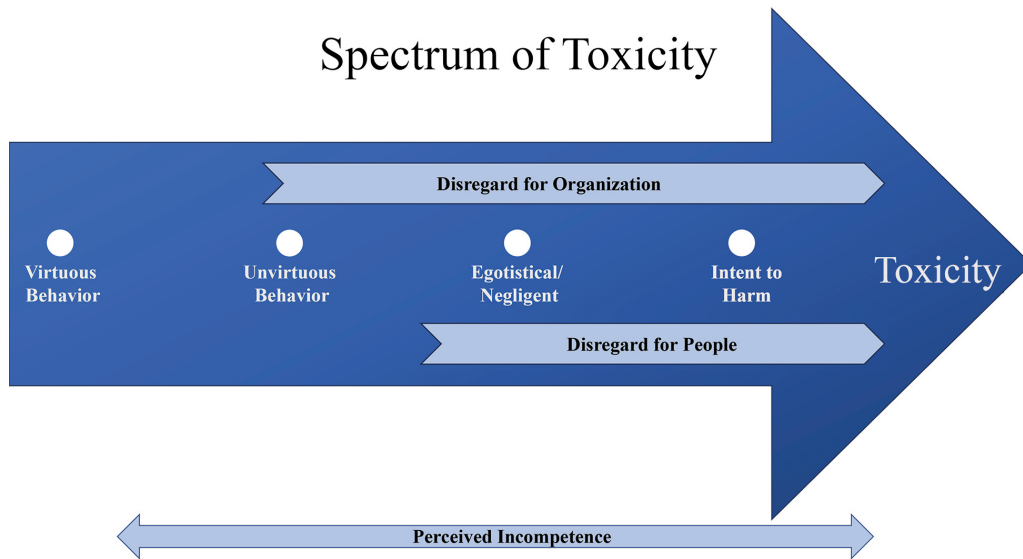


Figure 1. Interaction between leadership behaviors and other elements toward toxicity

In episode 7, “The Breaking Point,” Dike is a replacement officer for Easy Company. When first introduced, the men are questioning Sergeant Carwood “Lip” Lipton on Dike’s whereabouts. When a soldier dies from an accidental self-inflicted gunshot wound, it is Lip who reports to then-battalion commander, Winters, instead of the commanding officer for the unit, Dike. Winters questions why a sergeant is briefing the battalion commander rather than the lieutenant, whose duty it is. Lip covers for Dike, but the episode makes clear his frustration.

Dike is portrayed as frequently walking away from the men in Bastogne or heading back to headquarters to make calls. He is often missing in crucial moments of decision and frequently does not engage with the men or attempt to know the men in any meaningful ways, as demonstrated when he asks Lip about his past but disappears before Lip can finish his response and reciprocate in kind.

In Ambrose’s book, *Band of Brothers*, Winters stated, “Basically we had weak lieutenants. I didn’t have faith in them,” and recalled that Dike was “a favorite protégé of somebody from division HQ.”²² For Winters, Lip, and the men of Easy Company, this meant that Dike was given the chance for company command in order to make him promotable, not because he was gifted in the field. They worried that he cared more for his promotion and about his future position than he cared for the men he was leading, and were concerned this would get them killed. In the miniseries, this negligence and self-regard culminates

22. Stephen E. Ambrose, *Band of Brothers: E Company, 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne from Normandy to Hitler’s Eagle’s Nest* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 205.

in the attack on Foy, Belgium, when Dike freezes, unable to direct the men, resulting in several casualties before Winters relieves him of command.

Dike's character represents egotistical/negligent behavior, as he is seemingly absent and self-oriented, leading to the alienation and resentment of his men. But unlike Sobel, he is not depicted as intending to harm or looking for the effects of that harm.²³ In the voiceover of "Breaking Point," Lip posits that "Dike wasn't a bad leader because he made bad decisions. He was a bad leader because he made no decisions."²⁴ In basic terms, the harm that Dike allows or creates is a follow-on result of his self-absorption and consequential neglect in the care of others. The lack of care is neither intentional nor instrumental as it would be in the case of a toxic leader who is seeking evidence that he has harmed another person.²⁵

Complicating the series' portrayal of Dike is the reality of his historical service. Dike earned two Bronze Stars, one in Holland and the other during Bastogne, for saving three wounded soldiers. He went on to be an aide to General Maxwell Taylor, remained in the Army Reserve following World War II, and served during the Korean War, ending his military career at the rank of lieutenant colonel.²⁶ Contrary to Winters' retelling in the book version, Clancy Lyall, another Easy Company soldier, recalls that Dike "was shot in the shoulder while taking Foy, near a haystack. That's when Ron Speirs came running across the field."²⁷

The contested memories of the incident also highlight a further complication in analyzing Dike's leadership capability. Was he a toxic, self-indulgent, negligent leader or was the battle at Foy just a personal breaking point for a wounded man? For Easy Company, Dike exhibited toxic traits in his inability to make decisions or connect with the men. The organization placed an inexperienced lieutenant in combat command over a battle-hardened group in order to provide a favored officer the ability to promote. It was the organization's promotion structure and requirements that placed Easy Company in the hands of Dike, but it was also the organization's procedures that allowed Winters to relieve Dike of command.²⁸

Again, while Dike displayed some toxic traits in the series, he did not demonstrate the intent to harm, nor did he seek evidence of his harm. Considering Norman Dike's overall service record in reality, a possible account of these events would implicate the followers as well as the leader. In other words, Dike's inexperience created a reaction in his subordinates that developed intense friction which worsened the relationships and prevented growth

23. Lipman-Blumen, *Allure*, 20.

24. *Band of Brothers*, season 1, episode 7, "The Breaking Point," directed by David Frankel, written by Graham Yost, aired October 14, 2001, on HBO.

25. Lipman-Blumen, *Allure*, 20.

26. Paul Combs, "Historical Errors in 'Band of Brothers: Even the Best Shows Get It Wrong Sometimes," Medium.com, November 27, 2022, <https://medium.com/>.

27. Clancy Lyall, in Brotherton, *We Who Are Alive*, 177.

28. Laurence Peter and Raymond Hull, *The Peter Principle: Why Things Always Go Wrong* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1969), 20–22.

in Dike's behavior as a leader. Was this just the wrong company for Dike to succeed in after the experiences the men endured to this point?

In *Band of Brothers*, Sobel and Dike represent toxic leadership behaviors with different degrees of harm. Dike's harm often came in the form of negligence and passivity, resulting in the inability to gain the confidence or trust of his men, while Sobel actively sought to harm through his petty punishments and retaliatory behaviors.

Do behaviors like Sobel's and Dike's start with the intent to harm and negligence or do they grow from early indicators into higher degrees of toxicity? Speirs and Nixon provide examples of how unvirtuous behavior could be an early indicator of potential toxicity, despite demonstrations of good leadership in other ways.

In the series, Nixon, as Winters' closest friend, was portrayed as a drunk and with a certain disregard for the rules and order of the military, but "every member of Easy interviewed for [Ambrose's *Band of Brothers*] said . . . Nixon was the most brilliant staff officer he knew in the war."²⁹ Nixon is one of the few Airborne officers to make a third jump that ends in tragedy. Only he and two others make it out while the rest of his unit is killed in the aircraft. It is here the series demonstrates Nixon's reliance on alcohol to deal with his wartime experience and emotions as he hunts for a bottle of whiskey amid the empty ones. Winters informs him he has been demoted due to his drinking even as Nixon continues to drink.³⁰

In this instance, the only true harm for Nixon's behavior is to himself and his own career, but Nixon's alcoholism calls into question his future ability to lead. In a combat situation, this could be detrimental for the men under his command and leadership. Despite the fact Nixon "was a genius in addition to being a brave, common sense soldier," his excessive drinking compromised his ability to do all aspects of his job as evidenced by his demotion. Left unchecked, this problem might have crossed over the line eventually into more dangerous and toxic behavior for the men under his command.³¹ While Nixon remained a good leader to the men in Easy Company, other officers guilty of unvirtuous behavior such as excess or intemperance could cause significant harm to the men, the mission, and the organization.

While Nixon's character is tarnished primarily by his excessive drinking, Speirs has a more complicated reputation. Tough, hard, but often called a good combat leader, Speirs is the subject of many rumors, including shooting one of his own officers for being drunk, and killing unarmed German POWs.³² Yet his willingness to place himself in danger, as evidenced by his run through the Battle of Foy to relay information, and his quick, common sense decision-making in battle make him a favored leader among Easy Company.

29. Ambrose, *Band of Brothers*, 163.

30. *Band of Brothers*, season 1, episode 9, "Why We Fight," directed by David Frankel, written by John Orloff, aired October 28, 2001, on HBO.

31. Ambrose, *Band of Brothers*, 240.

32. *Band of Brothers*, "Breaking Point"; and *Band of Brothers*, season 1, episode 2, "Day of Days," directed by Richard Loncraine, written by John Orloff, aired September 9, 2001, on HBO.

