Leading in International Operations[1]

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The topic I was asked to address by the organizers of this conference concerns leading on international / multinational operations. I think the real question is: What makes an effective leader in international operations? I decided to approach this question very much from a psychological perspective, drawing on a number of different studies and experiences from several operations, also including current military operations in Iraq. I'm going to relate my remarks also to what I think are some key psychological considerations in the recent situation of prisoner abuse by U.S. Army military police at Abu Ghraib, because of the important implications for leadership in all kinds of operations.

Probably the first question that should be addressed is what constitutes an international operation? It seems to me that military operations are increasingly international in nature, and it's getting harder and harder to find an operation that is strictly unilateral. So rather than an either / or distinction, we can think about military operations as falling on a continuum from more- to less- international in nature.

Unilateral → Multi-lateral, Coalition → Allied, NATO-EU → International, UN

Unilateral: US- Grenada, Panama; UK- Falklands
Multi-lateral: Iraq, 1st Gulf War
Allied, NATO, EU: Bosnia, Afghanistan
International: UNPROFOR, Sinai MFO, Lebanon

So what characteristics make a leader more effective in international operations? In particular, what are the most important psychological attributes? My answer is the leader needs all the things that make him/her effective in any operation, perhaps with special emphasis on certain attributes / skills.

My short list of leader attributes is:

- Political awareness, skill, sensitivity
- Broad depth of perspective; deep appreciation for the complexities of life, sensitivity and appreciation for other cultures, and people who are different from oneself, values the views of others
- Openess
- Trust-Reliability-Authenticity
- Integrity and Honesty
- Resiliency-Hardiness
- Accessible -Approachable
- Good Humored – "Agreeableness"
- Knowledgable

Some years ago I did a detailed study of a very peculiar, highly stressful organization in the US Army… the CMAOC (Casualty and Memorial Affairs Operations Center). Located just south of Washington DC, this is the agency that handles all matters related to Army casualties, dead and wounded. It is a highly demanding and stressful operation, with a diverse staff of officers, NCOs, and civilians whose job it is to notify family members when a soldier is seriousl ill or wounded, and insure proper care and information is

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provided to the family when a soldier dies. There's also considerable time-pressure to manage tasks quickly, but at the same time not to make mistakes. Frequently, there is close scrutiny from very senior leaders and government officials who may be responding to media or family member inquiries or complaints.

Now, while DA CMAOC is not exactly what we mean by international military operations, I believe there are enough parallels to make it worth examining. For example, this is an environment marked by a very diverse work force, with time-sensitive mission demands, requiring great knowledge and skill as well as sensitivity, and often having to deal with various interested outside parties including congressmen and senior military officials.

In this study we observed and conducted interviews with most of the staff over a period of time, and also administered some questionnaires. A retired Army Sergeant Major was in charge of the agency, and he ran it very effectively indeed. He came to epitomize for me the effective leader under highly stressful conditions. Based on interviews and close observations of the key leaders in the CMAOC, I developed a simple model of effective leadership under stress. I call it the "Lange" model, after Fred Lange (now deceased), the Army Sergeant Major on whom it is mainly based:

A – Accessible (gets around, is seen, spends time talking informally with people)
K – Knowledgeable (highly experienced, knows his stuff, knows the law, and knows people
U – Unflappable (cool under fire, stays focused and helps others stay focused under pressure)
U – Uncorruptable (Integrity, knows what is right, and will do what is right no matter what… willing to challenge the boss if need be to do what is right)
L – Likeable, Warm, Sense of humor (Laughs)

Another model of exemplary leadership under unusual conditions, similar to Mr. Lange, was the Norwegian Brigadier General who took command of Macedonia peacekeeping mission (Able Sentry) around 1993 (including command of U.S. Army forces). He was widely admired and respected by U.S. forces. They told and re-told the story of how he took leave to visit them at their home stations in Germany, shortly before they were scheduled to deploy to Macedonia. That one act generated a tremendous respect and trust in a leader that the U.S. troops had never met before, and who wore the uniform of another country. Like Mr. Lange at CMAOC, he made himself accessible to the troops in an informal and relaxed way, laughing and chatting with them about their concerns.

I would like to turn now to recent events in Iraq because I think there are some important leadership lessons there as well that are very relevant to us today. In particular, I'd like to focus on the issue of the handling and treatment of prisoners by some U.S. forces in Baghdad.

In trying to understand the abuse of Iraqi prisoners by U.S. soldiers at Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad, it's important to consider two different kinds of influences: (1) Contextual / situational, and (2) Individual / personality. The findings and recommendations contained in the report of investigation by Major General A. Taguba (Taguba, 2004) lead to the following inferences regarding both situational and individual factors that were likely of some importance for the military units involved:

Situational / contextual factors:

- Ambiguity, uncertainty in the chain of command, and about who is in charge. The most notable example from the Taguba report is the conflict between BG Janis Karpinski, CDR of the 800th MP Brigade, and COL Thomas Pappas, CDR of the 205th Military Intelligence Brigade. Soldiers were unclear about who was in charge (cf. FRAGO 19 NOV 03, placing CDR 205 MI BDE in TACON of all units, including MPs, at Abu Ghraib). Similar ambiguities existed at subordinate command levels.

