Dereliction of Duty is an excellent case study of civil-military relations at the strategic level. The book analyzes the actions and decisions of President Johnson, Secretary of Defense McNamara, Ambassador Taylor, General Harkins, General Westmoreland, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the time period 1961-1965. H.R. McMaster concludes that the Vietnam War was lost before Americans assumed sole responsibility for the fighting in 1965 as a result of the “arrogance, weakness, lying in the pursuit of self-interest, and above all, the abdication of responsibility to the American people” on the part of President Johnson and his principal military and civilian advisors. (pp. 333-334). He asserts that the failure on the part of the Service Chiefs was the result of interservice rivalry and service parochialism. The Chiefs presented strategic alternatives based on narrow service perspectives and could not provide a unified front against McNamara’s strategy of graduated pressure. A key theme throughout the book is involvement in Vietnam and how the war was fought were not inevitable but were the result of deceit and manipulations between President Johnson and the JCS and the lies and obfuscations about nature of war.

Given recent history, Dereliction of Duty remains relevant to senior officers, colonel through general. Examples include: the president and his principal civilian and military advisors faced strategic challenges regarding liberating Kuwait and not invading Iraq (1990-1991), responding to the 9/11 attacks in Afghanistan (2001), the shift to Iraq (2002-2003), the shift back to Afghanistan (2008-2009), the NATO-led operations in Libya (2011), the decision not to intervene in Syria (2012-2014), and support to Iraq (2014). This trend is likely to continue. The relevance of this book is also illustrated in the following vignette. When the Head of National Plans for the Marine Corps briefed the Commandant in preparation for a strategy session with the President in 2009, he had a copy of Dereliction of Duty next to his briefing binder as a reminder of the historic significance of the advice CMC was to give POTUS.

While reading Dereliction of Duty, Marines should reflect on the nature of civil-military relations in the United States. What lessons can be drawn from the clearly dysfunctional relationships between the Administration, Congress, and the JCS during 1961-1965? Has the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986 solved the problem of service parochialism and functional issues with the JCS? Are senior officers better prepared today to face strategic challenges? In addition to the structure of civil-military relations, the reader should also consider the power of personality and the baggage of experience. H.R. McMaster points out that President Johnson held a low opinion of senior military officers. 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. On the other hand, the senior military officers were shaped by their experiences in World War II, Korea, and within their service. Finally, it is also important for the reader to reflect on the actions of the key players in their time by filtering out the benefit of hindsight.