



**STRATEGY  
RESEARCH  
PROJECT**

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Defense or any of its agencies. This document may not be released for open publication until it has been cleared by the appropriate military service or government agency.

**VINCE LOMBARDI AS A STRATEGIC LEADER**

**BY**

**LIEUTENANT COLONEL BELINDA L. BUCKMAN**  
United States Army

**DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT A:**  
Approved for Public Release.  
Distribution is Unlimited.

**USAWC CLASS OF 2002**



**U.S. ARMY WAR COLLEGE, CARLISLE BARRACKS, PA 17013-5050**

**20020429 157**

USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

**Vince Lombardi as a Strategic Leader**

by

Lieutenant Colonel Belinda L. Buckman  
United States Army

Colonel Frank R. Hancock  
Project Advisor

The views expressed in this academic research paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. Government, the Department of Defense, or any of its agencies.

U.S. Army War College  
CARLISLE BARRACKS, PENNSYLVANIA 17013

**DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT A:**  
Approved for public release.  
Distribution is unlimited.



## ABSTRACT

AUTHOR: Lieutenant Colonel Belinda L. Buckman  
TITLE: Vince Lombardi As A Strategic Leader  
FORMAT: Strategy Research Project  
DATE: 22 Feb 2002      PAGES: 29      CLASSIFICATION: Unclassified

When one mentions Vince Lombardi's name, people immediately associate it with the Green Bay Packers and the dynasty he created within the National Football League (NFL). As head coach and general manager of the Packers from 1958 to 1967, Lombardi guided the organization to five NFL championships and back-to-back Super Bowl titles.

Without question, Vince Lombardi was a successful coach. However, there were other successful coaches in the league, who also believed in discipline, consistency, selflessness, resilience, confidence and pride. But what was it that set Vince Lombardi apart? Why more than 30 years after his death does he remain the standard against which others are measured? Who was Vince Lombardi and why did his leadership and value to the nation transcend the world of professional football?

The purpose of this effort is to answer these questions while exploring Lombardi as a strategic leader. This will be accomplished by examining Lombardi's conceptual, technical and interpersonal strategic leader competencies described in The Strategic Leadership Primer published by the United States Army War College. Particular emphasis will be placed upon analyzing how Lombardi's education, background and experience developed a solid frame of reference to support execution of these competencies at the strategic level.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	iii
PREFACE.....	vii
VINCE LOMBARDI AS A STRATEGIC LEADER.....	1
STRATEGIC LEADER COMPETENCIES .....	1
BACKGROUND .....	3
EARLY YEARS .....	5
LIFE AS AN ASSISTANT COACH.....	6
TRANSFORMING PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL.....	8
GREEN BAY PACKERS .....	9
CONCEPTUAL COMPETENCIES .....	10
INTERPERSONAL COMPETENCIES .....	12
TECHNICAL COMPETENCIES .....	13
CONCLUSION.....	15
ENDNOTES .....	17
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	21



## PREFACE

A very special thanks to Frank "The Man" Hancock who epitomizes everything that is good about the American competitive spirit. He is the backbone of the faculty and truly cares about student development.

I also have great respect for the skills and assistance of Ms Dot Overcash who has guided numerous students through this process with patience and professionalism. A very special thanks to Paul Bennett, Gil Griffin and Steve Yarborough who have taught me more this year than they will ever know. They are true professionals in every sense of the word.





## VINCE LOMBARDI AS A STRATEGIC LEADER

When one mentions Vince Lombardi's name, people immediately associate it with the Green Bay Packers and the dynasty he created within the National Football League (NFL). Arriving in rural Green Bay, Wisconsin as a 45 year-old former assistant coach and with no previous head coaching experience, Lombardi quickly established and implemented standards that led to his selection as the NFL's "Coach of the Year" during his initial season. As head coach and general manager of the Packers from 1958 to 1967, Lombardi guided the organization to five NFL championships and back-to-back Super Bowl titles.