- Laissez-faire leadership… leaders not visible or actively involved in mission activities, not communicating standards, policies, plans with soldiers, possibly conveying a sense of complicity or tacit approval of abusive behaviors toward prisoners.

- Lack of training. The Taguba report indicates a lack of training and preparation throughout the 800th MP BDE, particularly with respect to prisoner-handling procedures and techniques, and including familiarity with Geneva Conventions.

- Lack of discipline. Uniform wear and standards of behavior (including saluting) not established or enforced.

- Psychological stressors associated with the OIF mission are not recognized / appreciated by key leaders. The Taguba report indicates these factors included "difference in culture, Soldiers' quality of life, and the real presence of mortal danger over an extended time period, and the failure of commanders to recognize these pressures contributed to the perversive atmosphere that existed at Abu Ghraib Detention Facility…" So, the Taguba report points both to the direct impact of psychological stressors on soldiers, as well as failure of leaders to recognize and address these stressors in some way. Previous research into psychological stressors during military operations has identified the following five key factors: (1) Ambiguity, (2) Isolation, (3) Powerlessnesss, (4) Boredom, and (5) Danger (Bartone, Adler & Vaitkus, 1998). It would appear that all of these psychological factors are salient ones for U.S. soldiers presently in Iraq. Ambiguity also includes uncertainty regarding who is the enemy, and who is a friend, and Boredom can extend to deep questions about the importance or significance of one's activities. Today I would add to this list another factor, workload or operations-tempo stress, reflecting long work hours, frequent and longer deployment cycles, and inadequate staffing that can result from limited resources and/or failure to replace individual losses over the course of a deployment. The Taguba report indicates that U.S. forces at the Abu Ghraib facility were "undermanned and under resourced", and that as a Reserve Component unit, the 800th MP BDE had no system for replacing individuals who were lost for reasons such as medical or having completed the required term of active duty service.

Individual / personality factors:

While contextual factors such as those listed above can be powerful influencers of human behavior, an extensive body of research demonstrates that not all individuals respond alike to the same contextual factors. Even Milgram's (1983) and Zimbardo's (Haney, Banks & Zimbardo, 1973) classic studies in obedience, conformity and social influence found that while many people conform to a surprising degree in inflicting pain and abuse on others, some individuals will resist social pressure and act in accordance with their own values and convictions about what is right. As the Taguba report points out, in the Abu Ghraib situation the majority of units and individuals, including leaders and soldiers, did not succumb to the psychological stressors or any of the other contextual factors or command failings observed. Clearly then, contextual factors alone are not enough to explain why some individuals engaged in, and/or tolerated prisoner abuse. To understand how the prisoner abuse occurred, one also has to consider the psychological – personality factors that can influence individual vulnerability, resilience and performance under highly stressful conditions. These include:

- Personality "Hardiness" (Kobasa, 1979; Maddi & Kobasa, 1982). Hardiness is a personality style or trait that includes a strong sense of commitment in life, belief in one's own ability to exercise control, and a perspective on change as challenging and fun. While most early studies focused on the peculiar ability of high-hardy persons to remain physically healthy despite major life stress, more recent work shows that hardiness also influences short- and long-term healthy mental adjustment to major stressors, including war-related stressors (Bartone, 1998; Bartone, 1999; Waysman, Schwarzwald & Solomon, 2001). In addition, some studies have suggested that leaders who

themselves are high in hardiness help to generate a more positive social climate and increase cohesion within their units, which in principle would facilitate more healthy adaptation for all members of the unit (Bartone, Johnsen, Eid, Brun and Laberg, 2002).

- Big-Five Personality Traits (Costa & McCrae, 1990).   Studies applying the Five Factor Model of personality have identified personality factors related to leadership potential and effectiveness in various groups, including military officers and cadets (Bartone, Snook and Tremble, 2002; Costa, Bartone, Herbst, Brazil, Kelly, Friedman and McCrae, submitted; McCormack and Mellor, 2002). Evidence suggests that Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, and Openness all contribute to more effective leadership. Multiple studies also suggest that agreeableness is related to "Transformational Leadership" style (Judge & Bono, 2000), itself shown to predict greater leader effectiveness in various groups (Bass & Avolio, 1994). More studies are clearly needed to specify the Big Five personality factors and facets associated with better performance of both individual soldiers and leaders in military operations. Resulting knowledge may lead to more refined selection and assignment strategies. For example, it may be that persons high in Agreeableness (including Trust and Altruism) make more compassionate and effective prison guards, less likely to engage in prisoner abuse (Paul T. Costa, Jr., personal communication, May 2004).[2] Similarly, openness may also be an important personality dimension facilitating greater awareness and appreciation for other cultures and practices different from one's own.

