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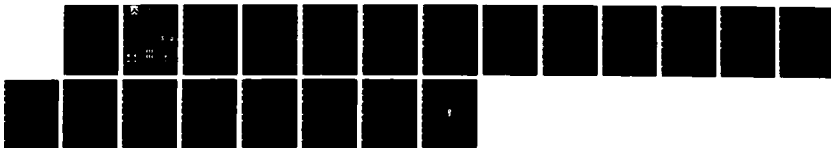
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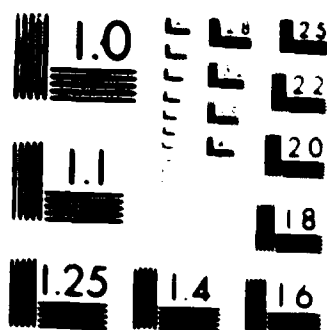
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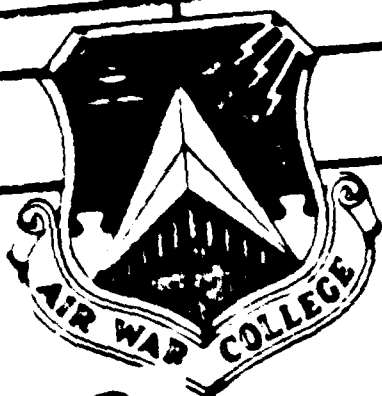
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## RESEARCH REPORT

No. AU-AWC-86-207

CHARISMA AND POWER:  
AN X-FACTOR IN LEADERSHIP?

By COLONEL JAY A. SWANDER

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INFORMATION

Air War College

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CHARISMA AND POWER:  
AN X-FACTOR IN LEADERSHIP?

by

Jay A. Swander

Colonel, USAF

A RESEARCH REPORT SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY  
IN  
FULFILLMENT OF THE RESEARCH  
REQUIREMENT

Research Advisor: Lieutenant Colonel Robert F. Fowler

Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama

May 1986

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AIR WAR COLLEGE RESEARCH ABSTRACT

TITLE: CHARISMA AND POWER: AN X-FACTOR IN LEADERSHIP?

AUTHOR: Jay A. Swander, Colonel, USAF

Discusses the possible relationship between the two elusive phenomena of charisma and power and whether they are important factors that every military leader must be cognizant of if he or she is to be successful. An in-depth analysis of "charisma--the mystique" includes historical background, delves deeply into the intricacies of the psychological aspects that occur between the leader and his followers, and discusses when and how the charismatic leader functions best in an organization. A discussion of "power--the role it plays" in leadership follows and is quite straightforward in detailing that leadership is, plain and simple, the exercise of power. Power behavior and power relations between the leader and follower are scrutinized. Some very strong considerations are drawn about the two concepts and whether there is an advantage from understanding these two phenomena for the military leader.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Colonel Jay A. Swander has been a leader in the diversified Security Police career field since 1964. He was thrust into his first squadron commander leadership position for over 300 personnel as a First Lieutenant at Langley AFB, VA, in January 1967, due to the conflict in Southeast Asia. Since then he has succeeded at all organizational levels; to include, a joint-level Department of Defense assignment, a three and one-half year Air Staff tour as an Action Officer, and base level Chief, Security Police and squadron commander experience at six Air Force installations in four different major air commands. One of his squadrons was selected the best Security Police unit in Air Force Systems Command in 1975, while another garnered best in Tactical Air Command honors in 1981, 1982, and 1983, as well as being selected runner-up for best in USAF competition in 1981. He was awarded the Bronze Star for his actions as Operations Officer for a 500-man unit at Phu Cat AB, RVN; and has received the Meritorious Service Medal (three oakleaf clusters), Air Force Commendation Medal (one oakleaf cluster), and the Air Force Outstanding Unit Award (valor device, and one oakleaf cluster). He received his Bachelor of Science degree from San Jose State University, and has done graduate work at the University of Southern California

and the University of Georgia in Industrial Relations and Personnel Management, Psychology, Public Administration and Corrections Management. He graduated from the Squadron Officers' School in 1972, and completed the Air Command and Staff College in 1974. Colonel Swander is a graduate of the Air War College, Class of 1986.



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## CHARISMA AND POWER:

### AN X-FACTOR IN LEADERSHIP?

"The desire for power is clearly allied to the desire for glory, and usually the easiest way to obtain glory is to obtain power."

