

The
John F. Morrison
Lecture in
Military History



*Military Leadership
and the
American Experience*

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Gerald F. Linderman

Gerald F. Linderman, born in Marshfield, Wisconsin, earned a B.A. from Yale University in 1956 and served in the Foreign Service of the Department of State from 1956 to 1966, with tours in Africa and India. He earned an M.A. and a Ph.D. in history from Northwestern University in 1964 and 1971 respectively. Joining the faculty of the Department of History at the University of Michigan in 1969, he became a full professor in 1986 where he continues in that position. Professor Linderman is the author of *The Mirror of War: American Society and the Spanish American War* (1974) and *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* (1987), a History Book Club main selection. Professor Linderman, the 1988-89 John F. Morrison Professor of Military History at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, has received numerous teaching awards at the University of Michigan.

The John F. Morrison Professor of Military History

The Morrison professorship honors Major General John F. Morrison (1857-1932), whose contributions at Fort Leavenworth made it the center of tactical study for the U.S. Army. An 1881 graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point, Morrison had been a student in the second class at the School of Application for Infantry and Cavalry in 1885 and had taught at Leavenworth for one year just before the Spanish-American War. His broad understanding of troops and tactics developed while serving on the frontier in the 1880s and in Cuba where he received a Silver Star for gallantry in action against Spanish forces at El Caney in 1898. Following the Spanish-American War, he served in the Philippines from 1899 to 1904 and as military attache with the Japanese during the Russo-Japanese War. He attended the Army War College and then reported to Leavenworth in 1906.

During his six years at the School of the Line and the Army Staff College, Major Morrison served as an assistant instructor in military art, department chairman, assistant commandant, and acting

commandant. Morrison was a brilliant teacher and tactician. In fact, years later, his students would proudly declare: "I was a Morrison man." General George C. Marshall, one of Morrison's students at Leavenworth, went so far as to proclaim that "he taught me all I had ever known of tactics."

Leaving Leavenworth in 1912, Morrison held commands at Vancouver Barracks, along the Mexican border, in China, and at training camps in the southern United States. After an observation visit to France in 1917, he became director of training for the entire Army. He retired in December 1921.

The John F. Morrison Professor of Military History was established at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College in 1974, and a distinguished historian has been selected every academic year to hold this chair. Professor Gerald F. Linderman is the fifteenth Morrison Professor.

Gerald F. Linderman, the John F. Morrison Professor of Military History, 1988-89, presented this talk to Command and General Staff Officer Course students on 4 October 1988.

Military Leadership and the American Experience

Military leadership in this society in wartime presents, and has always presented, a problem of special severity. At the root of the problem is the relationship between the individual American and that larger society of Americans. Despite complaints in every generation that individualism is on the decline, by any comparative measurement—simply setting this society against others—we have not sought to express ourselves through the social group. Nor do we often accept that the success of the group represents, in some equivalent and satisfying measure, the success of the individual. Nor are we often willing to subordinate to the group our own interests and perceptions.

Let me try to draw a contrast. Johannes Steinhoff was a World War II fighter pilot, an ace, a *Luftwaffe* major trying to combat Allied air power over Sicily. In July 1943, he received from Hermann Göring, commander in chief of the *Luftwaffe*, this teleprinter message addressed to the German fighter aircraft forces in Sicily:

Together with [our] fighter pilots in France, Norway and Russia, I can only regard you with contempt. I want an

immediate improvement in fighting spirit. If this improvement is not forthcoming, flying personnel from the commander down must expect to be remanded to the ranks and transferred to the eastern front to serve on the ground.

Such a transfer was to be not exactly a promotion: these pilots would have been thrown against the Red Army as untrained infantry.

Göring's message was an unjust and outrageous signal. He was wrong. The problem was not "fighting spirit." Pilots were dying daily. The problem was that German aircraft had been surpassed technologically and that so many experienced pilots had been killed and could not be replaced. Steinhoff was furious, filled with anger and indignation. He protested to his own general, who in turn said to him:

Listen, you're not to take it seriously. I did what I could. I've been urging [Göring] to abandon the whole business, but then he sent this signal to the Air Corps. . . . And once again: don't take the teleprint too seriously. Do you promise me that?