Like his fictionalized character in *Band of Brothers*, Speirs carried a complicated reputation among his men in reality. Private David Kenyon Webster thought Speirs was as good an officer as Winters and liked him for his bravery and his leadership, though recognized that other men “loathed Speirs on the ground that he had killed one of his own men in Normandy, that he was bull-headed and suspicious, that he believed there was no such thing as Combat Exhaustion.”³³

Speirs cared for his men and demonstrated strength in leadership, but his attitude and callousness toward killing could be considered an early indicator of toxic leading; if left unchecked, they could be dangerous. In the miniseries, when Sergeant Grant is shot by a replacement private, the men capture the assailant and beat him. Speirs briefly joins in, almost killing him, before ordering his release over to the military police.³⁴ His violent behavior violates his responsibility as an officer to model and ensure good order and discipline in his unit. Though he ultimately follows procedure, his participation in the vigilante justice demonstrates a rashness and lack of prudence.

Like Nixon’s, Speirs’ unvirtuous behavior, manifesting primarily as a lack of restraint when under pressure, does not make him a bad or toxic leader to many of the men in Easy Company. Both are well-respected and decorated men, though they both indulge in excess and arguably a lack of prudence. Yet their behavior leaves the opportunity for others to be harmed, for men to ignore the law, code, and duty, and to create situations that could cause further detriment and harm to the good order and discipline of the company.

Vices, when pursued for their own sake, can lead to other unvirtuous behavior. Nixon’s excess and Speirs’ rashness demonstrate a disregard for the organization and its established artifacts, espoused values, and the norms of the Army they serve.³⁵ Thus, unvirtuous behavior and a disregard for the organization can be an indicator of potential toxicity. These behaviors, uninhibited or imbalanced with other virtuous leadership traits such as temperance or prudence, may evolve into toxic leading.

Conclusion

An analysis of the leaders in *Band of Brothers* reveals that toxic behavior might be better thought of as a spectrum in which certain actions unimpeded can lead one further into toxicity. In short, a process may be at work where certain behaviors could drive a leader to increase harmful intent and behavior until they become toxic. Speirs and Nixon were both recognized as good and capable officers in their own ways, but they each showed what some may deem unvirtuous behavior: Nixon’s intemperate drinking and Speirs’ lack of empathy, rashness, and unjustifiable uses of violence.

33. Ambrose, *Band of Brothers*, 241.

34. *Band of Brothers*, season 1, episode 10, “Points,” directed by Mikael Salomon, written by Erik Jendresen and Erik Bork, aired November 4, 2001, on HBO.

35. Edgar Schein and Peter Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 5th ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2016), 18.

Clearly, leaders can present unvirtuous behaviors and still be good leaders if they work to curb such behaviors and place the interest of the unit and the organization over their self-interest. Speirs and Nixon continued to place the lives of their men at the forefront of their actions. Arguably, they still upheld the organization's interest as well, though they had become jaded by the bureaucracy, as evidenced by Nixon's disregard of his own demotion. Though the desire to place the needs and survival of their men over their own self-interest kept Nixon and Speirs from progressing further along the spectrum of toxic leading behavior, their unvirtuous behaviors represented early indicators of their future potential for toxic leadership.

Dike exhibits another form of troubling behavior as characterized in *Band of Brothers*. In his time with Easy Company, Dike was not present, did not make decisions, and was more interested in his future career trajectory than in the present role he served to lead Easy Company. He was absent to the point of negligence, leaving Sergeant Carwood Lipton to lead the men in his place. This negligence had dire consequences in the Battle of Foy when Dike's decisions led to the deaths of several men before he froze, unable to command his men. Easy Company perceives Dike to be self-interested and negligent, but as portrayed in the miniseries, his intention is not malicious and there is no true desire to cause or see harm.

It might be useful to acknowledge that some leaders create toxic environments without malicious intent due to negligence or a lack of interest in their own unit, people, or organization. This egotistical/negligent leadership often demonstrates a disregard for people that, left without mitigation or interference, could lead to more severe and detrimental behavior in the future. While there is no intent to harm, this negligence can often cause significant problems to the culture and climate of an organization and leaves a gap of leadership that subordinates, not all as skillful as Lip, can fill in the absence. This can create a toxic environment for the followers in the organization who feel unheard, unseen, and forgotten by their leadership.

Finally, Sobel exhibits the more extreme toxic behavior that presents a true intent to cause harm and see the consequences of that harm. While many men went on to acknowledge that Sobel's training prepared them for the upcoming hardships of the war, it did not create a trust in leadership or in the organization for his men. Sobel's own unvirtuous traits—envy, jealousy, self-interest, egotism—were left unchecked. He punished the men at Currahee based on petty grievances and jealousies rather than justified indiscretions.

Sobel's leadership might be remembered very differently if he had employed similarly harsh training countered with a respect for the men's time and an attempt to connect and bond, showing true care for their health and well-being. His actions, as the men understood them, rarely showed that he held any true consideration for them. Instead, most of the men believed that Easy Company was an extension of Sobel's own value and success, and that he was willing to sacrifice their health and well-being for the sake of his own reflected glory.

Sobel's actions also reveal that a toxic environment requires a level of perceived incompetence from subordinates. While Sobel pushed his team to run Currahee, perform perfectly at inspections, and make no mistakes in exercises, his inability to read maps, his

poor decision-making in exercises, and questions about his own physical abilities caused further resentment among his unit. Dike's actions were also met with more hostility for his inadequacy while the unit was willing to give more grace to Nixon and Speirs for their behaviors because of their abilities and their compassion for the men. Ultimately, a disregard for people—maybe even an unconscious one—a disregard for the organization, an intent to harm and seek evidence of that harm, with a perceived incompetence among followers combine into a more extreme form of toxic leading.

The organization's role in toxic leadership is one that needs to be further explored. According to the analysis of *Band of Brothers*, Sobel was able to manipulate the punishments and regulations of the organization to cause further harm to his men. The revoked passes, inspections, and performance awards he used were all artifacts of the organizational culture of the Army that allowed his behavior and treatment of the men to be rewarded instead of curtailed. It took a mutiny of senior noncommissioned officers, also a use of the organization's rules and procedures, to see any change or restriction to Sobel's actions.

Dike, Nixon, and Speirs all operated both within and outside of the organization's espoused beliefs and standards. It is more difficult to ascertain if they worked to align their behaviors with accepted organizational norms and practices to justify their behavior, but it is clear that norms developed within the organization allowed certain incidences to occur.

Dike's time with Easy Company was a result of the organization's need for their officers to have combat experience to promote. This was an accepted practice, and in his situation, put the men of Easy Company at his discretion despite his lack of battlefield experience. Speirs' and Nixon's behaviors, while technically illegal or immoral to the espoused beliefs of the organization, were tolerated and often encouraged based on less transparent cultural norms and practices. Left unchecked, Speirs' casual disregard for violence outside of combat and Nixon's drinking could have led to the harm of men in their unit and under their command. Further scholarship should explore the role of the organization in creating, allowing, or curbing toxic leaders as well as exploring how toxic leaders use the organization to justify their behaviors.

While *Band of Brothers* provides many examples of both good and bad leadership to analyze, it is important to remember that the fictionalized account is based on real men and historical events. Delving into their stories beyond the film series brings even more questions for future scholarship. If toxic behavior can be thought of as a spectrum, where there is potential for intervention and rehabilitation, is there a point on the spectrum where the leader is no longer redeemable? Are followers' perceptions all that are required to make one toxic? What roles do aptitude, gender, race, and other identifying traits play in the perception of toxicity? Is there a difference in a leader who presents some toxic behaviors versus a toxic leader? Finally, further research should be conducted on the consequences of toxic leadership on the leaders themselves.

Sobel's life story reveals a man isolated from those who shared his wartime experience. He never reconnected with Easy Company, and other accounts claim he held resentment and anger toward them during his life. Further research on the personal and professional impact of toxic leadership on the leaders might reveal more information on how individuals

later cope with their wartime experience and shed light on resiliency. Sobel, and the other men of Easy Company, demonstrate that thinking of toxic leading behavior on a spectrum provides new ways to explore the possibility of rehabilitation and intervention to prevent and mitigate toxic leadership. ✈️

BOOK REVIEWS

Power Up: Leadership, Character, and Conflict Beyond the Superhero Multiverse

Edited by Steven Leonard et al. Casemate Publishers, 2023, 320 pp.

Since antiquity, humankind has sought to better understand its collective experience and to explore ethical and moral challenges through the sharing of myths and legends. In *Power Up: Leadership, Character, and Conflict Beyond the Superhero Multiverse*, the editors present an anthology of essays that critically analyze topics relevant to today's leaders—especially military leaders—through the lens of a modern mythology that includes popular heroes and villains from comic books, films, and television series. Lead editor retired US Army Colonel Steven Leonard is a member of the faculty at the University of Kansas School of Business, and he is best known in defense communities as the creator of the Doctrine Man blog. He previously published a similar anthology, *To Boldly Go: Leadership, Strategy, and Conflict in the 21st Century and Beyond* (2021), in which the collected authors examine military themes through the analysis of science fiction. Over the course of 35 essays grouped into six distinct themes, authors in this anthology discuss the nature of heroism and leadership, team building, character and morality, and the ethical employment of technology in modern conflict. One of the significant strengths throughout this collection is the authors' ability to make the stories of superheroes with extraordinary powers relatable to the moral, ethical, and interpersonal challenges that regular human beings face.

On playing Superman in film, Christopher Reeve once stated that “[what] makes Superman a hero is not that he has power, but that he has the wisdom and the maturity to use the power wisely.” Similarly, each author in this work presents discussions that focus less on superheroes using their powers to solve problems and more on how those heroes' character traits influenced their decision-making, which often enabled the heroes to prevail in difficult situations.