Lord Bertrand Russell

### INTRODUCTION

One of the basic principles postulated for an officer to achieve any success within a military organization is to be aware of the essential qualities of good leadership and how they relate to each other; for example, strength of character, initiative, integrity, responsibility, courage, knowledge, discipline, morale, and communication to name a few. Of growing concern to this observer is that these various qualities of leadership continue to be analyzed and studied with new, and often, profound changing relationships being proposed with no single, true answer for success surfacing. During my research and study of leadership, there are two phenomena that are also discussed, but are rarely mentioned as being related to any significant degree: that is the often controversial concept of charisma, and the fairly new concept of power. Are these just abstract concepts, or are they important factors that every military leader must be cognizant of if he or she is to be successful in the future. At first blush we can all attest to the fact that charisma exists because we have seen it at work, either firsthand or from a

distance, and those military leaders that are said to have it have actually become more powerful than their contemporaries by accomplishing the tough missions and successfully leading military forces during the ultimate military challenge: armed conflict.

In this paper I will present a somewhat different interpretation of the two provocative phenomena of charisma and power. It is not intended as a substitute for all other thinking on leadership, but rather a reflection from one military leader to others that there may be a correlation, or at least some definite relationship that should be understood when assessing military leadership. The first step is to give some initial framework to these two words, because even a casual perusal of leadership literature reveals that the terms are often elusive. According to the New World Dictionary these are the accepted definitions:

**Charisma**--a special quality that captures the popular imagination and inspires unswerving allegiance and devotion apart from an established status.

**Power**--great ability to act, or affect strongly; having great influence, force or authority.

In putting some shape to a possible relationship, I will briefly explore the two concepts separately, and then provide some considerations that I believe may embody the essence of both charisma and power.

## CHARISMA--THE MYSTIQUE

"Charisma (the Greek word for gift) has become like the weather, something about which we can talk but not do much."

(1:35) In and out of the military organization nearly every leader with some marked popular appeal is now indiscriminately tapped with this mystical word. Max Weber first adapted the term charisma from early Christianity thinking and used it in his initial discussion of his classifications of authority (traditional, legal, and charismatic) and proposed that it rested on "devotion to the specific sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person." (3:238) Other writers have redefined charisma, without departing from Weber's intrinsic intention, to "refer to any combination of usual qualities in an individual which are attractive to others and result in special attachments, if not devotion, to his leadership." (3:256) We have all experienced, or at least observed, the physical manifestations of a charismatic leader's appeal when we have seen the audience he is addressing either jumping up and down in anticipation or almost in some form of hypnotic trance. I have found myself awestruck with the feeling that there was some sort of human scent present that permeated the audience to the point where they seemed to be almost totally in love and one with the leader. He loomed larger than life to them and seemed to be instilled with a

total sense of what he wanted to accomplish; he and his mission were one and the same.

"A significant aspect of charisma is that the extraordinary qualities of the leader are purely subjective, resting on the perception of his followers, and . . . what is important . . . is how the leader is regarded by the subjects of his charismatic authority." (4:107) It is often suggested that the charisma of a leader may depend upon his being assimilated in the thoughts and feelings of the followers, as previously mentioned, much like a sacred figure or hero, and that he be able "to communicate to his followers a sense of continuity between himself and his mission and their legendary heroes and their missions." (5:6) In this charismatic relationship, "once it has been achieved, the leader is relatively immune from any constraints as long as the relationship prevails . . . and involves the abdication of choice and of judgment by the followers." (6:6) To be more succinct, "in the eyes of a true follower of a charismatic leader . . . the fact that the leader says a given thing is right makes it right." (7:350) This is a classic example of describing the idea of "object surrender, where the followers hand over their egos to the leader and remain susceptible to his commands and directives. They submit in order to preserve their love of the leader, and whatever esteem they experience comes from the sense of devotion to the ideals and causes

established in the leader's image." (3:260) The charismatic leader is likened "to a prince with unrestrained power for good or evil as long as he maintains the people's goodwill."

(1:107) While his charisma may be in the eye of the beholder, the charismatic leader "actively shapes and enlarges his influence through his own energy, self-confidence, assertiveness, ambition and seizing of opportunities."

(1:40)

The charismatic leader most often appears in times of great distress and acute crisis in a society, culture or organization. Charisma normally carries with it "a challenge to the older order, a break with continuity, a risky adventure, a continual movement, ferment and change . . . charisma often arises when traditional authority and legal, rational, and bureaucratic means have failed . . . people become 'charisma hungry' . . . due to the decline of old values and rituals, shocks to the culture, growing fears, anxieties, and identity crises." (1:37-38) Members of most military organizations have found themselves in similar situations where there was a leadership vacuum and a drifting instability in their unit, and have actively sought more meaning for their work; and searched for a new enthusiastic, emotional involvement and commitment to group objectives. If a leader arrives and is perceived to have charisma, "he generates excitement by creating a common vision, making supporters feel stronger, originating valued

opportunities, inspiring loyalty to the organization, commanding respect from everyone . . . he has a special gift of seeing what is really important, and a sense of mission."