Though still explosive, Steinhoff hesitated and then answered, "Yes, sir."

Immediately, however, he began to think of the disparity between the

force of his emotion and the meekness of his reaction:

I felt almost ashamed of my attitude when speaking to the general. It seemed to me that I had been an accessory to an act of treachery of which our pilots were the victims. . . . I had thrown in the sponge, simply answering "Yes, sir."

So why had he done it?

In this answer lay that trust in one's superior—a whole attitude toward life—which had been instilled into us, into our fathers and into their fathers before them. For us soldiers, it had hitherto been the only right attitude, indeed the only conceivable one. The obedience practised for centuries by the German soldier had always presupposed an unshakeable trust that the orders he received would be sensible orders and that the high command would search their hearts very carefully before sacrificing whole formations. And the many who were sacrificed died in the certainty that this was so.¹

"An unshakeable trust that the orders . . . received would be sensible orders": what a small part that precept has played in our military experience. It is not the American way. The United States has never possessed an unquestioning soldiery and has never even approached the idea of legions, those willing or compelled to expend themselves in the name of remote and ill-understood policy, as were the formations of Rome or

of nineteenth-century Britain in defense of the outposts of the empire. The absence of such forces has not previously constituted much of a problem for us; it has, however, become a problem—as yet unsolved—in those situations of limited war that have confronted us since 1950. When decisive military victory on the scale of World War I or World War II is not attainable, when wars are concluded by tortuous negotiations over elusive ends while combat continues, American willingness to sacrifice shrinks. As many of the men in Korea asked themselves, if there is to be no winner, why die for a tie?

The American refusal to pay much deference to military leadership has also meant that we have had no experience of a military culture, no military island within our own society on which values other than those of the society at large pertain. It is true that four and one-half hours after midnight on the first day of basic training, new privates feel themselves catapulted into a military culture utterly different from their life outside, but not many remain intimidated. American civil society so permeates military life, rendering a military isolation so difficult that military leaders have had to understand that orders in war must be framed not only for Americans as

soldiers but for those same Americans as civilians temporarily in military uniforms.

“An unshakeable trust that orders . . . received would be sensible orders”: from the Army’s earliest days, foreign observers have noted the absence of that confidence in Americans. Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben, George Washington’s inspector general, said of the American soldiers he observed, “One must first explain—and then give the order.”² And implicit in that formulation is the possibility that one’s explanation will prove unconvincing and that one’s order will not be obeyed. Von Steuben was not the last to discover that giving orders in the American Army was a lot less fun than in the Prussian Army.

Let me offer you, as a brief study of the difficulty of exercising military leadership in this society, the situation that confronted a company commander in the American Civil War. He had to understand, above all, that leadership was not his to exercise by virtue of the rank he held. Several factors contributed to his troubles.

In the Civil War, a captain did not ordinarily know much more than his men. Field Manual 22-100, *Military Leadership*, tells us that, in order to

be a military leader, there are certain things that one must be, that one must do, and that one must know.³ In the Civil War, it was vital that an officer be a person of the requisite qualities and that he do certain things to prove that he possessed those qualities. But what was he to know? The technical and technological aspects of war are so much more demanding today than they were in 1861. A leader today must know so much more than citizens at large that his expertise becomes an important source of others' respect for him. But, in the Civil War, few thought that warmaking required specialized knowledge; few thought that there was anything to soldiering beyond the firing of a rifled musket, an experience with which many recruits were already familiar. James A. Garfield entered the war as a lieutenant colonel, a nice place to start out in the Army, especially since he possessed no military knowledge—none. But he did not for a moment doubt his fitness for high command. "Pluck," he said, simple readiness to fight, was infinitely more important than "military science."⁴

For another reason, too, rank counted for little. Men entered military service determined not to be "bossed." The Southern soldier,

said one Confederate enlisted man, was "an individual who could not become the indefinite portion of a mass, but [he] fought for himself, on his own account." A Confederate officer observed that the rank and file "failed utterly to understand . . . why, as soldiers . . . they were not each and all entitled to be treated as free men." At the top, Robert E. Lee complained that "our people are so little liable to control that it is difficult to get them to follow any course not in accordance with their own inclination." And it was no better on the Union side, where William T. Sherman grumbled that "each private thinks for himself. . . . I doubt if our democratic form of government admits of that organization and discipline without which an army is a mob."⁵