An excellent example of this perspective can be found in Eric Muirhead's essay, “They Only Lack the Light to Show the Way,” in which he analyzes how Clark Kent's human vulnerabilities did more than his superpowers to shape Superman's approach to leadership and heroism. Muirhead explains that Superman's story—especially as depicted in the 1978 *Superman* film directed by Richard Donner—is “a brilliant allegory for the power and importance of transformational leadership in our contemporary society” (107).

Muirhead elaborates that as shown in the film, young Kent struggles with being “torn between respecting his concerned parents' desire for secrecy and his own desire to use his amazing abilities for personal gain” (110). As an adolescent, Kent was confronted by his human father who impactfully told him, “You are here for a reason . . . but I do know one thing, it's not to score touchdowns” (110). Muirhead discusses how this shaping of Superman's character at an early age drove him to use his abilities to serve others instead of himself.

Superman stands in stark contrast to the subjects of Kayla Hodges' essay, “Boys Will Be Boys.” Hodges discusses how the superpowered characters from the television series, *The Boys*, abuse their abilities for personal gain because they lack a moral compass to guide them in the way that Superman was guided. Their newfound powers only magnify their character flaws instead of directing them to realize their potential to help others.

A key takeaway, especially for military leaders, is that there are often points in one's career during which one will be granted unique and significant power, authority, and freedom. When placed in these positions, a leader's character—good or bad—is on full display, and both their positive and negative tendencies will be amplified. It is important to develop character in younger leaders through mentorship and to vet them appropriately for positions of greater authority in the future.

Failure to do so will result in leaders who abuse power instead of those who responsibly use power for the good of the people and the mission.

Other compelling themes throughout *Power Up* include leading diverse teams and the ethical employment of technology in modern warfare. In his essay, “Call it, Captain,” Cory Hollon analyzes how Captain America rapidly and adroitly applies his knowledge of his team members’ unique experiences and abilities to assign them appropriate tasks through mission command. It was not Captain America’s super soldier strength but rather his human leadership ability that enabled his team to achieve success during the Battle of New York in the 2012 film, *The Avengers*.

Additionally, in her essay, “I’ve Come to Save the World,” Kera Rolsen contrasts the characters of Vision and Ultron—both powered by artificial intelligence—and argues that Vision’s ethical restraint built in by his creator differentiates him as a force for good compared to Ultron, who is an unchecked destructive power. Rolsen’s discussion on the need for ethical oversight of technology is particularly pertinent to today’s pursuit of artificial intelligence and machine learning in military applications. Both essays are fantastic examples of the insightful level of analysis throughout this anthology.

Power Up has little areas that require improvement, but there are a few essays that seemed to stretch to connect the superhero story with the analysis of the intended topic. Additionally, while it is a strength to examine lesser-known characters, one particular section presented two different essays on the Unbeatable Squirrel Girl, which caused this reader minor confusion because they explored slightly unrelated topics while using the same context. Lastly, there are recurring mentions of Russia’s war with Ukraine along with discussions of the current political divide in the United States. While this content is meaningful in the early 2020s, it may date this collection, which could potentially cause readers to dismiss this work’s relevance in the future.

Overall, *Power Up* is an outstanding anthology of relevant and timely essays written by a collection of some of the brightest military-connected writers of the post-9/11 generation. By examining military leadership through the lens of the superhero genre, this collection provides a fun and insightful vehicle to explore important topics through popular stories to which a broad audience can relate. This thought-provoking anthology is worth reading for any student of leadership.

Lieutenant Colonel Carl R. Chen, USAF, DBA

Networked Nonproliferation: Making the NPT Permanent

Michal Onderco. Stanford University Press, 2022, 224 pp.

In *Networked Nonproliferation*, Michal Onderco examines a critical event in the history of arms control and nonproliferation: the indefinite extension of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, commonly referred to as the NPT. Though other scholars have examined the impact of the NPT, Onderco provides the first book to examine the diplomatic maneuvering of the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference to explain why the treaty was indefinitely extended despite initial opposition by a majority of states.

A professor of international relations at Rotterdam’s Erasmus University, Onderco specializes in the study of nuclear politics and authored this book utilizing newly available evidence from national and diplomatic archives, as well as oral history interviews with conference participants. In his work, Onderco argues that the United States leveraged its unique position at the center of multiple diplomatic networks to partner with several influential states to gather support—and neutralize opposition—to indefinite extension.

Negotiated in the midst of the Cold War and entered into force in 1970, the NPT is one of the most successful international arms control agreements, adopted by over 190 countries to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and ultimately pursue global nuclear disarmament. A critical period during the treaty's history occurred in 1995, when a review mandated by the treaty was held to determine if it would be extended indefinitely or only for fixed periods of time, to be decided by a majority of the treaty's members. Most observers doubted the review conference would succeed in extending the treaty indefinitely, yet it achieved this end and did so without requiring a vote.

Onderco tackles why this happened and proposes a new theory to explain this outcome: that the United States' unique central position in an international network of nations allowed it to utilize its partners to persuade doubters, secure side deals, and neutralize opposition to indefinite extension.

The principal obstacle to indefinite extension centered on global disarmament. When the NPT entered into force in 1970, it contained a "deal" to secure the support of non-nuclear states. While they would agree to forgo nuclear weapons, the existing nuclear armed states committed to eventual disarmament of their own nuclear weapons stockpiles, though the precise time frame and mechanism were left ambiguous.

As the 1995 review conference approached, many non-nuclear states grew increasingly frustrated at the lack of progress on global disarmament. Although they agreed with the United States and other major powers on the value of nonproliferation, they sought to use the review process as a way to pressure nuclear weapons states to uphold their end of the deal and make concrete steps toward disarmament.

Onderco argues that the United States ultimately succeeded by leveraging key states to influence three primary blocks of potential opposition: newly independent post-Soviet states in Eastern Europe, countries in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM)—founded during the Cold War by states that sought to remain neutral rather than formally align themselves with either the United States or the Soviet Union—and multiple Middle Eastern countries. Rather than rely solely on pressure and side payments, the United States utilized its relationships with the European Union (EU), South Africa, and Egypt to leverage their outsized influence with these opposition blocks to gain support or neutralize opposition.

Eastern European states were eager to join the EU and exercise their newfound sovereignty, so the United States used the EU's carrot of membership and integration to secure support for indefinite extension. Similarly, South Africa was a leader in the NAM and able to influence whether the NAM would collectively block indefinite extension. The relationship between US Vice President Al Gore and South African Vice President Thabo Mbeki secured South African support for indefinite extension over the opposition of South African bureaucrats and successfully prevented a consensus NAM opinion against the US proposal.

Finally, the long-standing US-Egypt relationship allowed the United States to use Egypt's leadership position in the Middle East. The United States wanted to secure indefinite extension without a formal vote, so was able to convince Egypt, and thereby other Middle Eastern states, to refrain from calling for this vote, ultimately allowing the motion to proceed.

Given Onderco's access to primary documents and first-person recollections of these events, his three case studies provide compelling evidence that the US strategy relied on several key actors and used their unique positions to influence broader blocks of countries. He discusses specific meetings, negotiating positions, and strategies of the relevant players, and produces a convincing narrative of how relationships and network position convey power and influence in international diplomacy.

His work also reveals the complexity of diplomacy, and that while it is tempting to focus solely on the 1995 conference, a significant amount of negotiation and diplomatic maneuvering occurred well before this conference began. This is a welcome reminder that negotiations, deals, and agreements often precede publicized gatherings, and that in many cases, these preparatory sessions and one-on-one engagements are where diplomatic successes are truly and quietly earned.

Yet the complexity of these negotiations can also challenge readers of this book. At times it is difficult to keep track of all the different meetings and changing versions of documents. Each reveals an interesting aspect of how positions changed over time, but it can be a lot for readers to digest who do not possess a baseline familiarity with the ecosystem surrounding the NPT. This makes *Networked Nonproliferation* an important book for scholars of nonproliferation or diplomatic history but will likely be of less interest to the casual reader or military practitioner.

Finally, the book forms a welcome reminder of a time when arms control agreements commanded the support and cooperation of adversaries like the United States and Soviet Union. The NPT sat alongside treaties like the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), START II, and the Chemical Weapons Convention as markers of a “golden age of arms control” (4). Sadly, it is difficult to imagine gaining a similar consensus among geopolitical rivals today in the pursuit of arms control or other measures to preserve strategic stability.

In sum, Onderco's *Networked Nonproliferation* provides an important contribution to scholarship surrounding the NPT and outlines a compelling case for the importance of networks and relationships in international politics. It fills an important role in depicting the diplomatic maneuvering of the 1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference and offers an example of why the United States should prioritize its relationships with Allies and partners as a continued source of power in an ever-changing world.

Lieutenant Colonel Craig Neuman, USAF, PhD

Eagles Overhead: The History of US Air Force Forward Air Controllers, from the Meuse-Argonne to Mosul

Matt Dietz. University of North Texas Press, 2023, 368 pp.

Eagles Overhead is a history book that offers a timely perspective on the US employment of airpower, tracing the story of the forward air controller (FAC) program from its scrappy formation on the battlefields of World War I through to its equally scrappy positioning within the US Air Force today. Author Matt Dietz, a career Air Force officer and aviator currently serving as head of the history department at the Air Force Academy, informs his prose with a warfighter's credibility in a manner that can be easily understood by a general reader.

