

# COACHING *for* LEADERS

## **Call Sign Chaos: Learning to Lead**

*by Jim Mattis and Bing West*

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## **Dave's Reading Highlights**

In late November 2016, I was enjoying Thanksgiving break in my hometown on the Columbia River in Washington State when I received an unexpected call from Vice President–elect Pence. Would I meet with President-elect Trump to discuss the job of Secretary of Defense of the United States? I had taken no part in the election campaign and had never met or spoken to Mr. Trump, so to say that I was surprised is an understatement. Further, I knew that, absent a congressional waiver, federal law prohibited a former military officer from serving as Secretary of Defense within seven years of departing military service. Given that no waiver had been authorized since General George Marshall was made secretary in 1950, and I'd been out for only three and a half years, I doubted I was a viable candidate.

I figured that my strong support of NATO and my dismissal of the use of torture on prisoners would have the President-elect looking for another candidate. Standing beside him on the steps as photographers snapped away and shouted questions, I was surprised for the second time that week when he characterized me to the reporters as “the real deal.” Days later, I was formally nominated. That

During the interview, Mr. Trump had asked me if I could do the job of Secretary of Defense. I said I could. I'd never aspired to the job, and

took the opportunity to suggest several other candidates I thought highly capable of leading our defense. Still, having been raised by the Greatest Generation, by two parents who had served in World War II, and subsequently shaped by more than four decades in the Marine Corps, I considered government service to be both honor and duty. In my view, when the President asks you to do something, you don't play Hamlet on the wall, wringing your hands. To quote a great American athletic company's slogan, you "just do it." So long as you are prepared, you say yes. When it comes to the defense of our experiment in democracy and our way of life, ideology should have nothing to do with it. Whether asked to serve by a Democrat or a Republican, you serve. "Politics ends at the water's edge." This ethos has shaped and defined me, and I wasn't going to betray it no matter how much I was enjoying my life west of the Rockies and spending time with a family I had neglected during my forty-plus years in the Marines.

I never enjoyed sitting in classrooms. I could read on my own at a much faster rate. Instead of a television, at home we had a well-stocked home library. I devoured books—Treasure Island, Captains Courageous, The Last of the Mohicans, The Call of the Wild, The Swiss Family Robinson....Hemingway was my favorite author, followed closely by Faulkner and Fitzgerald. Reading about the Lewis and Clark expedition, I was fascinated that they had canoed on the Columbia River and had passed through our neighborhood.

I never committed for the long term. My aims were modest. I thought, Maybe I'll make captain. It freed me up to not worry about my next command and focus instead on doing the best job I could in the one I had.

I had learned in the fleet that in harmonious, effective units, everyone owns the unit mission. If you as the commander define the mission as your responsibility, you have already failed. It was our mission, never my mission. The thirty-eight recruiters were my subordinate commanders. "Command and control," the phrase so commonly used to describe leadership inside and outside the military, is inaccurate. In the Corps, I was taught to use the concept of "command and

feedback.” You don’t control your subordinate commanders’ every move; you clearly state your intent and unleash their initiative.

With the help of my officers, a thesaurus, and caffeine, we chipped and hammered sentence after sentence until each fitrep reflected the individual personality and his accomplishments. Keeping in mind that the evaluator at the other end had never met this particular sergeant, I strove to describe each Marine accurately as an individual, the same way any of us would want to be evaluated. If we wanted ethical recruiting of top-notch applicants, I had to make sure that those who gave 100 percent to the mission received the promotions their commitment earned.

Recruiting duty also introduced me to a useful paradox. On the one hand, success was quantitatively measurable. You couldn’t fake it. Speaking crisply or having a tight haircut did not make a leader. Collectively, I and my thirty-eight sergeants had a monthly quota to make. It wasn’t enough to deliver warm bodies. A recruiter was evaluated on the performance of his candidates. If he had a top graduate, the recruiter attended graduation to be publicly praised along with his recruit. But if his recruits failed, the recruiter’s fitrep would reflect that. Because I was held to a rigorous quantitative standard, I learned to value clear output goals.

I was conscious of what George Washington wrote to the Congress early in our war for independence: “Men who are familiarized to danger meet it without shrinking; whereas troops unused to service often apprehend danger where no danger is.” The key to preparation for those who hadn’t yet been in battle was imaging. The goal was to ensure that every grunt had fought a dozen times, mentally and physically, before he ever fired his first bullet in battle, tasted the gunpowder grit in his teeth, or saw blood seeping into the dirt. I wanted my troops to imagine what would happen, to develop mental images, to think ahead to the explosions, yelled orders, and, above all, the deafening cacophony. Battle is so loud that it is hard to hear—let alone make sense of—what someone is trying to direct you to do in the midst of the chaos. At that instant, the muscle memory of training and rehearsals must kick in; swift decisions have to be made

with inadequate information. Every warrior must know his weapon, his job, and his comrades' reactions so well that he functions without hesitation. A hitter has a quarter of a second to gauge the arc of a curveball and swing his bat. He doesn't have time to think. He has practiced so many times that calculating whether to swing is automatic, grooved into his muscle memory. The same is true of the grunt engaged in close combat. Verbal clarity requires the same intense practice. We have all heard recordings of 911 calls by frantic people who are talking incomprehensibly. Imagine, then, trying to give clear, terse, accurate descriptions and orders over the radio when you are under fire. So, day after day, I had my platoon sergeants and platoon commanders on the radio, responding to sudden scenarios designed to inject stress.

By walking through sand tables and imaging through setbacks, casualties, and chemical attacks, we built grim confidence in our ability to adapt. I've found this imaging technique—walking through what lies ahead, acclimating hearts and minds to the unexpected—an essential leadership tool.

There is no battalion unit that uses the call letter J. So I designated my focused-telescope officers with the military phonetic "Juliet." For instance, I had reassigned my personnel section to help with the incoming casualties. That left my adjutant, who understood my battle plan and my intent, without a job. He would act as a Juliet officer. I selected three Juliets, who met with me many mornings. They knew our plan and understood what information I needed, so I wouldn't be caught off-balance. Understanding my intent, they'd then circulate among my dispersed elements. Their sole priority was to keep me informed while also putting a human face to my intent. If you have multiple avenues of information coming to you and you're out and about yourself, you develop an enhanced understanding. Every commander and chief executive officer needs tools to scan the horizon for danger or opportunities. Juliets proved invaluable to me by providing a steady stream of dispassionate information. I chose men who I was confident would maintain trust. What kept the Juliets from being seen as a spy ring by my subordinate commanders was their ability to keep confidences when those commanders shared

concerns. They knew that information would be conveyed to me alone.