Now, what could a Civil War company officer do in such a situation? One would expect him to issue the essential orders and see that they were executed and discipline enforced. Ah, that he could not do, because his was not a twentieth-century America, not an urban and industrial America, but a society of farmsteads and small towns. Nor was his a twentieth-century American Army. Units were not national composites, drawing, as they do today, men from all parts of the country. Most companies were

made up of residents of the same town, at most the same county, a situation that gave enlisted men a powerful leverage. In most cases, the captain had been elected by those in his company. Those in the ranks were his boyhood friends, and he expected to return to that small town to live in their midst and among their families once the war was over.

A lieutenant colonel in the 3d Ohio, John Beatty, decided that he had to discipline the men who were straying from camp at their whim. The court-martial charges he pressed, however, brought down on him, in his words, "not only the hatred and the curses of the soldiers . . . but . . . the ill-will of their fathers, who for years were my neighbors and friends." And his attempt to establish discipline simply aggravated insubordination. Some of the men drifted away for days, and those who remained refused to drill. When Beatty ordered one of the worst, a drunken and rebellious soldier, to be buckled to a tree, the whole regiment protested: "The bitter hatred that the men entertained for me had now culminated." Beatty faced them down; he drew his sword and told them that he would die before he would let them free the man; finally, they dispersed. But it was not over. At last, the colonel of the regiment

intervened, but only to plot with the men against Beatty; 225 soldiers signed a petition demanding Beatty's removal. Again, John Beatty persevered, but you can imagine how poisoned were his relations with friends around him and friends at home.⁶

Now, the Civil War did not, of course, come to a halt because the problems of command were so painful. It was fought not because armies were held together by external discipline but because officers and men shared a dedication to the same set of values—values that all were anxious to express in combat. The most important of them was courage—an assertive, aggressive, fearless courage. So, while Civil War camp discipline remained abominable and march discipline abysmal, discipline was best where it was most necessary—in battle—and here courage was the key. Men would respond to orders in and around battle when their own courage was at issue and when orders were given by officers of whose courage the men were convinced. It is this courage that, in the early years, held Civil War armies together. It was not ideology, not any notion of cause, not organization, not training, not the coercion of a courts-martial system that provided Civil War

armies the minimal cohesiveness essential to fight their battles; it was courage, invoked by officers who understood their society and their men.

The way a Civil War officer ordinarily won that essential reputation as a brave man was by demonstrating courage, notably, by calmly and coolly exposing himself to enemy fire. This was how John Beatty finally ended his tribulations with the 3d Ohio. In the Battle of Perryville, he ordered his men to the ground while he remained standing amid "shot, shell and cannister . . . thick as hail," a gesture that won over the regiment. "Now they are," he said, "without exception, my fast friends."⁷

As the Civil War officer built a reputation for bravery, he built credits that he could then use to challenge and to draw out his men's courage. He might employ gestures of reassurance, such as by casually lighting a pipe and strolling about as the enemy's bullets flew past, or he might shame his men with his own courage. A cavalry officer trying to stem the Union retreat at Chickamauga deliberately walked up to a rail pile far in advance of his men, standing erect and exposed to enemy musketry until his soldiers, previously "driven back by hot fire" of the Confederates but now

embarrassed by their timidity, rallied to him. He repeated the gesture several times until, in midafternoon, he was fatally wounded.⁸ Orders from such men were heeded.