In forming his thesis, Dietz posits that foundational US Army Air Corps and US Air Force thinkers and advocates articulated a philosophical preference for air superiority and strategic bombing-oriented airpower operations that permeate through to the service leadership's thinking today. Subsequently, he argues FACs—and the close air support (CAS) mission they have duly upheld for decades—have been continuously under-resourced, underrepresented in historical studies, and largely ignored doctrinally. Ultimately, Dietz is writing to commit the FAC program's contributions to the record through this academic work while examining if its treatment and organizational standing reflect the natural evolution of warfare or inherent organizational bias.

Through an introduction, seven chronological chapters, and a conclusion, Dietz wrestles with these questions from a place of respect for his subjects. He does a particularly good job conveying their culture through personality sketches of notable individuals, recognition of significant units, and a sharing of stories, symbols, and songs developed over decades of service on battlefields as diverse as Italy and Iraq. In addition to these qualitative inputs, Dietz effectively employs quantitative data and thorough primary and secondary sources to contextualize the program's contributions within the wider view of the conflicts and eras being supported.

For example, examining the opening operational stages of the Global War on Terror, Dietz notes the parallels between Vietnam—arguably the FAC's heyday—and Afghanistan inasmuch as both conflicts “featured light infantry units and special forces teams, supported by air power, engaged in close combat with insurgent forces distributed among civilian populations,” in a manner that should have served as the ideal conditions for a FAC capability. But he then observes that “tightly constrained resources and extreme flight distances effectively left Forward Air Controllers off the battlefield,” resulting in only eight FAC missions flown between October and December 2001 out of more than 2,300 close air support sorties in total (178).

Ever the Airman, Dietz excels at threading in how continual technological innovations—various airframes, advanced guided munitions, and increasingly sophisticated communication capabilities—also shaped how the Air Force approached and supported CAS, both through and ultimately beyond the FAC program. This even-handed approach lends credibility to Dietz when he describes battles like 2002's Operation Anaconda in Afghanistan and concludes that “the battlefield desperately needed the Forward Air Controllers' skills,” while also noting that the last deliberately planned FAC mission in Iraq or Afghanistan was flown by a pair of A-10s long before combat ended in either place on April 16, 2003 (185).

That mid-2000 era marks a turning point in the FAC program and *Eagles Overhead*. Prior to this, the “triad” relationship between the ground-based embedded tactical air controller and tactical air control party to/from the air-based FAC was presented as having evolved—with steps backward in peacetime and forward during conflict—since its ad hoc creation on a European battlefield in April 1944. Subsequently, Dietz explains how the triad became obsolete as advancements in networked communication capabilities and unmanned aerial platforms allowed senior commanders the ability to bypass both Joint terminal attack controllers and FACs for an eye-in-the-sky view of the battlefield accurate enough to allow them the ability to centralize command and control of operations from a distant strike cell or air operations center.

This answers one of Dietz's primary research questions: Yes, the nature of at least the American way of conducting war has changed to the extent that the concept of an airborne FAC is now as anachronistic as the grease pencils those pilots used on their glass cockpits. As a result, Dietz notes that despite a review and brief resurrection of CAS training for F-16 fighter pilots by Air Combat Command between 2018 to 2020, the prestige of and institutional support for FAC training is dormant outside of the A-10 community. This answers Dietz's second primary research question: Yes, the US Air Force continues to value and resource air superiority and strategic bombing operations over other mission-sets like CAS.

In his conclusion, Dietz places his thumb on the scale with a valiant argument for the continuation of some form of a FAC program, potentially using the F-35. This seems fantastical given current technologies on hand, likely future battles, and historic trends as laid out by Dietz in the preceding chapters. And it also takes space from a more interesting discussion on the US Air Force's continued preference to centralize command and control of operations, a topic Dietz is

well-qualified to engage in given his recent deployment as director of operations for the Ninth Air Force (Air Forces Central). That Dietz leaves the reader desiring more and not less of his perspective is a generous critique.

In conclusion, *Eagles Overhead* excels as a complete but approachable history that pays proper homage to its topic but also transcends it. It is worthwhile reading for anyone interested in how a program or capability survives—and sometimes thrives—within a larger bureaucratic system that invests in what it perceives as higher priorities. And it offers an informed view of the application of airpower past, present, and potentially into the future.

Lieutenant Colonel Phil Ventura, USAF

Britain's Secret Defences: Civilian Saboteurs, Spies and Assassins during the Second World War

Andrew Chatterton. Casemate Publishers, 2022, 205 pp.

Andrew Chatterton's *Britain's Secret Defences* is a historical account of Britain's secret plans for the recruitment and training of civilians to counter an anticipated German invasion during World War II. Chatterton, a World War II historian, wrote this book after 12 years of researching the most clandestine British efforts of that period. This book fills a gap in the historical literature on Britain's anti-invasion efforts during the war by adding the largely unknown story of a secret civilian force.

Britain's Secret Defences describes how the British government recruited, trained, and equipped civilians to spy on the enemy, spoil invasion attempts, and execute a post-defeat insurgency as an organized resistance. Chatterton has collected compelling stories of the people who were involved in these secret operations, and he also provides archaeological and archival research to accompany their stories. Chatterton's narrative challenges conventional perspectives on Britain's post-occupation plans, offering new insights into this historical episode. Since there was never an invasion, the civilian programs were never used as intended, and the two chapters that detail their eventual irrelevance fail to provide significant insights to the historical record.

This book is divided into three parts, each of which narrates the history of a different secret civilian defense program. Part 1 is about civilian saboteurs. Chapters 1 through 3 offer insightful stories of civilians who trained to be saboteurs during an invasion. Chapter 4 is an account of how British leadership did not close the civilian saboteur program when it no longer had a purpose; the program continued even though the threat of an invasion had become unlikely, and the program changed/deteriorated in response to the lack of a mission. Chapter 5 tells how the program's ideas were used elsewhere with other unofficial groups and individuals. Instead of secret patrols, however, civilians were used for covert missions akin to modern-day special forces missions.

Part 2 is about civilian spies. Chapter 6 tells the story of civilians training to assist the military as an anti-invasion intelligence network, including housewives, teenagers, clergy, and even dogs, using dead-drop letters, wireless sets, and secret bunkers. Chapter 7 is about the logistics required to operate a civilian force with circumstances that were different than a traditional military intelligence network. Like their saboteur counterparts, the civilian spies were never put to use because Germany never invaded England. Similar to chapter 4, chapter 8 is an uninspiring account of how the civilian spy program fell into decline and eventually dissolved when the invasion never happened.

Part 3 is about civilians who trained in both sabotage and spy craft to be ready to serve as underground resistance after a successful German invasion and the defeat of the British military.

Chapter 9 details how they were trained as saboteurs and spies like those civilians described earlier, but the group in part 3 had orders to wait until after the invasion and a British military defeat to then begin their work and carry out an insurgency-type resistance.

Chatterton effectively demonstrates that Britain creatively prepared for an invasion based on what they saw during the fall of France, British civilians willfully accepted secret responsibilities to resist a German invasion, and the British government provided these civilians with significant training and resources. In addition to the body of literature on Britain's use of its military and its Home Guard—an armed, uniformed civilian militia—for its defense, Chatterton's narrative changes the conventional understanding of Britain's foresight, resolve, ingenuity, and ruthlessness, revising the common perception that British resistance preparations were poorly planned, last-minute, and weak.

One of the work's limitations is its relative paucity of resources; however, this is no fault of the author. By the time the secret programs were declassified, many of the people who were involved had already died without telling their stories, so Chatterton was limited in his sources. Despite this, he has compiled an impressive collection of primary sources from interviews and testimonies, archival records, and secondary (corroborating) literature.

Perhaps the greatest limitation is that Chatterton does not discuss the ethical implications of the British using civilians in spy and sabotage roles, although he does assert that the civilian participants and their families would have been hunted and killed for doing this. Instead, Chatterton acknowledges his bias that he is proud of Britain's reputation for standing alone and strong in the face of German conquest, and this pride is seen throughout the work.

Britain's Secret Defences challenges the narrative that England was woefully unprepared to resist a German invasion after Dunkirk and the fall of France in 1940. It provides intriguing insight into how Britain was willing to use nonmilitary means to resist German aggression—organizing civilians into a covert force for military intelligence, designing spy and saboteur operations, and training them to be an insurgency—all prepared and in place prior to an invasion and occupation.

Chatterton describes the personalities that came up with the innovative ideas for clandestine civilian operations and how they made things happen despite significant obstacles and incredible uncertainty. He states that had Britain's military failed to stop Germany, these trained civilian guerrillas would have been able to wreak havoc to thwart an invasion attempt or would have proved to be a formidable force of opposition during a German occupation.

Granted, it might be optimistic of him to assert that these unproven civilians would have had more success than the rest of Europe, which failed to thwart German invasions in their countries. Britain's civilian operatives did receive weapons training and were told to be ruthless. Decades later they shared their stories of how brutal they would have been if the invasion had happened and they were called upon to serve. Still, they were never given the opportunity to actually prove that they could perform well under hostile conditions.

This book offers a new piece of history that revises the conventional understanding of Britain's national will and home defense efforts during World War II to include governmental efforts to give civilians tremendous defense responsibilities. *Britain's Secret Defences* is worth reading for those who want to expand their understanding of World War II history to include Britain's use of civilians in clandestine combat roles. Military leaders and their civilian oversight may also find this book interesting, because it illustrates how British leaders modified their political-military efforts during a time of great uncertainty and limited options.