Without question, Vince Lombardi was a successful coach. However, there were other successful coaches in the league, Don Shula of the Miami Dolphins, Chuck Noll of the Pittsburgh Steelers and Tom Landry of the Dallas Cowboys who also believed in discipline, consistency, selflessness, resilience, confidence and pride.<sup>1</sup> But what was it that set Vince Lombardi apart? Why more than 30 years after his death does he remain the standard against which others are measured? Who was Vince Lombardi and why did his leadership and value to the nation transcend the world of professional football?

The purpose of this effort is to answer these questions while exploring Lombardi as a strategic leader. This will be accomplished by examining Lombardi's conceptual, technical and interpersonal strategic leader competencies described in The Strategic Leadership Primer published by the United States Army War College. Particular emphasis will be placed upon analyzing how Lombardi's education, background and experience developed a solid frame of reference to support execution of these competencies at the strategic level.

Although the normal tendency is to limit one's view of strategic leaders to great military generals, this paper will challenge the reader to expand his/her horizons in dealing with this subject. This paper will clearly show that Coach Vince Lombardi was a strategic leader who possessed and exercised those core competencies which allowed him to effectively deal with the complex issues and events confronting the nation in the late 1960s.

### STRATEGIC LEADER COMPETENCIES

Critical to an analysis of Vince Lombardi as a strategic leader is establishing an accepted definition of a 'strategic leader.' According to The Strategic Leadership Primer, published by the United States Army War College (USAWC),

Strategic leadership is the process used by a leader to affect the achievement of a desirable and clearly understood vision by influencing the organizational culture, allocating resources, directing through policy and directive, and building

consensus within a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous global environment which is marked by opportunities and threats.<sup>2</sup>

While the definition above addresses the process, it is important to understand that strategic leadership is exercised at the highest levels of an organization and requires leaders to apply their leadership skills, as well as, develop a new and unique set of skills to provide guidance in an ever-changing environment. These strategic leader competencies are the knowledge, skills and attributes which enable a leader to function at the highest levels of an organization. The major categories of leadership competencies are conceptual, technical and interpersonal.<sup>3</sup> These competencies prepare strategic leaders to focus on the future and personally lead change in challenging and complex environments. This requires the development of strategic conceptual competencies which include frame of reference development, problem management and envisioning the future.<sup>4</sup> Examining each of these categories is critical to establishing a clear understanding of what it takes to be a strategic leader.

Although categorized as a conceptual competency, frame of reference development provides the critical support necessary for all three competencies. A solid frame of reference is developed over a lifetime as a leader synthesizes information, knowledge and experiences. To build a frame of reference a strategic leader must be open to new experiences and input from others including subordinates, be reflective and willing to learn from past experiences, and be comfortable operating in the strategic environment.<sup>5</sup>

Strategic leader conceptual competencies include problem management and the ability to envision the future. Lombardi quickly grasped the various roles that he played within the organization. He expanded his focus to fulfill the requirements of each role shifting his attention over time from the offense, to the team, to the franchise, to the league, and ultimately sharing his leadership with a national audience.

Additionally strategic leaders must possess certain technical competencies. These competencies include the ability to integrate systems in a multicultural environment while influencing the development of national interests and objectives. As the head coach of a very successful professional team in the 1960s, Lombardi's actions and words were gospel to people all across the country. He demanded respect for all of his players regardless of race, and helped transform the attitude in Green Bay from tolerance to acceptance. Lombardi also addressed the growing unrest in American society, "I am sure that you are disturbed like I am by what seems to be a complete breakdown of law and order and the moral code which is almost beyond belief. The prevailing sentiment seems to be if you don't like the rule, break it."<sup>6</sup>

The final competency critical to a strategic leader is categorized as interpersonal. This includes the ability to build consensus, negotiate and communicate. Lombardi mastered these skills at every level as he built a football dynasty and led the league into the forefront of American consciousness. On a larger stage his leadership philosophy remains a staple in an American society that has maintained its competitive edge on the world.