- Psychological Development – "maturity." In addition to "trait" conceptions of personality, a developmental perspective may also help to shed some light on how individual soldiers in the Abu Ghraib situation could have tolerated and participated in prisoner abuse. Kegan (1994) has developed a comprehensive theory of psychological development that incorporates cognitive, moral and social domains of experience, and describes how individuals construct their world views over the lifespan. In Kegan's framework, which is supported by multiple studies, most young adults define themselves largely based upon the people and organizations / programs / policies around them (what Kegan calls third-order consciousness, or stage 3). If this model is correct, this implies that most soldiers, like other young adults, are functioning at the third-order of consciousness, making them rather more susceptible to group influences for good or ill. In fact, recent studies on Army officers and cadets suggest this developmental framework applies quite well within the military (Forsythe, Snook, Lewis and Bartone, 2002). An additional implication here is that a stage four perspective – one that recognizes the value and legitimacy of different approaches to understanding the world – is the minimum essential vantage if one is to truly appreciate and respect cultural differences.

While contextual and individual factors are considered as distinct categories in the above comments, it should be understood that in many cases these influence factors will overlap and interact.

In addition to what has already been suggested, some broad conclusions can be drawn from the psychological research and theory reviewed above. One is that military leaders at all levels have a profound responsibility to establish unit social climate and conditions that support positive and ethical behaviors and interpretations of experience, as well as to quickly and effectively address any negative or unethical practices. Furthermore, as military operations and circumstances become more ambiguous, confusing and unstructured, there is an even greater need for military leaders who possess a mature self-structure, broad perspective, and strong "morale compass." Especially in circumstances where the normal rules or standards don't seem to apply, or where shared values come into conflict (e.g., loyalty vs. honesty), the "rules" must come from inside the self, not outside. Another way of saying this is that what those around you are doing is not always a reliable guide to correct behavior. Kegan's conception of meaning-construction would suggest that at a Stage 3 level, where meaning and indeed self-concept reflects an external socially-defined perspective, individuals would have great difficulty behaving in ways that run counter to the immediate

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[2] However, in other circumstances (e.g. open combat), too much Agreeableness may be a liability.

social surround. Kegan argues that over half of the world's adult population is functioning at a Stage 3 level. This may in part explain how human rights violations and prisoner abuse such as that at Abu Ghraib may persist in some circumstances.

If Kega n's position is correct, it once again implies that senior commanders and leaders must assure that external conditions and standards (including subordinate leadership levels) serve to reinforce appropriate perspectives and behaviors. For example, Taguba's recommendation that all U.S. MP units prominently display the rules and standards for prisoner treatment, including the Geneva Conventions, is very appropriate and important. On international missions, leaders must further assure that agreed-upon standards and rules-of-engagement are effectively communicated (with translation as appropriate) across all contingents. This also underscores the critical importance of having a clear understanding and agreement in advance of an international operation by all participating nations / contingents as to the basic rules-of-engagement and standards of behavior, as well as the chain-of-command and lines of authority and how violations will be handled. Without such agreement, leaders on international missions may have a "mission impossible."

While training and skills-development for soldiers is certainly important, the Kegan model implies that true development of the person to a level that permits a mature, confident, and autonomous world-view is a more fundamental psychological process, one that training programs alone are not likely to influence much. How to go about developing such leaders is a major challenge that needs to be addressed.[3] Psychological research also points to personality traits of high potential value to both soldiers and leaders in stressful conditions, notably hardiness and conscientiousness. The question of how to develop or increase these tendencies is also an important one that deserves attention.

The abuse of Iraqi prisoners at the hands of U.S. military forces was a terrible thing. It should never have happened in a professional Army, but it did. It is a stain on the honor and integrity of all who wear the uniform. (It's also a reminder of the dark side that exists in all humans, what Sig mund Freud termed the Id, that animalistic, instinctive side that requires control and management by society and the individual conscience.) The good news in the prisoner abuse scandal is that it does not characterize the vast majority of our soldiers and military leaders, and also that the U.S. military itself is actively seeking to uncover the truth and take corrective action. The bad news (or part of the bad news) in this incident is that all of those thousands who are serving honorably and well now ha ve an additional burden of stress to carry, all the moreso given the wide dissemination of disturbing digital photos and images. If the key to healthy psychological coping and adjustment involves finding positive meaning in stressful experiences (as I believe it does), then that psychological task just got quite a bit harder for U.S. forces currently serving. And while the U.S. military is quite correctly under a critical spotlight right now for these incidents, it is well to remember that the underlying forces involved are universal human ones which it behooves us all to try to understand better. Military psychologists clearly have an important role to play in developing this knowledge, and applying it effectively within military organizations.

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[3] Under the leadership of Dr. Gerry Larsson of the Swedish Defense College, a study of officer development is currently underway that explores this question using qualitative techniques and interviews with officers from Sweden, U.S., Netherlands, Czech Republic, Canada, Israel, Italy, Norway and United Kingdom.

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