Colonel Robert W. Sturgill Jr., USAF, PhD

Small Armies, Big Cities: Rethinking Urban Warfare

Edited by Louise A. Tumchewics. Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2022, 328 pp.

As this review is being written, hundreds of thousands of Israeli troops are positioned along the border of Gaza, foreshadowing a massive urban military operation that pits Israeli forces against Hamas militants. Although the forces arrayed on each side are considerable, they pale in comparison to history's best-known urban fight at Stalingrad, where millions of men clashed over control of the southern Russian town. Still, the scale and nature of the Gaza fight make Louise Tumchewics' collection of essays, *Small Armies, Big Cities: Rethinking Urban Warfare*, timely.

The work approaches urban fighting through the lens of militaries who had significantly fewer troops to fight than the Germans and Soviets at Stalingrad—militaries defined by the book's categorization as division-sized or less (< 10,000 troops), in counterinsurgency operations and major combat operations that occurred within the past 75 years. *Small Armies, Big Cities* looks at the logistical constraints, firepower problems, and military-civilian relations issues that bedevil modern urban operations. Its pages examine several lessons on how and why small armies fight in the urban environment.

The book is a sound contribution to the growing literature on urban warfare. Tumchewics is a senior research fellow at the British Army's Centre for Historical Analysis and Conflict Research and specializes in aiding the UN and international non-governmental organizations with military-civilian interfaces in urban areas. Her expertise is on display as she guides the reader through 13 essays investigating theoretical discussions on what a city is and how to influence it during a war, as well as case studies into more obscure urban battles that can provide insights for military leaders and national decisionmakers.

An early essay by Paul Latawski provides a basic primer on the evolution of urban warfare, but the overall work is not meant to be a history of urban conflict and assumes that readers already have a basic understanding and context of urban warfare. The work is also ground- and army-centric but provides valuable lessons and "food for thought" for anyone interested in broader martial issues. The work acknowledges the axiom that modern armies should avoid urban conflict but also recognizes that the world continues to urbanize, and combat will take place in cities whether or not militaries wish it. As Tumchewics notes, "Armies may find themselves confronting the myriad difficulties of urban operations more often because urban battles may become more common as a greater percentage of the world's populations moves to cities and towns" (2).

The content, structure, and writing of each essay naturally differs, so readers are free to pick and choose the content that is most appealing to them. The work is at its best when Alex Neads describes how cities and locations may take on "totemic" significance to combatants that far outweighs the actual strategic, political, or even cultural importance of the place. He uses the battle for the Donetsk Airport in the initial period of Russia's war in Ukraine as a fascinating case study where both sides fought for the passenger terminal long after the airport served any tactical or strategic purpose.

Another highlight comes from Tyrone Groh's examination of "surrogate warfare," where he examines the promises and pitfalls of the US-led coalition support of Iraqi forces to remove ISIS from Mosul. John Spencer of the Modern War Institute at West Point also provides a highly relevant look at the US Army's need to rapidly adjust its forces from countering insurgents in Baghdad to conventional operations that could support the construction of a concrete wall around Sadr City. Each of the essays provides lessons that will likely be witnessed or relearned in Israel's upcoming Gaza campaign.

The ground-based approach to the book leaves the overall work lacking in a few areas. There is too little discussion for the “support” side of urban operations. There are few references to artillery or air support except for when the operations caused unnecessary damage or where their use was critical to success. The simple fact that only extreme examples are mentioned reveals how much the essays overlook such support. A more nuanced approach could provide readers, particularly Air Force readers, with new considerations for how to support all aspects of operations in the urban environment.

One essay regarding drones written by Paul Lushenko and John Hardy contributed to the larger discussion on drone warfare but did little to apply it to urban combat with any satisfaction. Drones and other autonomous systems are likely to change the tactics of urban operations, yet their discussion focuses more on targeted killings and disruption operations carried out by expensive systems like the US Predator, while failing to address the growing proliferation of smaller systems that are changing battlefields around the world. In the authors’ defense, the book was published in 2022, which left little if any time to consider applicable lessons learned from Ukraine; however, their analysis still seems outdated by nearly a decade.

The collection also does not attempt to fully address space or cyber considerations in the urban environment. Several authors note that the two domains are critical, but none elaborate on how to exploit or defend either. Those domains may have landed outside of Tumchewics’ intended scope, but the book suffers from their exclusion. The contributors often point out that small armies need to be creative in the urban environment to fight, win support, and meet political objectives, so serious thought is still needed on how to apply all of warfare’s domains.

Still, the book is interesting, and the authors provide little-known and often overlooked case studies that any serious practitioner of war should consider. Anyone interested in urban combat should read it to help evolve their own thinking or at least understand urban operations when conducted with limited resources. Perhaps the best praise that could be given to this collection is that Tumchewics should pursue a second volume of the work and expand the scope to seriously consider how small armies can use airpower, fire support, cyber, and space support to achieve their objectives. In the meantime, readers will not regret the time they dedicate to the existing work.

Lieutenant Colonel Ian Bertram, USAF

Forging Wargamers: A Framework for Professional Military Education

Edited by Sebastian J. Bae. Marine Corps University Press, 2022, 266 pp.

Forging Wargamers: A Framework for Professional Military Education is a diverse collection of essays edited by research analyst Sebastian J. Bae with contributions from both practitioners and scholars in wargaming. As acknowledged by Bae in the preface, he “never envisioned [the volume] as a textbook or definitive manual for wargaming education” but rather as something “to help raise the next generation of wargamers—to provide the necessary tools and skills for the advancement of our field” (xiii). His goal, then, is to respond to an often-repeated question and more practical problem from wargamers, “How do we establish or improve wargaming education, including sponsors, participants, and future designers?” (xiii).

Bae, a research scientist and senior game designer at the Center for Naval Analyses, teaches wargaming courses at the Center for Security Studies at Georgetown University as well as at the US Marine Corps Command and Staff College and US Naval Academy. He is perhaps most

famous for serving as faculty advisor to the Georgetown University Wargaming Society, which hosts a very popular wargaming YouTube channel.

In *Forging Wargamers*, Bae has edited a collection of nine chapters, plus an introduction and conclusion. The chapter authors are recognized experts from the uniformed military and DoD-affiliated education centers, and academics often with both education and practical wargaming experience in the national security field. The different perspectives provide value, and each chapter seeks to answer a foundational question on the future of wargaming.

In chapter 1, lecturer Natalia Wojtowicz of the Hague University of Applied Sciences explores the current perception of wargaming as often an ad hoc and informal pursuit rather than a recognized profession or academic discipline. She notes that today's wargaming education pathways include professional military education, civilian universities, or think tanks. She provides ideal competencies for each wargaming role with the conclusion that more structure and standards will help lead to the legitimization of wargaming as a profession.

Chapter 2 by RAND Corporation's Kyleanne Hunter, formerly with the US Air Force Academy at the time of book release, examines wargaming in pre-commissioning education. Hunter argues for integrating wargaming into military training earlier and more often, as this will lead to a more agile force. In chapter 3, Office of Naval Intelligence analyst Timothy J. Smith discusses its Simulation-Based Analysis and Training program. In essence the program combines computational modeling and simulation, tabletop wargames, historical scenarios, and the utilization of critical thinking and structured analytic techniques.

Intelligence analysts, even those with no Naval background, will be aware of the use of analytic tradecraft including standards from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. An addendum to chapter 3 provides an annotated guide, including a syllabus and forms from a SimBAT course on Global Strategy in World War II. Wargaming educators will find the information useful for incorporation in classes.

In chapter 4, Paul M. Kearney, an active-duty army strategist and wargamer, focuses on building wargame designers through the promotion of on-the-job training. Kearney outlines the initial problem that currently there is "no pipeline to train wargamers." He argues, "Instead wargaming talent with the Department of Defense relies on self-motivated hobbyists who find their way into wargaming positions as civilians (general schedule or contracted wargamers) or by vagaries of the military human resources processes" (102). The chapter includes best practices and advocates for the use of commercial wargames and professional wargaming associations.

Chapter 5, written by Australian active-duty officers Scott Jenkinson and Jo Brick, explains Australia's experience in implementing wargaming at the Australian Defence College. The focus of the chapter is the utilization of wargaming for the purpose of education and building upon Australia's limited wargaming history and nascent ability. Chapter 6 provides an interesting overview from Ian T. Brown and Benjamin M. Herbold on how the US Marine Corps has begun to institutionalize educational wargaming across the College of Enlisted Military Education, Expeditionary Warfare School, Command and Staff College, and School of Advanced Warfighting. While the effort is still in process, they provide many lessons learned in the chapter.

In chapter 7, Jeff Appleget and Robert Burks, two well-regarded wargamers from the Naval Postgraduate School, shift the conversation away from operationalizing wargames into military forces to working with wargame sponsors. The chapter includes an overview of the school's efforts to engage sponsors, interact with them, and scope the process. Interwoven within this chapter are

efforts to minimize bias when working with sponsors. This chapter provides practical tips for current wargamers designing a policy or practice to engage with wargame sponsors.

Chapter 8 explores the inclusion of social science principles into analytic wargames. Benjamin Jensen and Brandon Valeriano note, “With a rising concern about the impact of emergent technologies (such as cyber, artificial intelligence, and unmanned vehicles) on the battlefield, there is a corresponding renaissance in the use of wargaming to evaluate interdependent decision making in a strategic setting” (198). The authors reference the University of California–Berkeley’s Project on Nuclear Gaming, which uses experiments on decision-making, and the increasing number of wargames that incorporate escalation in the use of cyber methods.

