Commandant’s Professional Reading List

- Why Read *The Mask of Command*? -

“This book is about generals. Who they are, what they do, and how what they do affects the world in which men and women live.”

While utilizing a case study approach to the careers of Alexander the Great, the Duke of Wellington, Ulysses S. Grant, and Adolph Hitler, John Keegan does not approach their leadership through a comparison to sociological traits, commonalities or artificially designed patterns of behavior. He instead classifies these men as ‘heroic’ vs ‘un-heroic.’ There is not pejorative in nature. He uses those terms to relate leadership style and national outcomes. For instance, he classified Ulysses S. Grant as an un-heroic leader due to the fact that the overall strategy and nature of the state was handled by political entities, or “elders,” as Keegan refers to them. Keegan uses this very effectively to describe the constraints and guidelines these leaders had to adhere to in attempting to implement military strategy. There are very good points made regarding the management of a military within a democracy vs. states with fewer public safeguards of civil liberties and the impact they can have on the military’s performance.

*Mask of Command* is an important read for officers entering the field grade level of responsibility as it addresses the foundational relationships between society, government and general. *Mask of Command* provides a very solid complement to the conclusions of Clausewitz and does so with an historical and cultural approach. Warfare cannot be boiled down to sociological equations and tables. As Keegan points out, “…I perceive that the warfare of one society may differ so sharply from that of another that commonality of trait and behavior in those who direct it is overlaid altogether in importance by differences in the purposes they serve and the functions they perform.” A general in one country may be a supreme commander over all national elements (Alexander, Hitler), or he may be strictly a military extenuation of government or “elder” policy (Wellington, Grant). While many would conclude the commander with more governmental power enjoys an advantage of options, Keegan points out how that may not necessarily be the case.

Keegan deftly explains the various pitfalls to both. More importantly, and what officers should be concerned with, are the imperatives for effectiveness that Keegan eloquently describes. For officers to be effective in their command, they must be aware of kinship within their units, (not familial relationships, but intimacy of working relationships), prescription, (the ability to convey the situation’s criticality directly to his men), sanction, (no multiple standards when it comes to infractions and punishment), action, (knowing the proper time, place, and method of military action), and finally, example, (confidence among subordinates that those who impose risk are willing to share it).

*Mask of Command* provides important intellectual considerations regarding leadership. It relies on both history and sociology to effectively describe the phenomenon of men getting others to do their bidding in dangerous circumstances.