Commandant’s Professional Reading List

- Dereliction of Duty Discussion Guide –

This guide is intended to help Marines think about and synthesize ideas from the book Dereliction of Duty. All answers or responses during discussion should be embraced as relevant, and open for further discussion. To the discussion leader: There is no single right answer.

Encourage the participants to read, from this book and other books, such as Fiasco by Thomas E. Ricks, Duty by Robert M. Gates, Supreme Command by Eliot A. Cohen, The Soldier and the State by Samuel P. Huntington, and The Armed Forces Officer. Encourage them to consider the ideas of others (authors and peers) and to push themselves intellectually.

Avoid leading the discussion group to a particular interpretation. Support continuous conversation. This guide does NOT support a lecture with mile-deep detail on every possible issue and scenario in Dereliction of Duty.

The point of this guide is to help the readers synthesize the purpose, perspective, wisdom – “goodness” – of the book with their own perspectives on warfighting, and come out of this session or sessions of small group PME with a better sense of history, identity, and purpose.

**Prep Work:**

a. Read Dereliction of Duty.

b. Watch the YouTube video at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-2AVCrbGwnE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-2AVCrbGwnE) of then Major McMaster discussing Dereliction of Duty on 30 April 1997. During his talk, he lays out some of the key arguments he makes in his book.


**Discussion Questions:**

1. What are an officer’s relationship and responsibilities to the Executive Branch?

Consider: The concept of civilian control of the military in the United States is sacrosanct. The chain of command flows from the President as Commander-In-Chief, through the Secretary of Defense. Nonetheless, civilian control does not equate to blind loyalty.

2. How can senior officers overcome biases and problems in civilian-military relations?

Consider:

Secretary McNamara and his “Whiz Kids” felt that Harvard Business School, operational analysis, and their experience during the Cuban Missile Crisis trumped the military experience of the generals and admirals. (pp. 18-20 in Dereliction of Duty)
In *Fiasco*, Thomas Ricks described the views of General Schwarzkopf and active duty Army officers as follows: “Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, Feith, and their subordinates lacked the experience or knowledge to make sound military judgments by themselves and were ignoring the better informed advice of senior generals. He [Schwarzkopf] said he preferred the way Cheney had operated during the Gulf War. ‘He didn’t put himself in the position of being the decision maker as far as tactics were concerned, as far as troop deployments, as far as missions were concerned.’” (pp. 82-83) It is worth noting that President Bush and Secretary Cheney arguably should have exercised increased oversight of General Schwarzkopf when he negotiated the ceasefire with the Iraqis that created the helicopter loophole that they ruthlessly exploited later against the Marsh Arabs.

Secretary Gates wrote in *Duty*, “Obama was respectful of senior officers and always heard them out, but he often disagreed with them and was deeply suspicious of their actions and recommendations. Bush seemed to enjoy the company of the senior military; I think Obama considered time spent with generals and admirals an obligation.” (p.574)

3. What does an officer do when he or she disagrees with civilian leaders?

Consider: The Truman-MacArthur disagreement during the Korean War. Review pages 36-39 in the *Armed Forces Officer* to aid in this discussion.

Also consider the more recent actions of LtGen Newbold. In an article in *Time* magazine dated 17 April 2006, he wrote:

“From 2000 until October 2002, I was a Marine Corps lieutenant general and director of operations for the Joint Chiefs of Staff. After 9/11, I was a witness and therefore a party to the actions that led us to the invasion of Iraq--an unnecessary war. Inside the military family, I made no secret of my view that the zealots’ rationale for war made no sense. And I think I was outspoken enough to make those senior to me uncomfortable. But I now regret that I did not more openly challenge those who were determined to invade a country whose actions were peripheral to the real threat--al-Qaeda. I retired from the military four months before the invasion, in part because of my opposition to those who had used 9/11’s tragedy to hijack our security policy. Until now, I have resisted speaking out in public. I've been silent long enough.”

“Flaws in our civilians are one thing; the failure of the Pentagon’s military leaders is quite another. Those are men who know the hard consequences of war but, with few exceptions, acted timidly when their voices urgently needed to be heard. When they knew the plan was flawed, saw intelligence distorted to justify a rationale for war, or witnessed arrogant micromanagement that at times crippled the military's effectiveness, many leaders who wore the uniform chose inaction. A few of the most senior officers actually supported the logic for war. Others were simply intimidated, while still others must have believed that the principle of obedience does not allow for respectful dissent. The consequence of the military's quiescence was that a fundamentally flawed plan was executed for an invented war, while pursuing the real enemy, al-Qaeda, became a secondary effort.”

“So what is to be done? We need fresh ideas and fresh faces. That means, as a first step, replacing Rumsfeld and many others unwilling to fundamentally change their approach. The troops in the Middle East have performed their duty. Now we need people in Washington who can construct a unified strategy worthy of them. It is time to send a signal to our nation, our forces and the world that we are uncompromising on our security but are prepared to rethink how we achieve it. It is time for senior military leaders to discard caution in expressing their views and ensure that the President hears them clearly. And that we won’t be fooled again.”
Did LtGen Newbold keep faith with the American people, civilian and military leaders at the highest levels of decision making, and with the junior corps of officers and noncommissioned officers of our armed forces? What about the timing of LtGen Newbold’s dissent?