The most unique chapter in the volume is chapter 9, provided by Brooke Taylor, the creator and principal investigator for the Air Force Global Strike Command National Nuclear Strategy and Global Security Workshop for Practitioners. It pertains to expanding participation in wargames to policymakers. Specifically Taylor advocates “for the Department of Defense to provide Congress with a seat at the wargaming table [to] create a pathway that focuses not on what Congress should be thinking about national security, but instead hones into how Congress should be thinking about national security” (222–23). Taylor promotes the idea for an educational nuclear wargame for freshman congressional orientation. While the idea is novel, it presents potential problems in the areas of funding bias or impacts on jobs located in congressional districts.

Bae has edited a work that meets his stated original goal by providing multiple perspectives from chapter authors. Individuals looking for a one-size-fits-all approach to wargames to answer the volume’s initial prompt will find disappointment. Yet while the collection speaks to improving wargaming education from diverse viewpoints, the volume is not without fault.

Although it includes perspectives of active designers, instructors, and wargamers, *Forging Wargames* would benefit from direct testimonials. While there are issues with citing or building a case from one data point or source, the perspective of non-wargamers or officials who were originally hesitant to wargaming could be added to enhance its appeal and validity. Additionally, the inclusion of quantitative studies or class surveys showing individual quantification of improvement in knowledge, skills, and abilities related to critical thinking and wargaming would build a successful case based on evidence.

Any future second edition of the text would benefit from additional interdisciplinary perspectives from experts from education, curriculum and instruction scholars, social scientists, or individuals from other federally funded research and development centers with wargaming knowledge. While the focus of the text is professional military education, the CIA, State Department, and other US government agencies within the interagency have histories of wargaming for planning, education, and experiential learning, and their perspectives would improve any second edition.

Bae makes a brave effort to provide a cogent and well-researched passionate appeal to wargamers in an easy-to-read volume of less than 300 pages. The work includes an excellent thorough bibliography of wargaming articles, books, monographs, and texts. Graduate students or those new to wargaming can utilize the bibliography as an entry-level starter list of wargaming resources. The volume concludes with a section that provides ample contributor bona fides. Hobby gamers and entry-level wargamers will find useful nuggets in the edited volume, and it will serve as a good desk reference.

At the same time, the edited volume is an ideal centerpiece for analysts, intermediate wargamers, and defense officials who have a deep interest and passion in wargaming. Readers looking for a more introductory overview text on the history of wargaming should start with Matthew B. Caffrey Jr.’s

On Wargaming: How Wargames Have Shaped History and How They May Shape the Future (2019) from the US Naval War College Press.

While Bae argues *Forging Wargamers* is not intended to be a textbook or definitive manual, he is far too modest. The volume is a solid primer and contribution to wargaming scholarship as the concept and field of wargaming will continue to adapt and change.

Bradley Martin

Oppenheimer (film)

Written and directed by Christopher Nolan, Universal Pictures, 2023, 3:09 hrs.

Despite the hype, my expectations for the Oppenheimer movie were low. But even with low expectations, I was disappointed. The official movie trailer was uninspiring and led me to expect rather cheesy special effects—it turns out the trailer showed the best of the not-so-special effects in the movie. It would have been easy enough, for instance, to work with historical footage of the actual Trinity test from July 1945 when depicting the test in the movie. Instead, after a blindingly bright flash—so far so good—the screen fills with images of flames of the sort produced by a chemical fire.

One need not be a physics expert or to have seen video of nuclear tests to know that the blast of a fission bomb looks nothing like being parachuted into a forest fire. Most of the other special effects were just plain weird and overdone; they tended to distract and detract from the film rather than communicate anything intelligible. I saw the IMAX version of the movie, and long before any of the scenes of explosions I wished I'd brought earplugs. Too much of the film just seemed like gratuitous noise and strange, incongruous visuals.

I've yet to read *American Prometheus* (2005), the biography of Oppenheimer on which the movie is supposedly based. I say "supposedly" because it is difficult to imagine a book being as choppy, achronological, and kaleidoscopically confused as the movie. Still, I knew a good bit about Oppenheimer's life story before watching the film. I knew about his flirtations with communism and long association with communists, his role leading scientists in the Manhattan Project, his subsequent clashes with Edward Teller and others over the making of the hydrogen bomb or "superbomb," and the later revocation of Oppenheimer's security clearance, removing him from any influence on future US weapons work or policy. Most of what I knew came from reading Richard Rhodes' *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* (1987), and his subsequent *Dark Sun: The Making of the Hydrogen Bomb* (1996).

But that was years ago. More recently, I got a refresher when reading Jim Baggott's 2010 book *The First War of Physics: The Secret History of the Atom Bomb: 1939–1949*. Yet even with the high points of Oppenheimer's story fresh in mind, it wasn't always easy to follow what was going on in the movie, and one suspects several scenes were confusing or lost entirely on viewers who hadn't previously read about "Oppie."

Notwithstanding those critiques, the movie wasn't without merit. Nolan clearly got the history of the Manhattan Project mostly right, and the military and senior policymakers were portrayed seriously and relatively fairly, without the all-too-common Hollywood disparagement of high-ranking officials. The acting was quite good, especially the dramatic scenes toward the end of the film, bouncing back and forth between the fates of Oppenheimer (played by Cillian Murphy) and

Lewis Strauss (Robert Downey Jr.), who once headed the Atomic Energy Commission when Oppenheimer was one of its leading scientific advisers.

The actor Matt Damon reportedly put on 30 pounds to bulk up for his role as Major General Leslie Groves, the hard-charging director of the Manhattan Project, but remained about 50 pounds shy of a convincing physique to match the general's. Damon's character came across as gruff but loyal to Oppenheimer, and even likable—a softer image than most descriptions of Groves.

I wasn't very familiar with Strauss and had to do some homework after the movie. The movie's treatment of Strauss hews closely to *Esquire's* version of the man. That image of Strauss is rather darker and more conspiratorial than other biographical sketches. A more recent piece in *Esquire* suggests that Downey knew quite a bit about Strauss and challenged Nolan's revisionist, negative portrayal. Again, the drama and acting toward the end of the movie are first rate, even if Nolan's license with the facts seems suspect.

At bottom, the movie is a jumble—a complicated story told poorly, more impressionistic cinematographic stunts than intelligible storytelling. It jarringly jumps back and forth across decades, sometimes in black-and-white, sometimes in color. The only constancy is Oppenheimer's complex character and his moral trepidations over nuclear weapons—themes that could certainly have been better explored much more coherently and in under three hours. Given the hype, positive reviews, and box office success, the movie will almost certainly win awards. Just be careful about buying what the movie is purportedly selling—the true story of Robert J. Oppenheimer, finally being told, at long last.

Without a coherent narrative or storyline, it's difficult to refute or point out factual flaws in the movie. By hiding its message in an impressionistic, full-on sensory assault, the movie conveys feelings about Oppenheimer, nuclear weapons, and Strauss while remaining mostly immune to critical analysis. Viewers are likely to emerge from *Oppenheimer* somewhat shellshocked and with a feeling of now knowing some things that have a questionable basis in historical fact. And, while distracted by the sound and fury of the film, they'll have been unknowingly force-fed messages deserving of more careful consideration than the movie allows. For me, *Oppenheimer* bombed, but it wasn't "the bomb."

Mark A. Bucknam, PhD

Euromissiles: The Nuclear Weapons That Nearly Destroyed NATO

Susan Colbourn. Cornell University Press, 2022, 408 pp.

In August 2019, the United States and Russia withdrew from the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty. Under the treaty, the two powers had agreed to eliminate all short- and intermediate-range missiles and on-site monitoring to assure their decommissioning—an agreement widely seen as pivotal to Euro-Atlantic security. Pundits immediately set to work retracing the treaty's origins and how it might be resuscitated. Susan Colbourn's *Euromissiles* is her vivid account of the path not only to the treaty itself but also to the states' deployment of the nuclear-tipped intermediate missiles at the heart of the treaty: the Soviet Union's SS-20 and the United States' Pershing II and Gryphon ground-launched cruise missile (GLCM).

NATO's European countries first played host to the nuclear-tipped missiles in 1983, thanks to the Carter administration's 1979 "dual-track" decision. The intent of the decision was to put pressure on the Soviet Union to cancel its SS-20 program first through diplomatic pressure and then

through the deployment of the US-made missiles once the former failed. None of this was easy for NATO and its 16 countries, which leads to Colbourn's central premise: This was not a Euro-missile crisis but a string of crises for the ever-embattled Alliance, beset by the "structural dilemmas woven into [its] very fabric" (8).

Although *Euromissiles* is primarily a historical intervention, any reader interested in national security will find it informative. First, Colbourn has provided a fundamental understanding of NATO's crucial pivot points in the final decades of the Cold War. In that regard, this book debunks any notion that the Alliance faced possible breakup only *after* the Soviet Union's dissolution. A common enemy at the gates did not hold the Allies together nearly as much as intra-Alliance devotion, empathy, and careful diplomacy.

