

The Greatest Weapon is Creative Discipline

by Russ Barnes

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Creativity is one of the most consequential of the military disciplines. Creativity is not the only resource needed to win a war; but a war cannot be won without it.

The case is made for the role of creativity in the book, *The Art of War*, by the French writer Antoine-Henri Jomini whose title is taken from the more ancient book by Sun Tzu. Jomini posits in his book what he calls, "the decisive points in the theater of war" which he implicitly argues cannot be brought about without the practice of creative discipline.

The example of a great American hero--General George Catlett Marshall, United States Army Chief of Staff during World War II--amplifies Jomini's understanding of the essential role creative military discipline plays in war.

Creative military discipline demands at least four practices in order to achieve the decisive point in war. These military practices, also demanded by other creative arts ranging from poetry to management, may be summarized by the following imperatives and examples from the career of George C. Marshall:

1. Shift the context

Given the confusing details of any war at hand, one must be able to shift one's perception about what war is, what war means, how war is to be conducted. The creative leader will see in the war new contours and a shape different from any other ever fought. A scandalous new vision of war emerges from this perception. This "gestaltshift" then allows the compass for operational mobility--a making way for a thousand "points of maneuver."

George C. Marshall contracted for the construction of a controversial vehicle that required the coexistence of two apparent opposite qualities: the durability of a tank and the simplicity of a go-cart. The result was the Willis Jeep. He anticipated the dedicated spirit that might flow to the fighting cause by an enormous pool of human resources never before tapped for a war effort on a significant scale--the women who comprised the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WACs). He saw that an unprecedented air force was required to cover the geographical ground of a global war.

Marshall knew that unilateral national power was no longer the sine qua non of victory. Success depended rather on the carefully assembled and well-nourished alliances that were to become the backbone of a new kind of war. And Marshall was not fooled by the grand, dashing--even though, necessary--battles led by subordinates such as Generals Patton and MacArthur. Marshall invested rather in elegantly comprehensive strategies that quietly won the war.

Marshall demonstrated the same kind of understanding regarding his own career. He was in competition with Dwight D. Eisenhower for Supreme Commander. This assignment was considered the most important one in the most decisive battle in a war that represented a historic watershed: Operation Overlord, the Normandy Invasion. Marshall declined the assignment, remaining instead in Washington as Chief of Staff.

His choice was seen as a defeat by his colleagues. Marshall's understanding of the new war, however, was keener than most of his contemporaries. He understood that classic war strategies were correct. The commanding general must direct the troops from the highest hilltop overlooking the battle's action. But one's conception of a hilltop, Marshall knew, had to be shifted. The concept must be changed to fit the war. In this new war, the hilltop would not be the one adjacent to the battlefield. The hilltop would rather become a virtual hilltop. It would be located in Washington, D.C., where all communications could be intercepted, observed, or directed by the commander. The military principle remained the same. The context shifted.

2. Anticipate war's costs

War, like creativity, is not free. Every action initiated for beneficial results has consequences that incur costs. Every creative action presupposes destruction, expense. The exercise of grappling with limitations, paradoxically, liberates the creative mind. Providing solutions to the problems of supply is its *métier*. Sun Tzu, the ancient Chinese philosopher of strategy, wrote in his *The Art of War*: "All war is economic."

George C. Marshall had the courage to call attention to the downside dimensions that always accompany victory. At Marshall's first meeting with FDR in the Oval Office, the President proposed a standing air force of 20,000 planes and a production capacity of 24,000 planes a year. When asked what he thought of the proposal, Marshall replied, "Mr. President, I am sorry, but I don't agree with that at all." What Marshall knew is that it takes trained people, fuel, hangars, and maintenance commensurate to the number of airplanes to support an air force. Airplanes alone do not constitute an air force, and it's folly not to compute the costs.