In my military judgment, President George H. W. Bush knew how to end a war on our terms. When he said America would take action, we did. He approved of deploying overwhelming forces to compel the enemy's withdrawal or swiftly end the war. He avoided sophomoric decisions like imposing a ceiling on the number of troops or setting a date when we would have to stop fighting and leave. He systematically gathered public support, congressional approval, and UN agreement. He set a clear, limited end state and used diplomacy to pull together a military coalition that included allies we'd never fought alongside. He listened to opposing points of view and guided the preparations, without offending or excluding any stakeholder, while also holding firm to his strategic goal. Under his wise leadership, there was no mission creep. We wouldn't discipline ourselves to be so strategically sound in the future.

Reading is an honor and a gift from a warrior or historian who—a decade or a thousand decades ago—set aside time to write. He distilled a lifetime of campaigning in order to have a “conversation” with you. We have been fighting on this planet for ten thousand years; it would be idiotic and unethical to not take advantage of such accumulated experiences. If you haven't read hundreds of books, you are functionally illiterate, and you will be incompetent, because your personal experiences alone aren't broad enough to sustain you. Any commander who claims he is “too busy to read” is going to fill body bags with his troops as he learns the hard way. The consequences of incompetence in battle are final. History teaches that we face nothing new under the sun. The Commandant of the Marine Corps maintains a list of required reading for every rank. All Marines read a common set; in addition, sergeants read some books, and colonels read others. Even generals are assigned a new set of books that they must consume. At no rank is a Marine excused from studying. When I talked to any group of Marines, I knew from their ranks what books they had read. During planning and before going into battle, I could cite specific examples of how others had solved similar challenges.

This provided my lads with a mental model as we adapted to our specific mission.

Developing a culture of operating from commander's intent demanded a higher level of unit discipline and self-discipline than issuing voluminous, detailed instructions. In drafting my intent, I learned to provide only what is necessary to achieve a clearly defined end state: tell your team the purpose of the operation, giving no more than the essential details of how you intend to achieve the mission, and then clearly state your goal or end state, one that enables what you intend to do next. Leave the "how" to your subordinates, who must be trained and rewarded for exercising initiative, taking advantage of opportunities and problems as they arise.

In his book *Defeat into Victory*, Slim explains how he reinvigorated his beaten forces and outmaneuvered the Japanese. I was struck by how he directed units that were far away in deep jungles, even out of radio contact for days and weeks. Slim wrote: "Commanders at all levels had to act more on their own; they were given greater latitude to work out their own plans to achieve what they knew was the Army Commander's intention. In time they developed to a marked degree a flexibility of mind and a firmness of decision that enabled them to act swiftly to take advantage of sudden information or changing circumstances without reference to their superiors....This acting without orders, in anticipation of orders, or without waiting for approval yet always within the overall intention, must become second nature in any form of warfare."

Then, one day, I walked into the operations office. There before the blackboard stood my operations officer, chalk in hand. Lieutenant Colonel John Toolan, with his thick Brooklyn accent and a busted nose, was still playing in the rugby scrum in his forties. He often made wry comments, accompanied by a disarming Irish smile. On the board, in capital letters, he had written: C H A O S. Curious, I asked him what he was thinking. He handed me the chalk. "Does," he asked, "the Colonel Have Another Outstanding Solution?" Thus did Chaos become my call sign. Rumors later claimed that Chaos referred to my desire to inflict bedlam in the enemy ranks. That was true. But

the underlying reality is that my often irreverent troops assigned me the call sign. There's always a Toolan waiting out there to keep your ego in check, providing you keep the risk takers and mavericks at your side.

All Marines are coequal in their commitment to carrying out the mission when they face the enemy. I never thought, as a general, that I had more commitment than my nineteen-year-old lance corporals; I could see it in their eyes. Because a Marine's greatest privilege is to fight alongside a fellow Marine, we respect one another regardless of rank. Yet the popular culture treats generals as above everyone else. The Pentagon sends them to a special course, called Capstone. There they are instructed by retired generals about their new roles. The Vietnam vets put their stamp on us, reminding us that once you made general, you never had a bad meal and you never again heard the truth.

I stayed in the Corps to be with the troops. At the Pentagon, I did my best to support my civilian bosses, and I learned a great deal. My faith in our form of government and the motives of the civilian leadership and the Congress was reinforced. That said, I couldn't wait to get out of that job. I wasn't cut out for Washington duty. I didn't get my energy from behind a desk. I had the privilege of supporting men who cared deeply about the defense of our nation, even as the chorus for a peace dividend grew louder: Secretaries Perry, Cohen, and Donald Rumsfeld, Deputy Secretaries John White, John Hamre, Rudy de Leon, and Paul Wolfowitz. Whether or not one agreed with their points of view, their dedication was beyond question.

Throughout my time in service I'd always assumed each promotion would be my last. So I was pretty sure I'd conclude my career back where I started, among Marines. Then I'd go back home to the Cascade Mountains on a high note, having served one last time with the operating forces. Looking back now, I see how mistaken that assumption was and why learning and mastering your job must never stop. I had changed in the ten years since Desert Storm. My involvement in downsizing the Marine Corps, studying at the War College, leading a large regiment, and learning how to make

bureaucracy work for the warfighters would all combine to ensure I was ready for the tests ahead.

Biographies of executives usually stress achievement through hard work, brilliance, or dogged persistence. By contrast, many who achieve less point to hard luck and bad breaks. I believe both views are equally true. Following the attacks on 9/11, when Al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan became the target, I was the next up to deploy. As Churchill noted, “To each there comes in their lifetime a special moment when they are figuratively tapped on the shoulder and offered the chance to do a very special thing, unique to them and fitted to their talents. What a tragedy if that moment finds them unprepared or unqualified for that which could have been their finest hour.” Thanks to the Vietnam veterans, at this “special moment” I was prepared and qualified “to do a very special thing.” While six months earlier, it would have been someone else leading our Marines into Afghanistan, mastering your chosen vocation means you are ready when opportunity knocks.

