

CSA reading list: annoying habits, bad choices and wooly thinking

By

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While the rest of you were watching college football, I was doing a content analysis of the last six reading lists from the Army Chief of Staff. I can say without hesitation that the most recent list (Summer 2017) is the weakest of the bunch.

Most annoying habit: Re-inventing the wheel again (and again and again...)

The various Army Chiefs of Staff issued six different professional development reading lists between 2009 and 2017 (Casey I, Casey II, Dempsey I, Odierno I, Odierno II and Milley I). All these lists are completely different- Dempsey's brief list consists of 26 books while Milley's massive list clocks in at a staggering 115 books. These six reading lists cumulatively contain the names of 240 different books yet not one single book shows up on every list and only one book (the second edition of *"Makers of Modern Strategy"*) shows up on five of the six lists. In fact, eighty percent of the books on the most recent list are not mentioned on any of the previous lists. All these Chiefs of Staff should have the same concept of Army professionalism so why are their professional development reading lists so strikingly different? Following the suggestions of a professional reading list should not be the intellectual equivalent of a dog chasing a tennis ball.

Most annoying habit (runner-up): Chief of Staff reading lists never take advantage of Army resources. In the 2017 reading list, GEN Milley wanted to focus attention on George Marshall. Great idea. Marshall is a wonderful model of military professionalism.

Unfortunately, the reading list directs people to Forrest Pogue's four-volume (!) biography of Marshall. I read all four volumes this summer and it was painful. What is odd about this choice is that the Army has a perfectly good 95-page monograph on Marshall and strategic leadership (written by an Army colonel at the Strategic Studies Institute of the Army War College in 1993) that would serve the same purpose.

Bad Choices:

- The 2017 list has more books about Classical Greece than it has about Vietnam.
- Guess which conflict makes Army generals more comfortable - World War II (14 books) or Vietnam (1 book)?
- Four of the most popular books on previous reading lists were *Face of Battle* (Keegan), *Battle Cry of Freedom* (McPherson), *Supplying War* (Van Creveld) and *We Were Soldiers Once... And Young* (Moore & Galloway). None of these books are on the 2017 reading list. It is hard to believe that the 2017 list didn't have room for these classics when it had room for five different books on various aspects of the Wehrmacht (all written by the same author).

Wooly thinking:

- 1) There is an entire field of human thought devoted to planning, organizing, leading and controlling organizations. It is called the field of management. As an academic major, management is the most popular in American universities (and coincidentally, the most popular academic major, by far, among cadets at West Point). One would think that people who are responsible for planning, organizing, leading and controlling one of the largest organizations on Earth would be at least a little interested in the field of management. The 2017 reading list shows otherwise. Despite containing 115 books, not one single one of these books is from the field of management. Michael Porter, anyone? Clayton Christensen? Jim Collins? Bueller?
- 2) *If you develop a paradigm, use the paradigm.* Over the last decade or so, the Army has spent a lot of effort defining professionalism (see a 2010 publication of the Strategic Studies Institute of the Army War College entitled “*The Army Officers’ Professional Ethic: Past, Present and Future*”). This effort is valuable because it is not possible to have an effective leader development program unless you have a clear mental image of a leader. Officers are supposed to exemplify four roles: warriors, servants of the nation, leaders of character and members of the profession of arms. It is not enough to exemplify one or two of these roles; an Army officer needs to exemplify all of them. The book choices of the 2017 reading list do not reflect this paradigm. For example, there is not one book on ethical leadership. Almost one quarter of the 115 books on this list are devoted to non-military global/regional topics. They range from Khanna’s “*Connectography*” (subtitled: Mapping the Future of Global Civilization) to Morgenthau’s venerable “*Politics Among Nations*” (which I used to teach international relations to cadets at West Point more than 25 years ago). It’s as if this were a reading list for students at Georgetown’s School of Foreign Service (which I was, once upon a time).

Final note: a not unreasonable expectation. Every single one of the 115 book descriptions on the 2017 list sounds like it was written by a teaching assistant for an undergraduate syllabus. Just once, I would like to read a book description on the CSA reading list that was written by a senior Army leader who says something like “*I first read the following book as a lieutenant and it fundamentally changed my ideas on (fill in the blank). I reread it on a regular basis and learn something new every time.*” I would make time to read that book.