## **BACKGROUND**

Although it has been over 30 years since Vincent T. Lombardi died of colon cancer at Georgetown University Hospital, his legend endures because he was much more than a football coach. In fact, he is acknowledged as the patron saint of American competition and success.<sup>7</sup> Ten years before he began his unlikely run to fame in remote Green Bay, Lombardi was a virtual unknown, and worried that he might get stuck in the anonymous ranks of coaching assistants. What happened next was that he took the worst team in the NFL and proceeded to dominate the NFL. In his nine seasons as head coach and general manager of the Green Bay Packers, the Packers won six divisional titles, five NFL championships, the first two Super Bowls, and became the standard against which all other teams were measured.<sup>8</sup> While there have been other great NFL coaches, men such as Don Shula of the Miami Dolphins, Chuck Noll of the Pittsburgh Steelers and Tom Landry of the Dallas Cowboys, none are revered and recognized as American icons.<sup>9</sup> How did Lombardi gain the experience, skills and attributes that resulted in his emergence as a leader on the national stage?

Vince Lombardi was born on June 11, 1913 in Brooklyn, New York the oldest son of Italian immigrants. The Lombardi's were a strong Catholic family and at one point Vince thought that he wanted to be a priest and he attended high school at Cathedral College of the Immaculate Conception a diocesan preparatory seminary. Realizing that this was not his path in life he transferred to St. Francis Preparatory School on a football scholarship.<sup>10</sup>

In the fall of 1933, following a successful high school career, Vince accepted a football scholarship to Fordham. He excelled as a guard on Fordham's nationally recognized defensive line tagged "The Seven Blocks of Granite" and graduated in 1937. Lombardi spent the next two years working for a finance company, attending law school at night, and playing semi-pro football.<sup>11</sup> In 1939 Vince Lombardi became Coach Lombardi, first as an assistant coach then as the head coach at St Cecelia, a small Catholic high school, in Englewood, New Jersey. In addition to his duties as an assistant football coach at St Cecilia, Lombardi taught physics, chemistry, latin and coached the varsity basketball team.<sup>12</sup> At one stretch in his eight year tenure, Lombardi led the St Cecilia Saints to a thirty-two game unbeaten streak.<sup>13</sup>

In 1947 Coach Lombardi finally moved up to the next level returning to Fordham as an assistant. However, two years later when he was passed over for the head coaching position at Fordham, Lombardi made a move that would forever define his coaching persona. He was hired by Coach Red Blaik, considered the best coach in the country at the time, to coach the defensive line of an Army team that had completed the previous season ranked sixth in the nation.<sup>14</sup> Lombardi spent five seasons as an assistant at Army, and credited Red Blaik for having the single greatest impact on his coaching career.<sup>15</sup>

Although he was now coaching at the college level and learning from the best, fifteen years had passed since he started at St Cecilians and Lombardi yearned for the opportunity to lead his own team.<sup>16</sup> In 1954, Coach Lombardi continued his slow climb up the coaching ladder, leaving West Point to become the offensive coordinator for the New York Giants of the NFL. In his five seasons with the Giants, they quickly became a championship team; however, now forty-five Lombardi was worried that he may never get the opportunity to lead his own team. This all changed in 1958 when Coach Lombardi signed a five year contract as the head coach and general manager of the Green Bay Packers.<sup>17</sup> With Lombardi in command, the Packers enjoyed their first winning season in twelve years and he was unanimously chosen as the NFL coach of the year.<sup>18</sup> In nine seasons under Coach Lombardi, the Packers dominated professional football by winning six division titles, five NFL championships and two Super Bowls while compiling a record of 98-30-4.<sup>19</sup>

In 1967, he retired as the head coach of the Packers, but remained in the front office as the general manager. After less than a year, Lombardi realized that he still wanted to coach and in 1969 he accepted the head coaching position with the Washington Redskins. In true Lombardi fashion he immediately led the Redskins to their first winning record in fourteen years. Unfortunately, he never had the opportunity to see if he could take the Redskins to a Super Bowl, as he was diagnosed with intestinal cancer and died on September 3, 1970.<sup>20</sup>

In ten years as a head coach in the NFL, Lombardi never coached a losing team and the NFL named him their "1960s Man of the Decade." Less than a year after his death Coach Lombardi was inducted into the Professional Football Hall of Fame and the Super Bowl trophy was renamed the Vince Lombardi Super Bowl Trophy in his honor. Coach Lombardi continues to be the standard by which others are measured and in 2000, ESPN named him the Coach of the Century.<sup>21</sup>

Coach Lombardi transcended his sport. His name is synonymous not only with winning but with a philosophy of what it takes to be a winner. He embodied certain notions of character, will, discipline, obedience, teamwork, and the need to compete, to strive for excellence, to fulfill

one's human potential.<sup>22</sup> Lombardi captured the nation's imagination at precisely the same time professional football was beginning to displace baseball as the national game and American society of the 1960s was in transition.<sup>23</sup>

## EARLY YEARS

Beginning early in his life and continuing until his death, Vince Lombardi relied upon formal education, self study and his ability to learn from his experiences to develop the complex knowledge structure required of a strategic leader.