When we met, General Farooq launched into a litany of grievances about decades of American foreign policy. I heard him out. Pakistan’s relationship with America was marked by disappointments on both sides. Smoldering resentment was the result. Once General Farooq was finished, I said, “General, I’m not a diplomat. I’m going to Afghanistan. I want to know if you will help me.”

Business management books often stress “centralized planning and decentralized execution.” That is too top-down for my taste. I believe in a centralized vision, coupled with decentralized planning and execution. In general, there are two kinds of executives: those who simply respond to their staffs and those who direct their staffs and give them latitude, coaching them as needed to carry out the directions. I needed to focus on the big issues and leave the staff to flesh out how to get there. Guided by robust feedback loops, I returned to three questions: What do I know? Who needs to know? Have I told them? Shared data displays kept all planning elements aligned.



Our combined staffs and intelligence analysts were piecing together the reports of OBL's retreat. At a glance, there appeared to be several routes leading east out of Tora Bora into Pakistan, twenty miles away. But in snow and freezing temperatures among sixteen-thousand-foot peaks, few of the rocky and icy paths were accessible. We had high-resolution photomaps detailing every twist and turn on the high-altitude passes, and imagery revealed only a few dozen passable routes. All could be kept under observation and under fire from well-sited, interconnecting outposts on the high ground. Again, history offered lessons. I had studied the Army's "Geronimo campaign." To track down the Apache leader in 1886, the Army had constructed twenty-three heliograph stations in southern Arizona and New Mexico to provide observation and communications. Whichever way the Apache turned, they were seen and cut off. Our own Marine intelligence staff back in the States had quickly provided computer-generated visibility diagrams. My staff plotted the locations where outposts on the high ground would have around-the-clock observation of all escape routes. The outposts were positioned so that each one could see another, thus providing interlocking fields of fire.

Here is how the White House correspondent for The New York Times described what happened: "Hank Crumpton, who was leading the CIA's operations in Afghanistan, brought his concerns to the White House, imploring Bush to send the marines to block escape routes....Bush deferred to Franks....In his desire to let the military call the shots, Bush had missed the best opportunity of his entire presidency to catch America's top enemy." My view is a bit different. We in the military missed the opportunity, not the President, who properly deferred to his senior military commander on how to carry out the mission. Looking at myself, perhaps I hadn't invested the time to build understanding up the chain of command. When I no longer worked for Admiral Moore for my ashore elements, I needed to adapt to a new Army commander with a different staff style. I should have paid more attention and gotten on the same wavelength as my higher headquarters if I wanted them to be my advocates. Deploying teams with massive firepower to seal off the passes seemed patently compelling on the merits. I waited for the call to come. But I was in

Afghanistan, and the decision-makers were continents away. When you are engaged at the tactical level, you grasp your own reality so clearly it's tempting to assume that everyone above you sees it in the same light. Wrong. When you're the senior commander in a deployed force, time spent sharing your appreciation of the situation on the ground with your seniors is like time spent on reconnaissance: it's seldom wasted. If I had it to do over again, I would have called both the ARCENT commander and Admiral Moore and said, "Sir, I have a plan to accomplish the mission, kill Osama bin Laden, and hand you a victory. All I need is your permission." In 2005, a New York Times correspondent wrote, "An American intelligence official told me that the Bush administration later concluded that the refusal of Centcom to dispatch the Marines...was the gravest error of the war."

On the other hand, invading Iraq stunned me. Why were we fighting them again? I was unaware of the discussions in Washington linking Al Qaeda to Saddam. There was broad consensus among international intelligence agencies that he possessed chemical weapons. The argument for invading and deposing him was based on preempting any future transfer of weapons of mass destruction to terrorists. Even assuming he had chemical weapons, I believed we had him boxed in with our daily combat air patrols and sanctions against his oil exports. Having served twenty years in the region, I knew that his hatred of Iran worked to our strategic advantage. When I questioned General Hagee, his response was straightforward. "The higher-level decisions are made in Washington by our civilian leaders, not us." He rightly pointed out that my job was to get the troops ready. The night after my meeting with General Hagee, I dumped my gear in my quarters, pulled books off the shelves, and began studying campaigns in Mesopotamia, starting with Xenophon's Anabasis and books on Alexander the Great—working my way forward.

I focused the division on only two priorities: getting ready to deploy and how to fight under chemical attack. I canceled all division-level inspections that did not pertain to those two tasks. Attitudes are caught, not taught. I left it to the seasoned leaders to schedule the events they considered necessary for those two objectives. I wanted all training conducted as rehearsals for the coming fight. My aim was

to create a restlessness in my commanders and make the learning environment contagious. I wanted them all to be asking, every day, What have I overlooked?

Instead of landing from the sea, my fully mechanized division would be moving along a few roads in seven thousand vehicles, in the deepest major land assault in Marine Corps history. I needed a method to display this challenge without disrupting their urgent training. Having studied the initial American battle in World War I, where traffic jams delayed and undermined our own attack, I needed a method to prevent that from happening. The Legoland theme park was near our California base. On his own, Clarke purchased seven thousand Lego blocks. The NCOs glued them to sheets of cardboard in numbers reflecting the varied composition of each unit and laid them out on our parade deck. Each commander then dragged his sheet of Legos across a map of Iraq marked out on the parade deck, in accord with our assault plan. We watched as dozens of sheets became entangled. Presto—we had identified the choke points from our Kuwait jumping-off positions to bridges deep inside Iraq, stacking up and resulting in massive traffic jams even without fighting an enemy. As a result of Clarke’s display of the problem, commanders had a graphic understanding of what they had to fix, which we rehearsed in the Mojave Desert.

On another front I was taken by surprise. In June 2002, General Hagee war-gamed the invasion. He identified the critical problem, one that had escaped me: it wasn’t breaking through the Iraqi Army or seizing Baghdad and throwing Saddam out of power. Rather, it was what we would do after. “General,” I said, “can’t we focus first on winning the war and then worry about what comes next?” “No,” he said. “What comes next after we depose Saddam will be the war. I’m getting no guidance about that. We have to do our own planning for posthostilities.”