Second, *Euromissiles* adds to a growing reexamination of the Kennedy administration's "flexible response" strategy by paying particular attention to the issues at the tactical nuclear level. As one scholar has argued, this 1960s-era strategy to deter across a broader spectrum was more of a rhetorical strategy focused on balancing geopolitics and not a radical departure from President Dwight Eisenhower's "massive retaliation" strategy. Even if readers disagree with this assessment of NATO military strategy, it is worth understanding as similar misnomers exist today. Third, this book offers a thorough look into the politics of nuclear weapons—an alien realm to many outside US Strategic Command.

For Colbourn, the crises surrounding the Euromissiles did not begin with the Soviet's deployment of the SS-20, as the predominant narrative holds. Rather, she agrees with the former chancellor of West Germany, Helmut Schmidt, and his belief that the problems arose in the 1960s following the Cuban Missile Crisis. While the world breathed a collective sigh of relief, the crisis stirred anxiety within NATO that the United States could not live up to its promise of "extended deterrence."

This fear would underpin Alliance politics throughout the Cold War. In this case, it came to a head as NATO's military strategists worked to incorporate flexible response, which proved highly ambiguous. While it allowed elasticity to accommodate each nation's political concerns, military strategists worried deeply about when and under what conditions leaders would resort to escalation.

Citing these concerns, France withdrew from its NATO military commitments in 1966. By then, concerns over Vietnam and the budget prompted the United States to begin talks with Britain and West Germany to redeploy some of its 400,000-plus American forces in Europe. These tense negotiations, known as the "offset crisis," became emblematic of one particular strand of the European predicament: its concern over America's commitment to fight if the time ever came. America's nuclear arsenal seemed to be the unwavering element of Alliance security; yet, at the same time, these weapons, if ever employed, would spell its destruction.

The second strand of this predicament grew throughout the 1970s as a wave of remarkable new military capabilities emerged. Unfortunately, the same breathtaking pace of modernization occurred in the Soviet military, leading to nuclear parity between the superpowers. Europeans felt exposed by this parity and the resulting bilateral negotiations between Washington and Moscow, known as the Strategic Arms Limitations Talk (SALT). "SALT neutralizes their strategic nuclear capabilities," Schmidt warned in a famous 1977 speech. "In Europe this magnifies the significance of the disparities between East and West in nuclear tactical and conventional systems" (66).

Hence, tactical nuclear systems mattered greatly to European leaders. Unfortunately, with each round of NATO's military modernization, a fresh round of political concerns arose. These concerns pushed Alliance politics to the edge during the dual-track decision and its eventual missile

deployment. The Soviet Union first deployed its mobile SS-20 in 1976, and because its range was under treaty limits, the weapons seemed purpose-designed for Western Europe.

The following year, the *Washington Post* exposed the United States' neutron bomb development, a weapon meant to extinguish human life while leaving infrastructure intact. The ensuing public debate created the framework that would underpin dual-track, and—as Colbourn insistently notes—it all happened under the Carter administration. While the neutron bomb had moved off the table, it taught negotiators that they could seek balance by deploying limited numbers of new technologies and threatening to deploy more unless the Soviets made concessions on their vast conventional forces. The key was to overcome the neutron bomb's sticking point: European public opinion.

NATO leaders faced a titanic challenge in deploying the Pershing II and GLCM while surviving the diplomatic skill of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. By filling the tactical ground-based nuclear strike role, these missiles served as both an answer to the military's counter-SS-20 problem and a bargaining chip for the Reagan administration. Between 1979 and 1983, Moscow tripled its SS-20 deployments, lending urgency to the problem. But the arrival of American-made nuclear weapons in Western Europe displeased a powerful pacifist movement that had arisen out of the ashes of World War II. Britain's parliament and street demonstrators tried to shame the decision.

Were Europeans more concerned about nuclear-tipped blackmail from the Warsaw Pact or the nuclear age itself? Gorbachev's subsequent proposals to cut the Soviet's arsenal seemed to answer that question. His relentless bargaining drove a wedge into intra-NATO politics, as anti-missile campaigners warned that American weapons undermined European sovereignty and raised the prospects of war. Colbourn quotes Margaret Thatcher to sum up the dilemma: "I want a war-free Europe. A nuclear-free Europe I do not believe would be a war-free Europe" (196). Colbourn ultimately credits the Italian parliament and West Germany's Bundestag for agreeing with Thatcher, accepting the missiles, and holding the Alliance together.

If for none of the reasons above, members of the US defense community would benefit from Colbourn's view on how the Cold War ended. A lingering belief exists that the United States "won" the Cold War thanks to an intense military buildup in Europe, with its Pershing II and GLCMs forming a crucial element. It was, after all, those missiles that pervaded the negotiations between President Ronald Reagan and Gorbachev. In other words, there is some justification in saying that US military readiness and innovation played a crucial role in presiding over the Soviet Union's demise.

Euromissiles challenges that position. Colbourn paints a picture of the Warsaw Pact and NATO both in a "race to the bottom" in which US weapons brought the latter's downward plunge (266). Open dialogue and continual outreach to the East allowed NATO to persist as the Pact crumbled. Hence, it was the Alliance's unity that enabled its military power—not the other way around. Because Colbourn deals directly with this three-way relationship between military power, Alliance politics, and success in superpower competition, *Euromissiles* is worth the read.

Lieutenant Colonel Daniel P. Gipper, USAF

Original Sin: Power, Technology and War in Outer Space

Bleddyn E. Bowen. Oxford University Press, 2023, 256 pp.

In his speech at the February 1957 astronautics symposium, US Air Force General Bernard Schriever detailed a vision of the important role outer space might play in the United States'

national security. “In the long haul,” Schriever predicted, “our safety as a nation may depend upon our achieving ‘space superiority.’ Several decades from now the important battles may not be sea battles or air battles, but space battles.” At the time, Schriever’s comments appeared to challenge then-existing Eisenhower administration policy, which emphasized peaceful uses of space and sought to address potential Soviet space threats through diplomatic and international channels. A mere eight months later, the Soviet launch of Sputnik 1, the first human-made satellite, altered the political landscape. As Schriever reflected years afterward, “Suddenly, everyone got space-minded.”

We have reached a new point in history in which the global public is once again becoming more space-minded. The recent formation of the United States Space Force; the private space missions by SpaceX, Blue Origin, and other commercial space companies; the widely-reported uses of space systems in Russia’s ongoing war in Ukraine; and the myriad ways in which space-based technologies are incorporated into modern life have all increased public awareness of outer space technologies’ invaluable role in both civilian and military operations. In examining our increasingly space-focused present, Dr. Bleddyn Bowen—space policy expert and University of Leicester associate professor of international relations—uses *Original Sin* to turn a critical lens on the past and to raise prescient concerns about the future.

Original Sin is premised on a damning idea: because outer space systems were initially pursued to “meet military-political objectives,” the entire history of space technology development has been tarnished by the “original sin” of space militarization (7). Bowen asserts that broader recognition of space technology’s dark origins and the ways in which military use and geopolitical competition continue to influence the space environment is a prerequisite to pursuing global political reform to create a safer, more stable space environment.

The first of the book’s three parts, “The Original Sin of Space Technology,” examines Bowen’s central theme by returning to the beginning of the Space Age. In chapter 1, Bowen describes the origins of early rocketry and its fruition in Nazi Germany’s pursuit of rocket-weapons; the role of nuclear weapons and the need to deliver them at speeds and distances impossible for existing long-range bombers in post-World War II rocket development; and the influence of both nuclear weaponry and intelligence collection on Cold War space competition between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Military interest in outer space was not, however, unique to the Cold War superpowers. Chapter 2 examines the space program development of China, France, India, Japan, and the United Kingdom, among others, demonstrating that each of these nations pursued space technology development for military and national defense purposes. According to Bowen, the original sin of space technology “does not just taint the dreams of Americans and Russians . . . but every major space power in the twenty-first century” (108).

In part two, “The Maturation of Space Power,” Bowen turns to space-based technologies themselves. Chapter 3 provides readers with a deep-dive into the world of outer space intelligence collection, detailing the history of satellite development for collecting signals intelligence, imagery intelligence, geospatial intelligence, and other forms of space-to-Earth intelligence. Satellite early-warning systems, such as the United States’ space-based infrared system, and their critical role in preserving international stability as “national technical means” of arms-treaty verification are also discussed.

In chapter 4, Bowen examines space technology within the orbital environment itself. Satellite constellations—including global navigation satellite systems like the United States’ global positioning system, space situational awareness and space domain awareness systems, and the

critical military and economic uses of these space system subsets—are the main topics of this chapter.

The third and final part of *Original Sin*, “Strategy in the Global Space Age,” is the most fascinating portion of Bowen’s work. Comprising the book’s last three chapters, part three focuses on the theory and practice of space warfare as it exists today and as it may exist in the near future. In addition to describing the systems and mechanisms of space warfare, many previously discussed in his earlier chapters, Bowen examines the tension between entanglement and independence in the space environment. Is a nation’s security better protected with open space systems that integrate easily with those of its Allies? Or is independence—building one’s own space systems to ensure access and control—a better, though costlier, strategy?

Key to *Original Sin* is Bowen’s analogy of orbital space as a “cosmic coastline.” This idea, a central part of his previous work—*War in Space: Strategy, Spacepower, Geopolitics* (2020)—cuts to the heart of military debate over the space domain’s nature and significance. Whether military space forces ought to be “brown water” (concentrating their efforts on littoral, terrestrially-focused operations) or “blue water” (emphasizing wider-ranging operations focused on the protection of space commerce) has been argued by a wide range of space strategists. Bowen persuasively contends that treating orbital space as a coastline and organizing both military and political space policy accordingly is prudent for the foreseeable future.