4. What are an officer’s relationships and responsibilities to Congress?

Consider:

H.R. McMaster describes a meeting between the service chiefs (without the Chairman) and member of the House Armed Services Committee on pages 309-312. He concludes “With the exception of [CMC] Greene (and then only in private to a staff member), the Chiefs has decided to support their commander in chief by misrepresenting their own estimates of the situation in Vietnam.”

Although there is no command relationship with Congress, senior military officers have a responsibility to respond to questions from members and committees of Congress. These days during confirmation hearings, the Senate Armed Services Committee asks 3 and 4 star GO/FO nominees a series of standard questions which include: “Do you agree, when asked, to give your personal views even if those views differ from the administration in power?” Keep in mind: during hearings, questions may be genuine or politically motivated; the opposition party may seek to drive a wedge between military leadership, secretaries, and POTUS.

On 25 February 2003, Army Chief of Staff General Shinseki testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee and stated that "several hundred thousand soldiers" would be needed in Iraq to conduct stability operations after the initial offensive. General Shinseki’s estimate was considerably higher than the Administration’s. On 27 February 2003, Deputy Secretary of Defense Wolfowitz testified before the House Budget Committee: “Some of the higher-end predictions that we have been hearing recently, such as the notion that it will take several hundred thousand U.S. troops to provide stability in post-Saddam Iraq, are wildly off the mark. . . It is hard to conceive that it would take more forces to provide stability in a post-Saddam Iraq than it would take to conduct the war itself.” In March 2003, 145,000 troops conducted the ground offensive into Iraq.

As a result of his actions, GEN Shinseki was marginalized. Note: Despite reports otherwise, GEN Shinseki was not forced into early retirement as Army Chief of staff because of his comments on troop levels; however, his retirement was actually announced nearly a year before those comments. Shinseki served a full four-year term as Army chief of staff, and did not retire early. Since World War II, no Army chief of staff has served longer than four years.

Additional questions for discussion: Was GEN Shinseki’s testimony an acceptable form of dissent? What about the pre-invasion timing of his dissent? Should the Administration have listened to him?

5. Has the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986 solved the problem of service parochialism and functional issues with the JCS?

Consider: McMaster’s conclusion that interservice rivalry impeded the JCS’s ability to develop an effective strategy. Part of the intent of Goldwater-Nichols was to relieve the problems caused by interservice rivalry. Today, being joint qualified is a prerequisite for selection to flag rank. It is worth discussing the effects of budgetary pressure on interservice rivalry.

6. Should senior military leaders consider the broader political context in which military decisions are made?
Consider: In 1957, Huntington wrote in *The Soldier and the State* that “When required in his executive capacity to make decisions involving both military and political elements, the military man ideally should formulate his military solution first and then alter it as needs be on the advice of his political advisers.” (p. 73) During the period covered by *Dereliction of Duty*, President Johnson’s reelection and his Great Society legislation priorities significantly affected his Vietnam policy. Since then, there have been debates about the effects of casualty aversion on strategy. Consider also, the political debates surrounding the surge in Iraq, the surge in Afghanistan, the announcement of timelines, and how election year rhetoric shape strategic discussions and decisions.

7. Should senior military officers express their dissent in the news media?

Consider: Secretary Gates wrote in his book *Duty* “Presidents and Congress expect senior military leaders to provide their personal and professional opinions candidly and honestly. There is no requirement for them to do so through the news media.” (p.188) He goes on to write, “While I was secretary, senior officers greatly added to the inherent tension with both Bush and Obama by all too frequent public statements that were seen by the two presidents as unnecessary and inappropriate, creating unwanted (and sometimes unnecessary) political problems at home, limiting options abroad, and narrowing the commander in chief’s freedom of decision.” (p.574)

8. Was America’s entry into the Vietnam War and the manner in which it was conducted inevitable?

Consider: H.R. McMaster wrote, “The imperative to contain Communism was an important factor in Vietnam policy, but neither American entry into the war nor the manner in which the war was conducted was inevitable.” (p. 323)

9. Were the joint chiefs derelict in their duties?

Consider: McMaster certainly considered them derelict. It is important for the discussion participants to reflect on the actions of the key players in their time by filtering out the benefit of hindsight. Also keep in mind, President Johnson, Secretary McNamara, General Wheeler, and Ambassador Taylor played key roles in the dysfunctional civilian-military relationship.

10. What lessons can be drawn from the clearly dysfunctional relationships between the Administration, Congress, and the JCS during 1961-1965?

Consider using this question to synthesize the discussion generated by the previous questions.

*Dereliction of Duty* Discussion Key Take-Aways:
1. President Johnson’s insistence on building consensus and his distrust of the JCS and anyone but his closest advisers created an environment for flawed strategic decision making.
2. Interservice rivalry impeded the JCS’s ability to develop an effective strategy.
3. Senior military officers have a responsibility to provide their best professional military advice to their civilian leadership. Best military advice must consider joint options and not be limited to service specific courses of action.
4. Senior military leaders have a responsibility to provide Congress with their candid professional military advice, even if they do not agree with the civilian leadership of the Executive Branch.
5. Senior military leaders must seek ways to build and maintain positive relations with their civilian leadership.