If, however, an officer had not yet had a chance to prove himself or if his courage in combat remained unclear, he would continue to be tested by the men. They could not, of course, force him to thrust himself forward in battle, but they had other ways. They could purposely and flagrantly violate a regulation and then watch for his reaction. If he punished justly, he would win respect; if justly and cleverly, he would win even more. If, however, he punished harshly, he would be counted a martinet, would be despised, and would open himself to his men's retaliation. He would go unsaluted; would be mocked in company theater performances; would be targeted for derisive, sardonic cheers on the march; or would be manhandled in company snowball fights. And if matters were not repaired, he would be hung in effigy or treated to his own funeral:

[We] built a coffin of cracker boxes. We made a dummy of straw and old clothes, laid the corpse carefully in. We paraded around the camp, and after a suitable funeral, we buried it with military honors. Our new would be lieutenant departed the next day, never to return.⁹

At the extreme, he would be threatened directly with what in Vietnam was fragging.

Now, I do not mean to suggest that, in the Civil War, all the cards rested in the hands of the enlisted men. Soldiers were just as intent on demonstrating their own courage as they were determined to compel officers to prove their courage. Thus, the possibility that a soldier might be branded a coward in the columns of his hometown newspaper was a powerful deterrent. Also intimidating were the Army's public degradations of cowardly or refractory soldiers—the head shaved, the buttons cut, the coat turned, and the miscreant drummed out of camp as the band played "The Rogue's March." There were physical punishments too, and some of them—tying men up by their thumbs or binding them to the racks of battery wagons—were excruciating. And there were military executions. Soldiers, however, seldom reacted to such episodes as their officers intended—with the resolve to be better soldiers—but with anger and revulsion. Often repulsed by what they had seen, they simply walked away into desertion. Or their resistance increased. Sentries aimed high when prisoners ran to escape. Men selected for firing squads loaded

blanks, aimed poorly, or simply failed to pull the trigger. For one Confederate execution, twenty-four soldiers had to be marshaled to shoot a single man.¹⁰ Thus, all official responses to indiscipline had to be used sparingly and with the greatest care.¹¹

Now let me attempt to bring these observations down to our own day. Following the Civil War, the Army became a small frontier constabulary whose job it was to discipline the Indians of the Plains. In the process, it became a professional force—lean, sinewy, imbued with a highly professional discipline. That, however, counted for little in the Spanish-American War, when the Regulars were once again inundated by civilian volunteers, in numbers ten times their own. Officer-enlisted man relationships were again much as they had been at the outset of the Civil War.

The novelist Sherwood Anderson was one of those volunteers in 1898, one of those hometown-company National Guardsmen. He was amused that officers and men had been told that they should not mess together:

Ed and Dug [company officers, again elected] are all right. They have to live off by themselves and act as though they were something special, kind of grand and wise and gaudy. It's

kind of a bluff, I guess, that has to be kept up.¹²

Sherwood Anderson could not separate the company commander from the janitor he had known back in Ohio, or the first lieutenant from the celery raiser at home, or the second lieutenant from the knife sharpener.¹³ And they did not control him:

An officer might conceivably "get away" with some sort of injustice for the moment—but a year from now, when we are all at home again[?] . . . Did the fool want to take the chance of four or five [of us] huskies giving him a beating some night in the alleyway?¹⁴

So, while such companies were on active duty in 1898, fistfights between officers and men were frequent. Marching columns often broke ranks for sight-seeing. Orders requiring that water be boiled and orders forbidding the men to sleep in huts previously occupied by yellow-fever victims—orders delivered by hometown friends—were ignored. In 1898, for every soldier who was killed on the battlefield, fifteen died of disease.

But the Spanish-American War was the last of the hometown wars, and the power of command was strengthened dramatically by the experience of World Wars I and II. Here, several developments came into play. Today's America is no

longer fragmented, but integrated; it is a centralized society and becoming more so. Washington exerts a direct and powerful role in our daily lives, far beyond that which nineteenth-century Americans could have imagined. The Army, itself a much more powerful bureaucratic organization than it was 100 years ago, draws additional strength from its role as an arm of Washington. In the nineteenth century, for example, soldiers did not worry about dishonorable discharges. The small town, while still autonomous, did not care what Washington thought of one of its citizens. Today, within a far less personal mode of life, dishonorable discharges hurt opportunities in education, careers, and housing. They can affect one through life, and soldiers know it.

The power of command has also been strengthened directly by those technological aspects of war that now require a specialized knowledge, thus enhancing the influence of those who possess expertise. The basic unit of war is no longer only a man and his rifle, and we no longer maintain, as did Theodore Roosevelt, that to find the best military commanders one need only to look for the best citizens.