The Siege, by Russell Braddon, described a British defeat in Iraq in World War I on the same ground I’d be fighting through. Of course, T. E. Lawrence’s classic Seven Pillars of Wisdom: few Westerners in recent history had achieved his level of trust with Arabs on the

battlefield. Biographies of Gertrude Bell, who helped create modern Iraq. I studied, again, Alexander the Great's campaign through Mesopotamia and Sherman's March to the Sea—I would adopt the latter's effort to always keep enemies on the horns of a dilemma, left or right, front or back. Marcus Aurelius's Meditations was my constant companion. His advice kept me dispassionate in some of the more infuriating planning conferences. I'm an opportunistic learner. I may not have come up with many new ideas, but I've adopted or integrated a lot from others.

Thanks to the Legos and the Mojave exercises, the units knew the order of attack and which had priority. Pilots and ground commanders had extensive discussions that continued following the formal sand table demonstration. Well-briefed aviators knew our scheme of maneuver and watched knowingly from the air as they aggressively supported what was coming next and the deception plan. Logistics officers were now alert to when we would be expending a lot of ammo or where we would need fuel, enabling them to anticipate how to keep us on the move. As far as I was concerned, young Warren Cook had come up with the most ingenious idea I'd heard in thirty years of war-gaming.

The CIA was sending a message to the enemy commanders: Don't fight us and we won't kill you. By bombing the hill, I would be sending my own message to all the Iraqi soldiers who could see Safwan from a great distance: Go home while you still can walk.

If there were no flames, that meant the natural gas pressure was building up. Lacroix saw no flames, and no workers moving anywhere inside the station. Was he now facing a bomb waiting to be touched off once a hundred or more Marines were inside? Acting on instinct, he ordered all his drivers to turn off their engines. Then the Marines listened. They heard a few random shouts and some half-hearted bursts of fire from a few AKs, but nothing more. It was the lack of sound that tipped Lacroix off. Three massive 1,500-horsepower engines generated the power to pump those millions of barrels. Obviously, they made quite a racket. But now there was silence. Lacroix decided that meant the station had been shut down, and any

buildup of natural gas had dissipated. He ordered his Marines to break through the wall and take control of the station. That was a good, on-the-spot call far down the chain of command. That small incident illustrates a larger principle. Lacroix consulted with no one. When a key indicator flashed a danger signal, he didn't pull back to call headquarters for guidance. That was decentralized execution. Based on understanding his commander's intent, Lacroix decided on his own course of action, and the Crown Jewel was firmly in our hands.

Every Marine lived and fought alongside others in his small team. For months, showers would be a distant memory. From general to private, we had no privacy, swapped for our favorite MREs and slept in holes next to our vehicles. Job, not rank, determined every Marine's family. I was reminded of a pithy sentiment Field Marshal Slim wrote in World War II: "As officers," he wrote, "you will neither eat, nor drink, nor sleep, nor smoke, nor even sit down until you have personally seen that your men have done those things. If you will do this for them, they will follow you to the end of the world. And, if you do not, I will break you."

"What's going on?" I asked him. "Nasiriyah, Kut...Why aren't you pressing harder? Why the hesitation?" I wanted to see a flash of fire and ferocity of tone. I hoped he'd say something like "We're just hitting our stride. In one more day, we'll be there." Instead he expressed his heartfelt reluctance to lose any of his men by pushing at what might seem to be a reckless pace. I was torn by his answer. I want officers to nurture a deep affection for their men, as I do—in my view, it's fundamental to building the trust that glues an organization together. Your troops must be confident about how much you care about them before they can commit fully to a mission that could cost them their lives. I also understood how difficult it is to order men you've come to love into a fight that some won't survive. But the mission must come first. Once you're committed, hesitancy in battle can expose other units to failure. I needed all hands in the fight, sharing the burden equally. On the spot, I relieved the RCT commander, a noble and capable officer who in past posts had performed superbly. But when the zeal of a commander flags, you

must make a change. Sometimes you order them into their sleeping bag, and rest restores them. In this case I believed that rest alone would not work. In good conscience, he was reluctant to follow my intent, which involved speed as the top priority. You cannot order someone to abandon a spiritual burden they're wrestling with. Fear of losing his Marines, coupled with his tremendous fatigue, cost the division an officer I admire greatly to this day. This was the first relief in combat of a regimental commander in this fight, and it was front-page news the next day. You can imagine what it felt like to be that colonel, his family, or his admirers. While I was criticized by some whom I respect, their disapproval didn't make me question my decision.

In the sweltering heat, our division chaplain, Father Bill Devine, gathered several sailors and Marines. They waded into the surly crowd, handing out bottles of cold water. It's hard on a blistering hot day to attack someone giving you water. Once they had shared their complaints, the crowd dispersed.

As an example of the disarray, we were methodically building the process for local elections when, against our advice, CPA told me to press for immediate elections. Swallowing our misgivings, we publicly engaged with tribal and local leaders to urge rapid elections, and then CPA suddenly reversed course, leaving us with egg on our face as we had to explain why we were now delaying elections we had been extolling.

In the U.S. military, we ride for the brand. If a civilian leader tells me to fight rustlers, that's what I do. If he tells me to round up wild horses, I do that. And if he tells me my job is to help a new settler plow his cornfield, I'll get off my horse, cinch my holster around my saddle horn, and get behind the plow.

As the ground commander on-scene, I knew what to do and how to do it. The generals above me agreed with my plan. But we were all overruled. I was unaware that Ambassador Bremer, in a teleconference with the White House, had argued that strong military action must be taken. General Sanchez, also on the line, described

President Bush as angry and as having said that we had to be “tougher than hell.” Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld later explained that he thought the United States had “to send a message that anyone who engaged in acts of terror would face the might of the U.S. military.”

A battle inside a city would inflict horrendous damage on noncombatants. I had studied the 1968 Marine battle in Hue City, Vietnam, and didn’t want to go down that road. Plus, an all-out assault would unify the residents against us. In World War II, despite horrendous casualties in German cities, the more we bombed, the more unified the German population became. This was the most critical objection I and the generals above me raised, but to no avail. Our perspective was lost in the cacophony of intense emotions evoked by the grotesque frontpage picture of a mob dancing around dangling corpses. General Conway reluctantly told me that I had to attack in force. I was to assault a city of twelve square miles, comprising hundreds of blocks of concrete houses containing 300,000 increasingly resentful residents and a dispersed host of armed enemy. Great nations don’t get angry; military action should be undertaken only to achieve specific strategic effects. In this case, we were in an extremely violent political campaign over ideas, and we were trying to treat the problem of Fallujah like a conventional war. I believed we had a more effective, sustainable approach for the situation we faced. But that was the order: Attack.