To understand Lombardi and his impact on the nation, one must understand the dominant role his family played in his upbringing. He was the oldest son of parents who emigrated from Italy as children and settled in Brooklyn, New York. His father, Harry, was a butcher and meat wholesaler who had the words W-O-R-K and P-L-A-Y tattooed above his knuckles to remind him that both played an important role in his life. His mother, Matilda, was one of thirteen children who formed a large extended family all living in Brooklyn. Both perfectionist and strict disciplinarians, Lombardi's parents emphasized early on that he was better than the rest and being average was not good enough. Young Vince attended daily mass with his mother, and this religious routine was as much about discipline as it was about devotion. As the oldest son, he occupied a position next to God in an Italian family, and Lombardi flourished in his assumed role of disciplinarian to his siblings, extended family and his friends. The Trinity in Lombardi's early life was religion, family and sports.<sup>24</sup>

Although Lombardi played basketball and baseball, from first contact he was fascinated with football. It surprised his family when he declared coming out of grammar school that he would prepare for the priesthood by attending Cathedral College of the Immaculate Conception a diocesan preparatory school without a football program.<sup>25</sup> Lombardi continued to demonstrate his natural leadership abilities as he transitioned from a leader on his block to a leader at his school. His intense desire to lead combined with an intimidating physical presence resulted in his unanimous election as section president for four straight years.<sup>26</sup>

Lombardi continued to play sandlot football while at Cathedral and after completing four years of the six year program he realized that he loved physical contact more than spiritual contact. Since he had not yet completed the entire six years, Lombardi did not graduate, therefore, he accepted a football scholarship at St Francis Preparatory School in Brooklyn to repeat his senior year. As a leader, Lombardi demanded perfection of himself and those around him. At St Francis he played fullback over a player with twice the talent but none of the determination.<sup>27</sup>

Growing up in the 1920s, Lombardi benefited from the national sports mania as people found more leisure time. Golf, boxing, baseball and college football were attracting huge crowds.<sup>28</sup> In the 1920s and 30s, the place to play college football was in the northeast where Fordham, Columbia and New York University all had major programs and their games were covered by the most influential sports writers in America. Lombardi accepted a scholarship to study under the Jesuits and play football at Fordham University.<sup>29</sup>

As a senior, Lombardi became a starter on a legendary defensive line heralded as "The Seven Blocks of Granite," who surrendered only one rushing touchdown that season. Although he was not the biggest or the best lineman, he was the leader among his teammates routinely demanding more from them on the field.<sup>30</sup>

It was the strict environment at Fordham that Vince Lombardi continued to strengthen his frame of reference. From the Jesuits he learned the lessons that he would carry with him into a life of football. They forced him to broaden his perspective of duty, obedience, and responsibility. The philosophy of sublimating individual desires for the common good now shaped the way Lombardi looked at himself and his world.<sup>31</sup> The Jesuits argued that perfection was obtainable and went to those who fought the hardest to achieve it.<sup>32</sup> Following graduation in June 1937, Lombardi knew that he did not want to follow his father in the wholesale meat business, and it took only two short years until he was teaching and coaching at a small Catholic powerhouse St Cecilia in Englewood, New Jersey.<sup>33</sup>

### **LIFE AS AN ASSISTANT COACH**

It was during his eight years at St Cecilia high school where Coach Vince Lombardi developed many of the pedagogical skills that set him apart from his peers. These were many of the same leadership skills that Lombardi would adapt to more complex situations as a leader at the next level. He also came to understand early on that coaching was his life's calling.