(1:43) The followers can almost recognize him on sight because of the glow of confidence his inner light gives him and they feel extremely good by just being near their leader. They firmly believe that he is more dynamic than any of their other leaders and that he can lead them to overcome any obstacle; therefore, they work harder and longer because they are truly more confident and inspired with a contagious enthusiasm that they will succeed in their assigned mission. While the charismatic leader has become more powerful due to his followers perceptions, the followers are also "apparently strengthened and uplifted; they feel more powerful, rather than less powerful or submissive." (8:259)

#### POWER--THE ROLE IT PLAYS

In any discussion of leadership and the concept of power the military leader needs to realize, plain and simple, that leadership is the exercise of power. The one salient point I have been able to deduce from my research is that "power is a fact, and so is the desire of men for it." (9:3) Lord Bertrand Russell pointed out almost fifty years ago that the desire for power was closely allied to the desire for glory, and usually the easiest way to obtain glory was to obtain power; and since these two motives usually prompted the

same actions, they could be considered as one for most practical purposes. (10:9) For this discussion of the concept of power, I believe an additional refinement of our initial definition is appropriate and should mention that "power is the potential individuals have to affect other people's behavior . . . it is the capacity to modify, to channel, and to persuade another person to do something he would not necessarily have done had he not been influenced to do so." (11:44) Power cannot be seen as a simple property, but a definite kind of human relationship process that can be shaped by the leader, and to some extent by the followers. In most military organizational relationships there is a great reliance on dependence between the leader and followers to achieve any mission, and it is virtually impossible for a leader to be effective without engaging in some form of power behavior.

Power relations are indispensable wherever men pursue collective goals. R. G. Greenwood asserted it with superb economy in the following statement:

Command and obedience are found, not in all societies, but in all where the nature of the common task is such as to require them. Watch two men moving a piano; at a certain moment one says 'lift' and the other lifts. (12:153)

When we scrutinize power relations, we see that power is also the ability to control and influence others, and provides the basis for the direction of the organization and the attainment of the specific mission. The one individual that is central to all military power relations is the leader. A leader in this



context may be defined as the one who has unusual influence and unusual power; therefore, "when a leader successfully exercises influence, he causes change in the human activity around him. When the leader exercises power, he causes manifest effects in human activity; i.e., the leader causes changes that he originally desired." (13:154-155) Most of the people that I have been associated with in my military career have a sincere need to look up to someone who can make them feel strong and confident despite all the problems that they face, and who can put meaning into even those duties that may seem trivial or pointless at first glance. Leaders who can fill these needs can indeed become very powerful in their organization. When members of an effective organization are asked who has the power in their outfit, they are able to tell you immediately, almost without thinking; and if asked what power is to them in their relationships, I will venture to say that their reply will be something similar to this thought: "power is simply the ability to get things done the way one wants them to be done." (14:422)

#### 'WHAT IF' THERE IS A RELATIONSHIP

There may or may not be a definite correlation between charisma and power, but to this military leader, there are definitely some very strong considerations that may be drawn about these two concepts:

(1) If a military leader dismisses a possible relationship completely, he or she may be missing out on one of the possible formulas they will need for their organizations eventual success, and for their own central role in shaping it so that it can not only succeed, but endure for sometime.

(2) Most military followers want their leaders to react in very consistent ways when distress or crisis occurs. The leader will have the opportunity to either turn their followers on to their ideas, or at least be ready to provide the right vision and influence; or they can underestimate their potential for influence and not achieve their mission when the opportunity arises.

(3) Even though the military leader may be a 'man with a mission,' and he certainly needs to believe in his mission, he can only arouse confidence in his followers so that they will feel better able to accomplish their tasks when both he and they share the same vision.

(4) Generally, the more the follower idolizes a leader, both consciously and (more importantly) unconsciously, the more he or she will defer to that leader.

(5) If a military leader causes the changes that he intended, he will have exercised a degree of power that will create extremely positive results in the organization that will truly create a large ripple that will be felt in and out of the organization.

Finally, if there is any advantage to be gained from understanding these two phenomena I believe it is that the military leader who truly sees the significance of the possible relationship will be in a position to be a high-powered leader that is better able to initiate positive activities, set the pace of the action, and call-the-shots when change is required in the power relations they will certainly encounter.

### CONCLUSION

I am not an authority in the true academic sense, but a practitioner that has lived and experienced the best and worst in military leadership. It is easy, even tempting, to dismiss the relationship between charisma and power, but one cannot discount the fact that there is something special that is not easily understood when viewing the tangible results of proven military leaders. None of what I have written is intended to be a panacea to solve the leadership ills, real or imagined, of our profession at arms. Instead, I believe there is room for more research on the matter of charisma and power after reviewing the literature. However, one thing is certain, I believe it is in each military leader's self-interest to carefully study and appreciate these two phenomena so that they can better understand how charisma and power may be the x-factor in leadership that is intertwined in a subtle, yet relevant, way to them and the people they will be called upon to lead in the future.

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