I had made my objections clear. While some might urge a senior officer to resign his post in this circumstance, your troops cannot resign and go home. They will carry out that specific order regardless of whether you are still with them. Loyalty to your troops, to your superiors, and to your oath to obey orders from civilian authority matters most, even when there are a hundred reasons to disagree. “Right, let’s get on with it,” I said to my network of commanders. While normally a commander would have received a detailed order, in this case the assault order was only verbal. We had to attack and drive out the terrorists, gaining control of the city. We’d start by shepherding out of danger hundreds of thousands of recalcitrant civilians. We broadcast repeated warnings for all civilians to leave the

city. As a quarter of a million people poured out, insurgents with freedom of movement were coming into the city. I made one strong statement up the chain of command: Once we assault, don't stop us. Inside the city, we would be engaged in a full-scale brawl. When the battle was over, the city and the adjacent major highway would be open, and the terrorists would be dead.

By constant repetition, the false allegations acquired plausibility. Although damage and death in the city were real, that damage was not difficult for policymakers to anticipate when ordering us to attack the city. Most noncombatants had fled the area, but not all. I was reporting our increasing progress, but that truth was submerged beneath enemy propaganda. In Baghdad, London, and Washington, the battle seemed endlessly destructive. I had lance corporals who could better express the nobility of our methods than U.S. government spokespeople in Washington.

Bremer called Generals Abizaid and Sanchez into his office. He had decided to halt the offensive. After a heated discussion, General Sanchez called Jim Conway, telling him to stop offensive operations by noon on April 9. Bremer intended to announce his decision over Iraqi radio and television before the end of the Friday services in the mosques. We had lost the information war. The President's envoy had argued first for an assault I believed was reckless, and now, with my troops in house-to-house fighting and close to victory, he had succeeded in halting the assault. I didn't see the order to halt coming. At the top level, there was loose, uninformed speculation that the attack might take weeks. My judgment, that we were close to crushing an enemy now in disarray, was not solicited.

I immediately headed for the meeting to find out what they were thinking. But on my way, we encountered a Marine patrol under fire. Working together with helicopter gunships and the patrol, we took out the enemy position. But I had lost time and arrived at the meeting late, sweaty and disheveled, passing a few journalists in the corridor. General Abizaid interrupted the meeting, courteously asking for my input as the division commander. "First we're ordered to attack, and now we're ordered to halt," I said. "If you're going to take Vienna,



take fucking Vienna.” I was repeating Napoleon’s outburst to his field marshal who had hesitated to seize that city. I expected my frontline commanders to speak frankly to me, and I did the same to my seniors. Silence followed. The several dozen officers and NCOs in the room were looking at the floor or gazing into middle space. All recognized that no one in that room, regardless of rank, could change the political decision. There wasn’t anything more to say. Although we were on the brink of at least a tactical success, we were stopped dead in our tracks. I had launched the assault emphasizing only one point: that I not be stopped. You don’t order your men to attack and risk death, and then go wobbly, stopping the attack and allowing the enemy to resupply and to recover his fighting spirit. He will be tougher when he next fights you, and your troops could understandably lose confidence in your leadership.

I knew that the underlying motivations of the policymakers were not malicious. Indeed, they wanted to do the best thing. But they had no grasp of the tactical opportunity or peril that their decision to assault the city now presented. They were spinning in a circle, without a strategic compass to keep them pointed in a consistent direction.

Reporters came in from Baghdad, so my words would sometimes make news. Language is a weapon. In formal circumstances, I’m calculating but I speak pointedly. There’s nothing to be gained by speaking obliquely about important matters. Brought up in the American West, I don’t hide behind euphemisms. As the negotiations turned into a kabuki dance, I warned my interlocutors: “I come in peace. I didn’t bring artillery. But I’m pleading with you, with tears in my eyes: If you fuck with me, I’ll kill you all.”

It was at this difficult moment that CBS’s 60 Minutes broke the story of abuses at Abu Ghraib prison, twenty miles east of Fallujah. Pictures taken by American guards showed Iraqi men lying naked in piles and standing blindfolded on stools, with wires attached to their arms. These graphic images repulsed us all and ignited a worldwide firestorm of political and press condemnation. Combined with the inability to sustain the attack on Fallujah, this did grave damage to the entire coalition campaign. The imposed tactical halt in Fallujah and

the egregious behavior of rogue guards at Abu Ghraib had cost us the moral high ground.

I believed I had let my men down, having failed to prevent the attack in the first place and subsequently failing to prevent a stop order once we were deep inside the city. It was a tough time for me, because higher-level decisions had cost us lives, but now was not the time to go inward. You must always keep fighting for those who are still with you.

In the last week of May, President Bush gave a speech at the Army War College, announcing a change in policy. Going forward, security would be a “shared responsibility in Fallujah....Coalition commanders have worked with local leaders to create an all-Iraqi security force....I sent American troops to Iraq to make its people free, not to make them American. Iraqis will write their own history, and find their own way.” I believed the President’s goal was idealistic and tragically misplaced, based on misguided assessments that appeared impervious to my reporting. Of all places in Iraq, Fallujah was certainly the wrong example for the President to cite. I had no idea who told him that responsibility for security was being “shared.” Not one American was left inside the city.

The press rightly plays a devil’s advocate role and doesn’t have to be right or accurate in that capacity. But whether you’re a general or a CEO, win or lose, you have to fight a false narrative or it will assuredly be accepted as fact. In the information age, you can’t retreat to your office and let your public affairs officer take the tough questions. My directive was to let reporters go where they wanted. Assign them an NCO so they don’t walk into a helicopter’s rotor blade, but let them see reality. I didn’t want a repeat of the “five o’clock follies” of the 1960s, when overly positive and often mischaracterized information from Vietnam was fed by the senior military ranks to an increasingly skeptical, then cynical press. If there’s something you don’t want people to see, you ought to reconsider what you’re doing. The most compelling story for us should be the naked truth about the reality of our operations.

As a consequence of the “wedding” story, a U.S. military investigation team arrived in my zone from Baghdad to determine whether I or others should be charged with murder. A military lawyer asked me a list of questions, one of which caused a stir. “General, how much time did you consider before authorizing the strike?” He knew from the record that the time from when I was awakened until I authorized a strike had been less than thirty seconds. “About thirty years,” I replied. I may have sounded nonchalant or dismissive, but my point was that a thirty-second decision rested upon thirty years of experience and study. At Midway, for instance, Rear Admiral Raymond Spruance pondered for two minutes before launching his carrier aircraft at extreme range against the Japanese fleet. Two minutes to turn the tide of war in the Pacific. That’s how battles are won or lost. The investigative report, issued weeks later, found no evidence that we had struck anything other than an enemyoccupied desert camp.