Marshall was responsible for building an army and air force from less than 200,000 men in 1939 into a fighting force of over 8 million troops by the end of the war. To mobilize these troops to the European and Pacific theaters--along with the supporting materials of guns, ammunition, boots, food, and medicine--required the innovation of global distribution channels. Marshall meticulously budgeted the necessities for every soldier down to and including toothbrushes. He promoted the practice of awarding ribbons and medals for extraordinary contributions. When colleagues complained about the awards, Marshall did the accounting to show that the cost of a ribbon was ten cents.

George C. Marshall did not fool himself that World War II was exclusively about Allied altruistic forces fighting against the evil forces of Nazism. He knew that it was, at root, an economic war like every other war. When the Nazi's surrendered in Europe, most of the Allied leadership concluded that the war was over. Marshall, on the other hand, knew

there were battles remaining to be fought. He understood the principle enunciated by Sun Tzu millennia earlier that, "In the practical art of war, the best thing of all is to take the enemy's country whole and intact; to shatter and destroy it is not so good."

Marshall therefore understood that the real object of the war is stability and prosperity, not merely the ego gratification derived from winning military battles. A final purpose of war is to boost the prospects of the enemy himself. In his June 5, 1947 speech at Harvard University, Marshall announced a daring plan for the reconstruction of Europe, including Germany, which became known as the "Marshall Plan." In this way, Marshall proposed the final shot of the war. What finally needed to happen for the Allies to achieve "victory," according to Marshall's speech, was to establish . . . nominal economic health in the world, without which there can be no political stability and no assured peace. Our policy is directed not against any country or doctrine but against hunger, poverty, desperation, and chaos. Its purpose should be the revival of a working economy in the world so as to permit the emergence of political and social conditions in which free institutions can exist.

For this European reconstruction plan effort, George C. Marshall was awarded the Nobel prize for peace in 1953, the first soldier ever to receive that honor.

3. Communicate an intimate vision

The creative military commander must communicate the new vision of war to all constituencies entangled in the war effort--troops, allies, political operators, enemies, etc. The message should be appropriate to, and limited by, the recipient's specialized role in the war. A corollary: the successful warrior must be an "intimate," as well as a "collective," communicator. War itself gravitates toward collective truths, and these truths are not subtle enough to win a war. Creative solutions, which do win wars, thrive upon intimate dialogue between a personal inner vision and the happenstance of outer realities.

George C. Marshall, among all his varied functional capabilities as a soldier, was foremost an outstanding teacher. As a young man, he taught a radically simplified version of war techniques, suited to the citizen soldier, at the army schools operated at Fort Benning and Leavenworth. Later, as leader of a Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) unit, Marshall taught essential and personal skills to young men devastated by the Great Depression. These same men later became part of the fighting force of the United States. Building officer material by means of becoming a mentor was one of Marshall's highest priorities. He was a devoted mentor to Dwight D. Eisenhower and many others who distinguished themselves in war.

When the necessity for wartime propaganda at home became evident, many argued for the use of the Army Signal Corps to formulate the message. Marshall argued that the message about the purpose of the war should be placed in the hands of independent Hollywood film directors such as Frank Capra. This is an example of Marshall's understanding that the individual imagination is more compelling in its power of persuasion than is that of the government or of any other collective.

4. Take time to meditate

Regular disengagement from the hurly-burly of war's exigencies aligns operational details under the command of the new vision. Meditative time allows for the "falling into place" of war's unpredictable happenstance into the new order of war, its shifted context.

Strategic creativity draws its clout from a reasonable amount of leisure. Dr. Larry Bland, Director, Marshall Papers, at the George C. Marshall Foundation in Lexington, Virginia, has pointed out that "Marshall would have been a failure in an era of short-term management. The modern army and corporation make you work, work, work, and you are not allowed a large perspective." In the old army, officers were allowed large portions of the afternoon off to play polo, read, or do whatever they wanted to. Marshall took advantage of his leisure time by consulting history. It was from his meditation upon history that he appears to have extrapolated generally applicable lessons of war from specific events.

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