



## **GREAT LEADERSHIP IS TIMELESS: LESSONS FROM OUTSTANDING MILITARY LEADERS**

**Date:** November 26, 2021

*Disclaimer: This briefing note contains the encapsulation of views presented by the speaker and does not exclusively represent the views of the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies.*

### **KEY EVENTS**

On November 26, 2021, Dr. Michael Hennessy, Professor of History and War Studies at Royal Military College of Canada, presented on *Great Leadership is Timeless: Lessons from Outstanding Military Leaders*. The presentation was followed by a question and answer period with questions from the audience and CASIS Vancouver executives. The topics discussed included gaps in military leader development, valued traits of successful military leaders, and examples of great senior leaders.

### **NATURE OF DISCUSSION**

#### **Presentation**

Dr. Hennessy began by identifying the typical tools utilized in the selection of military leaders and highlighted how they can be useful but do not accurately capture the stress and burden of leading in difficult situations. He drew on the insights observed by Maurice de Saxe in his book *Reveries in the Art of War*, which discussed the relationship between experience and quality leaders, how drill training causes issues in times of extreme crisis, and the essential traits needed to become a successful military leader. These traits were exemplified by three historical military leaders: Sir Winston Churchill, Lord Horatio Nelson, and Lieutenant-General Guy Simonds.

#### **Question Period**

During the question and answer period, Dr. Hennessy defended the idea that people search for leadership in challenging circumstances. However, for a civil society, it is more than just the leader that needs to be considered, it is the

solidarity of the community that is important. In the present day, there are no individuals that are the epitome of the leader described in Dr. Hennessy's presentation, but some can be commended for their situational decisions that demonstrate the desired traits of courage, intelligence, and health.

## BACKGROUND

### Presentation

Dr. Hennessy began his presentation by noting that personality tests, such as the Big Five, examine an individual's openness, consciousness, extroversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism, but they do not address some of the issues found in military leadership. Although they are beneficial for self-awareness, they do not teach how to lead during a crisis, for instance, which is also unteachable through militarized drill training. According to Dr. Hennessy, the current evaluations and training for military leadership roles do not attain the vital characteristics needed to become a strong leader. Therefore, he argued, the current recruitment and training process of commanding personnel must be revised to create better military leaders.

Dr. Hennessy referenced the book, *Reveries in the Art of War*, in which the author, Maurice de Saxe, reflected on his experience as a military leader and the difficult challenges associated with the role. Saxe, an eighteenth century nobleman who died as the Grand Marshal of France, identified three key factors to the development of successful military leaders.

Firstly, an individual's experience is not linearly correlated to the quality of their leadership. Despite experience being a valuable teacher, an extensive amount of military training and battle experience do not equate to being a better military leader in comparison to someone with less experience. Instead, adaptability and the ability to learn as one goes is more valuable than a vast amount of experience.

Secondly, military drill training can be problematic as soldiers are taught specific and exact responses to situations, causing military leaders to be lost when facing difficult crises and novel emergencies. Thus, military leaders are forced to revert back to what they know instead of knowing what to do since that is how they were taught.

Thirdly, there are three essential traits necessary to the success of military leaders: courage, intelligence, and health. Courage being raw physical and mental

courage; intelligence being innate genius and ability to innovate on the fly; and health being the physical and mental robustness to carry on in hardship.

The traits of courage, intelligence, and health can be observed in three historical examples of leaders who demonstrated them in decisions made during extreme crises. During the Second World War, Sir Winston Churchill, British Prime Minister, delivered a speech to the House of Commons about fighting until the end. Dr. Hennessy pointed out that this speech demonstrated courage, and most importantly, motivated many to continue fighting despite the recent loss in Dunkirk and France being on the brink of collapse.

Lord Horatio Nelson, an experienced Naval commander, was involved in two major events: the Battle of the Nile and the Battle of Copenhagen. Despite the commander's orders to surrender during the beginning of the Battle of Copenhagen, Lord Horatio Nelson, who was second in command, defied orders and continued to fight. Dr. Hennessy noted that Lord Nelson illustrated the three key essential traits through his tactical knowledge, tenacity, and willingness to persist.

In addition, Lieutenant-General Guy Simonds, the youngest Core Commander of the British Empire, led the Canadian forces to victory by fundamentally redesigning his armored formations, artillery, and air support when many were unsuccessful. With his new plan, troops traveled in Canadian built tanks, while air support was utilized to break through German armored formations and two clever tactical operations were carried out. During the first operation, Lieutenant-General Simonds reached a seven-to-eight-mile breakthrough in the thrust lines, which were then used for a larger second operation where they fought to open Falaise Gap, leading to their victory. Part of his success can be attributed to his knowledge of tactics and organization, as well as his understanding of his limitations. His intellect and ability to innovate on the fly is what sets him apart from other leaders.

Dr. Hennessy highlighted that all three examples demonstrate courage, intelligence, and health through their ability to make difficult decisions, adapt, and take action despite limited situational information. Today, the recruitment of military leaders is reliant on education and experience; however, Dr. Hennessy emphasized that the courage and intellect shown in Sir Winston Churchill, Lord Nelson, and Lieutenant-General Simonds during pressured circumstances are not skills that can be easily found. Therefore, the hope is to find leaders with these distinctive traits within the wide spectrum of individuals recruited every year.

## Question Period

Dr. Hennessy noted that during crises, people search and depend on leaders to guide them; however, there is a challenging fine line between a strong leader and a greedy dictator. While many idolize strong men in difficult circumstances, more often than not, it does not end well. Therefore, a discussion needs to take place regarding leadership, social policy, and how to build civil society. In terms of civil society, this topic is one of the U.S. and Canada's weaknesses as there is little conversation about this issue. An effective civil society relies less on a single leader and more on the community and their cooperation with each other.

When asked whether he thought any of the modern leaders personifies the key elements of great leadership, Dr. Hennessy pointed out that former Canadian Prime Minister, Jean Chrétien, is one very underrated leader. He made two critical decisions during his leadership that essentially saved Canada: he turned down the national bank expansions in 2008 and he declined the U.S. President's request to join the Iraq War. Taking the time to evaluate the situations and making these decisions in the face of substantial external pressure demonstrates an incredible amount of intellect and courage.

## KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

### Presentation

- Military recruitment tools, such as the Big 5 Personality test, are beneficial towards self-awareness, but are not as effective in identifying skills that aid in leading in stressful circumstances.
- Extensive amounts of military training and experience do not necessarily equate to being a better military leader. Instead, adaptability and the ability to learn as one goes is more valuable than a vast amount of experience.
- Courage, intelligence, and health are key characteristics that make a successful leader; however, individuals with these traits are difficult to find.
- Sir Winston Churchill, Lord Horatio Nelson, and Lieutenant-General Guy Simonds are examples of skillful leaders who demonstrate the crucial characteristics of courage, intelligence, and health in their decisions.
- Military recruitment today relies on an individual's experience and education, but there is hope that great leaders who possess the essential skills of courage, intelligence, and health can be discovered through the wide spectrum of recruited individuals.

### Question Period

- When difficult circumstances arise, people turn towards strong leaders for guidance, but it can be challenging to find strong leaders.
- Leaders are an important factor in a civil society; however, the efficiency of a civil society depends more on the community than on a single leader.
- Jean Chrétien showcased some of the skills of courage, intelligence, and health in his decisions against the national bank expansions and against the Iraq War on.



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