You can’t fool the troops. Our young men had to harden their hearts to kill proficiently, without allowing indifference to noncombatant suffering to form a callus on their souls. I had to understand the light and the dark competing in their hearts, because we needed lads who could do grim, violent work without becoming evil in the process, lads who could do harsh things yet not lose their humanity. By dropping in and getting face-to-face with the grunts, I could get a feel for what the squads were thinking, what frustrated them. Was there anything I could do spiritually or physically to help? My command challenge was to convey to my troops a seemingly contradictory message: “Be polite, be professional—but have a plan to kill everyone you meet.” A twenty-yearold corporal is in command of nineteen-year-olds and speaks only a few Arabic phrases. In an atavistic environment, his squad has to act ethically and without lashing out at the fearful and the innocent. But when someone shoots at a Marine, he becomes fair game. I wanted my lads to keep an offensive mindset. If fired upon, their job was to hunt down the enemy and take him out; I wanted no passivity or ceding of initiative to the enemy.

In late summer, I was nearing the end of two years commanding the 1st Marine Division and would soon be reassigned. I wanted to finish the fight, and I repeatedly said we had to clean out the enemy’s safe

haven in Fallujah. I was fed up with the dithering. I wanted to surround the Jolan market and search every building until we found and killed Zargawi, Janabi, and the other terrorists who were spreading mayhem. My higher command reiterated that we were not to go into Fallujah. My efforts to influence American policy decisions had fallen short. — I had never before left a job unfinished, yet I was leaving my troops facing a maddening situation: we were playing defense. American policymakers were still restricting necessary tactical actions. I had been raised by Vietnam-era Marines who drummed into me the importance of making sure the policymakers grasped the nature of the war they were responsible for. Don't get trapped into using halfway measures or leaving safe havens for the enemy. I believed I had spoken clearly. But I hadn't gotten through.

Situational recognition isn't unique to battle. Notice how often a college quarterback calls out the wrong signal, resulting in a broken play. To cut down on those mental mistakes, former Ohio State coach Urban Meyer devoted team meetings to hands-on simulation exercises, demanding that his players respond to confused situations. The goal was the assimilation of knowledge to take with them into the next game so that they would recognize the same situation when it occurred. Regardless of rank or occupation, I believe that all leaders should be coaches at heart. For me, "player-coach" aptly describes the role of a combat leader, or any real leader.

One event in particular drove that disconnect home to me. I was speaking at a San Diego conference, to a mixed audience of sailors and civilian contractors, including dozens of Marines. I knew they had seen hard fighting and were deploying again shortly. When asked about fighting the enemy, I spoke candidly. "You go into Afghanistan, you got guys who slap women around for five years because they didn't wear a veil," I said. "You know, guys like that ain't got no manhood left anyway. So it's a hell of a lot of fun to shoot them. Actually it's quite fun to fight them, you know. It's a hell of a hoot. It's fun to shoot some people. I'll be right up there with you. I like brawling." As I spoke, I was looking right at those young grunts. As S. L. A. Marshall, the noted Army historian, wrote, "It is by virtue of the spoken word rather than by the sight or any other medium that men

in combat gather courage from the knowledge that they are being supported by others....Speech galvanizes the desire to work together. It is the beginning of the urge to get something done.” By my words, I wanted them to know I was with them in spirit and expected them to act as warriors. They deserved to know that I respected and supported them. My remarks made national news and I was soundly criticized, many pundits and some members of Congress outraged by my apparent lack of sensitivity. Frankly, I was surprised and found their comments bizarre. Our Commandant, Mike Hagee, publicly stood up for me, saying, “Lt. Gen. Mattis often speaks with a great deal of candor....While I understand that some people may take issue with the comments made by him, I also know he intended to reflect the unfortunate and harsh realities of war.” Further, I never moderated my words or apologized. Knowing our enemies also read my words, I wanted them to know that America had troops who were not tormented about fighting people who murder in the name of religion or deny human rights to others. In an age when so many think they must guard their every word for fear of career-ending repercussions, the Marine Corps stood with me.

Also in the manual were touchstones to help young officers come to grips with the esoteric nature of irregular warfare among the people: Always try to partner on patrol with the local forces you are training. Conduct a census and issue identification cards. Get to know the local leaders, sheiks, and imams in your area of operations. Conduct yourself as a guest. In today’s insurgent wars, the vital ground is not a mountaintop or a key road—it’s the people.

Operations occur at the speed of trust. If, unlike Nelson, senior commanders don’t sufficiently train their subordinates so they can trust their initiative, then those commanders have failed before combat begins. Commanders don’t drive from the back seat. Credit those below you with the same level of commitment and ability with which you credit yourself. Make your intent clear, and then encourage your subordinates to employ a bias for action. The result will be faster decisions, stronger unity of effort, and unleashed audacity throughout the force, enabling us to out-turn and outfight the enemy.

I turned to first-rate minds on military transformation: Professor Colin Gray, Dr. Williamson Murray, Dr. Frank Hoffman, and Australian Lieutenant Colonel David Kilcullen. I consumed their writings and asked for their guidance. Eventually I settled on twenty-two books to guide me. I expanded my contacts with practitioners of strategic leadership. Most important among them were Generals Colin Powell, Tony Zinni, John Abizaid, Gary Luck, and George Joulwan, as well as others; statesmen like Henry Kissinger, George Shultz, and Newt Gingrich; and former Secretaries of Defense. They gave freely of their time. These three lines of effort allowed me to build a framework within which I could operate in the years to come as I dealt with transformation. At one point, it struck me as odd that the generals and statesmen I focused on were all retired. In a country that, outside of a few universities, no longer teaches military history, it should have come as no surprise. I was having to come to grips with a lack of strategic thinking in active diplomatic, military, and political circles—and the need for a renaissance in this domain.