And, finally, command meets less resistance because war itself has become a phenomenon immensely

more potent and overwhelming than it was in 1861-65, and thus men entering the Army are far less confident that they can control their fates on the basis of their own individualized behavior.

Still, although the power of command has been made stronger by changes within our society and by changes in war itself, the job of command remains painfully exacting. We have always had a diverse society, but its wildly heterogeneous and assertively multiethnic quality today requires of the Army officer complex cross-cultural understanding of a high order. And that is made more important by the disappearance, in the wake of Vietnam and Watergate, of a set of standards, generally described as white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, and male, which, despite their severe deficiencies, at least identified a mainstream of American values that could be invoked by officers as a measure of common expectations. We appear, moreover, to be entering a period in which low-intensity conflict threatens us more than does general war. Low-intensity conflict will bring with it a severe maldistribution of sacrifice. A few will be called to do the difficult work. Deciding which few will, I fear, create problems of equity reminiscent of

Vietnam. We still have no legions, nor shall we ever.

The problems of military leadership today may not leave officers standing practically on their own as was their fate in 1861, but difficulties persist. Field Manual 22-100 says that the leader "has to focus his attention on accomplishing the mission while looking out for the well-being of his soldiers."¹⁵ Put in this easy way, that is a dream, for it neglects the central fact that there is almost always a tension, and often an opposition, between the accomplishment of the mission and the well-being of the men. And there is no escape. The tension cannot be resolved by simply moving in one direction or the other. A body dedicated to its own well-being may be a college fraternity or a businessmen's club, but it is not an army. Conversely, a high command pursuing single-mindedly the accomplishment of mission, while relying largely on formal discipline to set its relationship with the rank and file, will find itself, within the American social and historical context, without an army.

So, true leadership will continue to rest in accepting that tension; in understanding human beings, their special experience in American history and the nature of the society

to which that experience brings us today; and in operating an Army within the space that opens to perceptive people who understand such things and are able to keep in some rough and always difficult balance the requirements of the mission and the peculiarities of the American citizen-soldier.

Notes

1. Johannes Steinhoff, *Messer-schmitts Over Sicily* (Baltimore, MD: The Nautical and Aviation Publishing Company of America, 1987), 189, 192–93.
2. Dixon Wecter, *When Johnny Comes Marching Home* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1944), 9.
3. Field Manual 22–100, *Military Leadership* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1983), 1.
4. Allan Peskin, *Garfield: A Biography* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1978), 87.
5. Jacob R. Perkins, *Trails, Rails and War: The Life of General G. M. Dodge* (Indianapolis, IN: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1929), 82; Carlton McCarthy, *Detailed Minutiae of Soldier Life in the Army of Northern Virginia, 1861–1865* (Richmond, VA: J. W. Randolph & English, 1888), 8; Hilary A. Herbert, "Grandfather's Talks About His Life Under Two Flags," Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill, 112; Ella Lonn, *Desertion During the Civil War* (New York: The Century Co., 1928), 15; William T. Sherman, *Home Letters of General Sherman* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1909), 209, 211.
6. John Beatty, *Memoirs of a Volunteer, 1861–1863* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1946), 71–82.
7. *Ibid.*, 139–40.
8. Jacob D. Cox, *Military Reminiscences of the Civil War* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1900), vol. 2, 31.

9. Enos B. Vail, *Reminiscences of a Boy in the Civil War* (Brooklyn, NY: Printed by author, 1915), 113.
10. Charles T. Quintard, *Doctor Quintard, Chaplain C.S.A. and Second Bishop of Tennessee* (Sewanee, TN: The University Press, 1905), 83–86.
11. Much of this analysis draws on the speaker's *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* (New York: The Free Press, 1987).
12. Sherwood Anderson, *A Story Teller's Story* (Garden City, NY: Garden City Publishing Co., 1924), 284.
13. *Ibid.*, 281–82.
14. *Ibid.*, 282.
15. Field Manual 22–100, *Military Leadership*, 32.