Bowen’s book is well-researched, his discussions of space technology and its uses thorough and informative, and his arguments regarding space warfare and Earth orbit as a cosmic coastline compelling. This reviewer’s only criticism is the book’s underlying theme that a militaristic original sin blights space technology in unique and pervasive ways.

There is no denying the military origins of rocketry, the crimes of some of spaceflight’s original geniuses—including Werner von Braun in his former role as Nazi rocket scientist—or the connection between space technology and nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, the idea that space technology as a whole is tainted by German and post-World War II American and Soviet military interests seems an oversimplification.

As mentioned, early space technology development was perceived differently by America’s civilian and military leaders. Schriever and other American military theorists certainly foresaw space growing into a warfighting domain. But on multiple occasions before and after the Sputnik launch, US civilian leadership—President Dwight Eisenhower and senior members of his administration and diplomatic corps—publicly proposed restrictions on military uses of space and various schemes of inspection to ensure that space launches were taking place for exclusively peaceful purposes. Though these proposals were rejected outright by the Soviet Union and, as a result, quickly abandoned by the United States, they show that early American policy related to space technology was multifaceted, rather than purely militaristic.

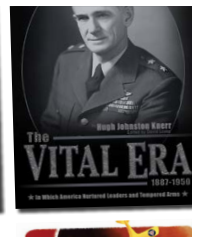
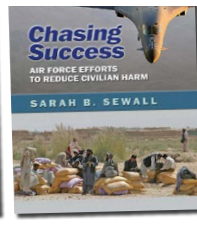
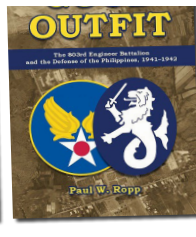
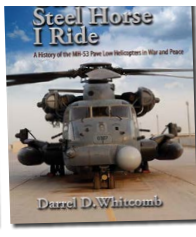
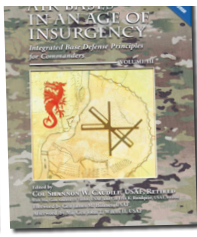
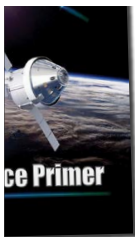
Further, the idea that a technology born of military interest or with prominent military application could be forever tainted seems to apply so widely and to so many varied fields that singling out space technology development for *Original Sin*’s titular opprobrium is almost banal. Other writers have also noted the symbiotic relationship between scientific development and military application. Should we consider the original sin of the sciences of astronomy, mathematics, or optical physics? Of computing? Of quantum technology?

To echo Bowen’s biblical reference with another, does not the story of Cain and Abel also suggest all human technology is tainted—since, at least within the tradition of the three Abrahamic religions, one of the earliest reported uses of a tool is murder? This reviewer believes—and does

not think Bowen would disagree—it is humanity’s nature, rather than some inherent predisposition from space technology’s development, that drives geopolitical discord in outer space. The original sin of space technology, as with all human innovations, lies not in militarized technological determinism, but in ourselves.

Regardless of quibbles over Bowen’s theme, *Original Sin* is an impressive work, providing readers a wealth of information on a critical topic in an accessible and, in comparison to many academic works on space law and policy, affordable way. Bowen’s comparison of orbital space to a cosmic coastline is a creative—and welcome—evolution of military space scholarship. This work should have pride-of-place in the book collections of Guardian and other military space operators, outer space enthusiasts, and space-minded members of the general public. To echo Schriever, as space becomes ever more important and we become increasingly space-minded, works like *Original Sin* will become even more significant.

Major Jeremy J. Grunert, USAF

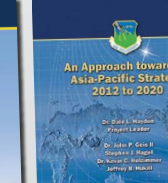
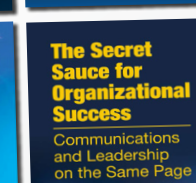
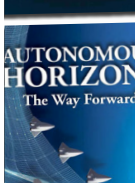
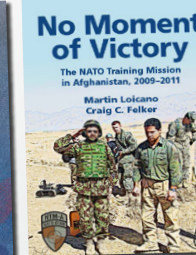
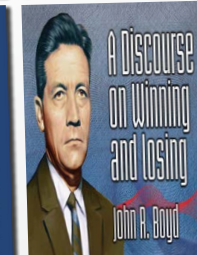
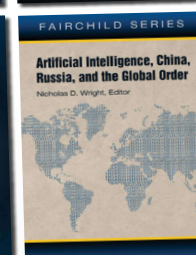
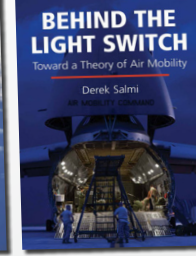
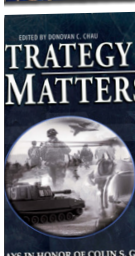
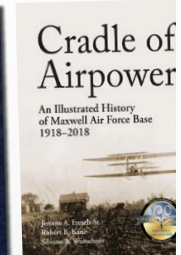
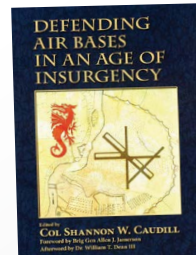
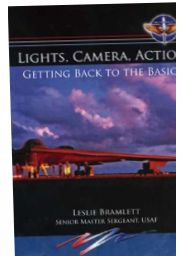


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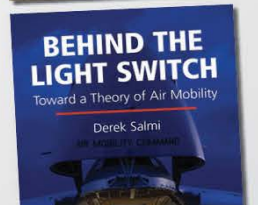
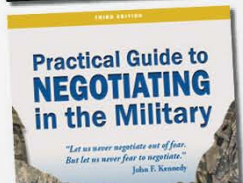
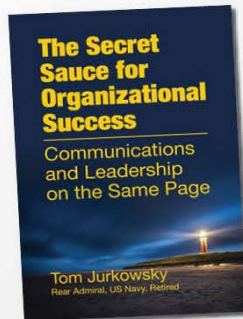
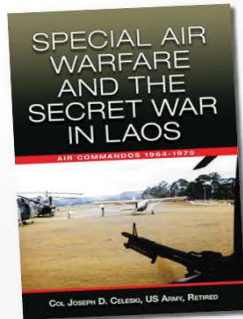
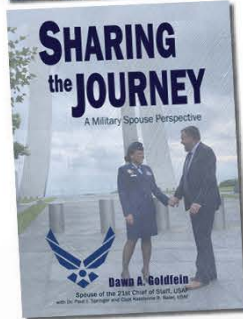
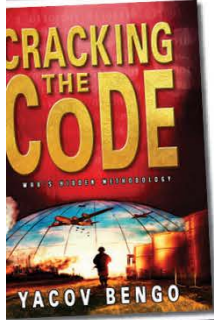
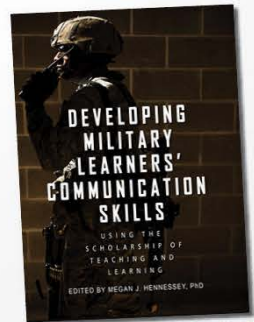
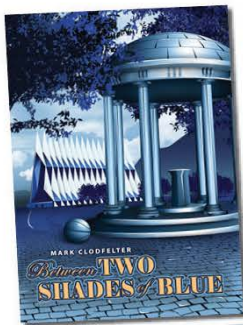
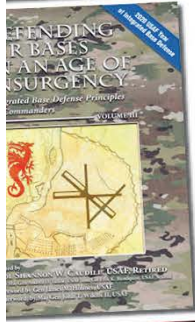
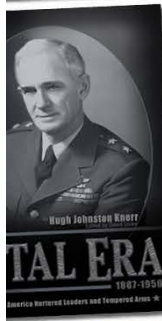
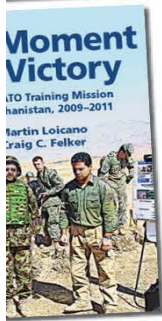
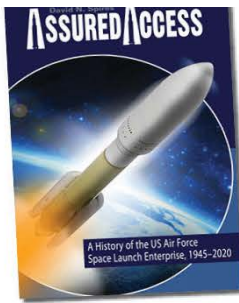
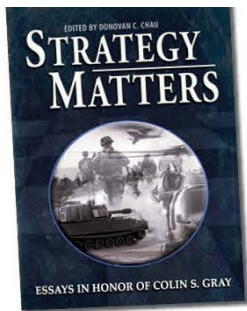
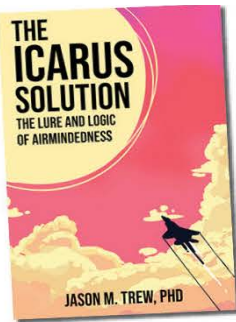
Air University Press and the journals would like to thank Nedra O. Looney for her 16 years of dedication to excellence in Air Force publishing, and for her 37 years in service to the Air Force, Air Education and Training Command, and Air University.



Thank you!

Dr. Chris Rein

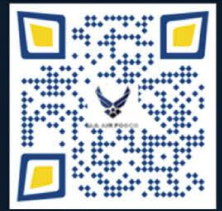
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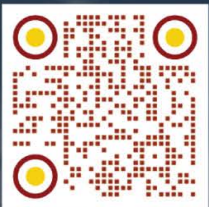
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