I emphasized that our job was to keep the support aligned to their needs at the speed of relevance, so that it would make a difference to our troops in the fight. I didn't want requests languishing. I consider myself the most reluctant person on earth to go to war. But once at war, our field commanders must be given what they need without delay. We could not have them fighting a two-front war, one against the enemy in the field and the other against us in the rear, extending from Tampa to Washington. A former boss, Navy Captain Dick Stratton, who was held in the Hanoi Hilton for 2,251 days as a "prisoner at war," had taught me that a call from the field is not an interruption of the daily routine; it's the reason for the daily routine.

An oft-spoken admonition in the Marines is this: When you're going to a gunfight, bring all your friends with guns. Having fought many times in coalitions, I believe that we need every ally we can bring to the fight. From imaginative military solutions to their country's vote in the United Nations, the more allies the better. I have never been on a crowded battlefield, and there is always room for those who want to be there alongside us.

In our military, lack of time to reflect is the single biggest deficiency in senior decision-makers. If there was one area where I consistently fell short, that was it. Try as I would, I failed to put aside hours for sequestering myself outside the daily routine to think more broadly: What weren't we doing that needed to be done? Where was our strategy lacking? What lay over the horizon? I had fine officers working hundreds of issues, but a leader must try to see the overarching pattern, fitting details into the larger situation. Anticipating the second- and third-order consequences of policy decisions demanded more time than I was putting aside.

I quickly warmed to them and encouraged them to use their initiative, keeping me informed following my mantra "What do I know? Who needs to know? Have I told them?" I repeated it so often that it appeared on index cards next to the phones in some offices.

"Today, I can report that, as promised, the rest of our troops in Iraq will come home," the President said. "We're leaving behind a sovereign, stable, and self-reliant Iraq." The words "sovereign, stable, and self-reliant" had never been used by the Pentagon or the State Department, and I had never seen them in any intelligence report. After all we went through and all the casualties we suffered, I thought, surely we were not just giving up. "You know I say what I mean and I mean what I say," Obama said in the fall of 2012. "I said I'd end the war in Iraq. I ended it." Rhetoric doesn't end conflicts. With America's influence effectively gone, Prime Minister Maliki imprisoned numerous Sunnis, drove their representatives from government, and refused to send funds to Sunni districts, virtually disenfranchising a third of his country. Iraq slipped back into escalating violence. It was like watching a car wreck in slow motion. Soon the Sunnis were in full revolt and the Iraqi Army was a hollow, powerless shell, allowing the terrorists to return like a barbarian horde, exactly as the CIA had predicted. In the summer of 2014, the medieval scourge called ISIS rose like a phoenix and swept across western Iraq and eastern Syria, routing the Iraqi Army and establishing its murderous caliphate. It would take many years and tens of thousands of casualties, plus untold misery for millions of innocents, to break ISIS's geographic hold. All of this was predicted—and preventable.

We cannot have our grunts look upon their seniors as setting rules that in effect hamstring our troops while seemingly giving the enemy the advantage of a “fair fight.” Our commanders must be the coaches and team captains for our own team, building trust with the grunts in the fight. When the brass lose influence over their troops because their rules are out of touch, the discipline that binds all ranks together is undercut. Discipline, in turn, protects the innocents caught up on the battlefield, which must also be seen as a humanitarian field. We must sustain trust, from the general to the private, as the most effective route to winning battles with the lowest cost to noncombatants.

I sensed that I needed someone to stand back and scan the horizon. Twenty years earlier, during Desert Storm, I had first dispatched experienced officers to observe the battle and report back, outside my chain of command. They were my “focused telescopes” or “Juliet officers.” Now, at the strategic level, I turned to three accomplished, savvy friends: David Bradley, chairman of The Atlantic magazine, retired Army General Jack Keane, and my old mentor, retired Marine General Tony Zinni. I knew they would tell me without reservation what they perceived to be ground truth. Separately, they flew to Afghanistan, licensed to talk to leaders and troops at all levels. They returned and gave me their individual assessments of our counterinsurgency effort.

After a rebellion, however, power tends to flow to those most organized, not automatically to the most idealistic. Many Arabs wanted democracy. But the revolt was against unjust and unresponsive governments more than it was a pell-mell rush to democracy and inclusive government. I was certain it was unrealistic to believe that, in a region lacking democratic traditions or civil society institutions, the path to liberal democracy could be swift or free of violence. The French Revolution unleashed six years of terror and trial by the guillotine, ending with the rise of the Napoleonic militaristic state. During World War I, the Russians rebelled against czarist rule, but that ultimately ushered in Stalin’s totalitarianism and



the deaths of millions. Rebellions, no matter how idealistic in origin, can as often as not produce chaos that often leads to tyranny.

Understandably, a military-dominated Egyptian government fell short of our ideals. But had the military not stepped in in response to twenty million Egyptians demanding the removal of the Muslim Brothers, the specter of an implosion loomed large. Yet the Muslim Brotherhood's values made them our enduring adversary, because they were ultimately more restrictive of the human rights of the Egyptian people, a fact made clear by the public's overwhelming rejection of their rule. When we go abroad, our noblest instinct—to champion democracy—must be guided by prudence and humility: as difficult as it is to understand our own political life at times, hoping for a full understanding of another country's politics is outright fanciful.

Cooperation, too, occurs at the speed of trust. I don't know how many tens of thousands of miles I logged during the Arab Spring. Conversations with Arab leaders, civilian or military, usually began with a litany of complaints about American leadership. A common refrain was "We love Americans, and we hate your foreign policy." I think Americans are subject to more lectures about our shortcomings than any other people, because more is expected of us. I listened to my full share. My ironclad rule was to never imply by silence that I agreed with any criticism of the policies of my Commander in Chief. On one visit to a kingdom in the region, after Mubarak had been deposed, the reigning monarch began voicing harsh criticisms of our policies. "Your Highness," I finally interrupted, "my loyalty is absolute to my country and my Commander in Chief, President Obama. I will not agree by silence when they are criticized. I'm here to help ensure the security of your kingdom. I carry out the last six hundred meters of American policy. Believe me, I know how to do that, and I will do that. Where our interests overlap, your problems are my problems. And I'm here looking for the overlap so I can help." He sat back and stared at me for a minute while his counselors sat silent. Then he smiled and we had a long and extensive talk. There is no shortcut to taking the time to listen to others and find common ground.

I constantly had to argue with those in our government who wanted human rights to be the singular criterion of our foreign policy. We do not always live up to our ideals. The Arab monarchies and strongman leaders were not reforming at the pace our human rights idealists insisted upon. But those nations that had stood by us after 9/11 had records far better than those of hostile, oppressive regimes like Iran and Syria. Expecting countries with no democratic tradition, only recently coming out from under the yoke of colonialism, to embrace democracy at the level demanded by some in Washington was based on a wholly unrealistic view about the pace of cultural change. We had to be thinking in terms of generations, not months. Pushing change too fast could result in total chaos; better for us to quietly and firmly support a pace of change that would not incite a predictably violent, even volcanic, response—the opposite of what we intended. At the same time, I championed the values America stands for, even when it made our partners uncomfortable. If I wanted them to listen to me, I had to respect their dignity in public. But I'm known for blunt speaking, and I was very blunt—in private.

My traction inside the White House was eroding. It was no secret in Washington that the White House was wary of my command at CENTCOM and increasingly distrusted me. While I fully endorse civilian control of the military, I would not surrender my independent judgment. In 2010, I argued strongly against pulling all our troops out of Iraq. In 2011, I urged retaliation against Iran for plotting to blow up a restaurant in our nation's capital. In 2012, I argued for retaining a small but capable contingent of troops in Afghanistan. Each step along the way, I argued for political clarity and offered options that gave the Commander in Chief a rheostat he could dial up or down to protect our nation. While I had the right to be heard on military matters, my judgment was only advice, to be accepted or ignored. I obeyed without mental reservation our elected Commander in Chief and carried out every order to the best of my ability. In December 2012, I received an unauthorized phone call telling me that in an hour, the Pentagon would be announcing my relief. I was leaving a region aflame and in disarray. The lack of an integrated regional strategy had left us adrift, and our friends confused. We were offering no leadership or direction. I left my post deeply disturbed that we had

shaken our friends' confidence and created vacuums that our adversaries would exploit.

I have seen no case where weakness promotes the chance for peace. A Kipling passage comes to mind about a peace-seeking man (the lama) and an old soldier. "It is not a good fancy," said the lama. "What profit to kill men?" "Very little—as I know," [the old soldier replied,] "but if evil men were not now and then slain it would not be a good world for weaponless dreamers."

The Corps recognizes that its success comes ultimately from those on the leading edge. This was the reason I felt misgivings upon each promotion. While I could take some satisfaction that I'd met the standard of promotion, I believed I could not do my job well if I lost touch with those on the front lines who carried out orders at the point of danger.

If you haven't read hundreds of books, learning from others who went before you, you are functionally illiterate—you can't coach and you can't lead. History lights the often dark path ahead; even if it's a dim light, it's better than none. If you can't be additive as a leader, you're just like a potted plant in the corner of a hotel lobby: you look pretty, but you're not adding substance to the organization's mission.

If I were to sum up the leadership techniques I constructed on the basis of the Marine Corps's bias for action, it would be simple: once I set the tempo, the speed I prized was always built on subordinate initiative.

I used "touchstones" such as "No better friend, no worse enemy" and "First, do no harm," among others, leavened with history's enduring lessons, to guide subordinates who would face situations requiring them to make instantaneous decisions on their feet.

Yet it's not enough to trust your people; you must be able to convey that trust in a manner that subordinates can sense. Only then can you fully garner the benefits. From mission-type orders that left subordinates with freedom of action to declining to take detailed

briefs if I thought it would remove subordinate commanders' sense of ownership over their own operations, my coaching style exhibited confidence in juniors I knew were ready to take charge. I had also found, in Tora Bora's missed opportunity to prevent Osama bin Laden's escape, that I had to build awareness and trust above me. This takes significant personal effort, and the information age has not made this easier or removed the need for face-to-face interaction.

Leaders at all ranks, but especially at high ranks, must keep in their inner circle people who will unhesitatingly point out when a leader's personal behavior or decisions are not appropriate. In its own way, this too is part of command and feedback, for none of us are infallible. Further, the significant authority granted to military officers requires officers to practice command over themselves, and that is enhanced by maintaining a counterbalance to the obedience required to conduct military operations in high-stress environments. As a full general commanding NATO's transformation efforts, I had a Hellenic Navy commander who kept me on the straight and narrow. At U.S. Central Command with hundreds of thousands of troops assigned to me, I had in my command group a U.S. Army Ranger sergeant major and a U.S. Navy admiral who didn't give a damn what I thought of them: if they thought that I had made a bad call, with door closed they would quickly make their point loud and clear. I trusted them to do this, and they never let me down. Knowing that my own approach to decisions was not foolproof, they saved me on more instances than I can recall from walking into minefields of my own making.

History is compelling. Nations with allies thrive, and those without wither. Alone, America cannot provide protection for our people and our economy. At this time, we can see storm clouds gathering. By drawing likeminded nations into trusted networks and promoting a climate of victory that bolsters allied morale, we can best promote the values we hold dear and protect our nation at the lowest cost. A polemicist's role is not sufficient for a leader; strategic acumen must incorporate a fundamental respect for other nations that have stood with us when trouble loomed. In our past, America has offered the example of coming together to prevent or win wars. Returning to a

strategic stance that includes the interests of as many nations as we can make common cause with, we can better deal with this imperfect world we occupy together. Absent this, we will occupy an increasingly lonely position, one that puts us at increasing risk in a world that as George Shultz said, is “awash in change.”

It never dawned on me that I would serve again in a government post after retiring from active duty. But the phone call came; I went to Bedminster and then in front of the Senate. On a Saturday morning in late January 2017, I walked into the Secretary of Defense’s office, which I had first entered as a colonel on staff twenty years earlier. Using every skill I had learned during my decades as a Marine, I did as well as I could for as long as I could. Over the 712 days I served as Secretary, we drafted the first defense strategy in a decade, gained bipartisan support for a budget to implement that strategy, adopted unpredictable deployment schedules to confuse our adversaries, accelerated the destruction of ISIS’s geographic caliphate, and worked to reassure allies of our steadfast support. The other occupant of that office who’d required a waiver, as I did, for insufficient time out of uniform was General George C. Marshall. “Problems which bear directly on the future of our civilization cannot be disposed of by general talk or vague formulae—by what Lincoln called ‘pernicious abstractions,’ ” he stated. “They require concrete solutions for definite and extremely complicated questions.” When my concrete solutions and strategic advice, especially keeping faith with allies, no longer resonated, it was time to resign, despite the limitless joy I felt serving alongside our troops in defense of our Constitution.