The years that Lombardi spent at St Cecilia were significant for several reasons. With steady and secure employment, Lombardi found the courage to marry his college sweetheart Marie Planitz and they had a son Vince Jr. and a daughter Susan. Lombardi remained at St Cecilia from 1939 to 1947, where he received three deferments from service in World War II. His Selective Service System records indicate that he was deferred in the national interests for teaching, for being a sole provider to his family and for being too old.<sup>34</sup> It is interesting to note that as the nation sent her sons off to fight the second great war in a thirty year period, the fact that Lombardi did not serve was not held against him. The parents felt fortunate to have someone of his character associated with their children. As Lombardi's reputation grew, he had

opportunities to leave St Cecilia for one of the big high school programs; however, he felt tremendous loyalty to the Saints and remained until he had the opportunity to return to Fordham as an assistant.<sup>35</sup>

After ten seasons away from college football, Lombardi coached the Fordham freshman team that routinely out performed the varsity. He spent the next year as an assistant with the varsity, and when he realized that he was not going to get the head coaching job he left Fordham to become an assistant coach under Red Blaik at Army. Although he would still be an assistant he would be learning from a man considered the best in the country at the time.

According to Lombardi, everything he learned about organizing a football team and preparing it to play its best, he learned during the five years that he spent at West Point. It was at Army under Coach Blaik, himself a devoted disciple of General Douglas MacArthur, that Lombardi honed his leadership skills and perfected his coaching style.<sup>36</sup> Lombardi and Blaik shared the same dominant characteristic - an overwhelming will to win. Blaik strongly believed that the purpose of the game is to win and to dilute the will to win is to destroy the purpose of the game.<sup>37</sup> MacArthur also believed that there was no substitute for victory, and Red Blaik drove that philosophy home to the next generation of our nation's leaders as a dominant figure at West Point in the 40s and 50s. As one of the first coaches to break down game films, Blaik taught Lombardi what it meant to be prepared. He spent endless hours analyzing the game play-by-play, position-by-position and methodically charting the action.<sup>38</sup> It was at West Point that Lombardi's spiritual discipline combined with his military discipline thus defining him forevermore as a football coach.<sup>39</sup>

At Army, Lombardi was exposed to General Douglas MacArthur, one of our nation's greatest strategic leaders. MacArthur had been the Superintendent at West Point shortly after World War I when Red Blaik played for Army. Before MacArthur left West Point for the Philippine Islands, his thoughts on the correlation between war and sport were carved in stone of the front of the gymnasium,

UPON THE FIELDS OF FRIENDLY STRIFE ARE SOWN THE SEEDS UPON  
OTHER FIELDS, ON OTHER DAYS WILL BEAR THE FRUITS OF VICTORY<sup>40</sup>

As MacArthur and Blaik both regarded football as another form of warfare, they corresponded regularly about the team. Before MacArthur was recalled, he had arranged for Lombardi and five other members of the Army staff to travel to the Orient and conduct football clinics. MacArthur's intent was to use football as a tool to instill the traditions of American culture and democracy in the Japanese. Lombardi participated in clinics in Tokyo and the Philippines and made a visit to the front lines in Korea.<sup>41</sup>



Lombardi had unique exposure to General MacArthur when he was detailed to stop at the General's suite on the way back from having the game films developed. During these informal sessions in MacArthur's Waldorf-Astoria suite, they discussed issues that expanded beyond the football field. Years later when Lombardi was a national figure he continued to reflect on what MacArthur told him in those screening sessions.

I can vividly remember him saying that 'competitive sports keeps alive in us a spirit and vitality. It teaches the strong to know when they are weak and the brave to face themselves when they are afraid. To be proud and unbowed in defeat and yet humble and gentle in victory. And to master ourselves before we attempt to master others. And to learn to laugh, yet never forget how to weep. And to give the predominance of courage over timidity.' I think they are great words from what I consider to be one of the great Americans.<sup>42</sup>

Blaik worshiped MacArthur and ensured that Lombardi had access to this American institution. A thread of continuity ran from MacArthur – to - Blaik - to – Lombardi, as they developed hundreds of our nation's future leaders. During his tenure at West Point Lombardi witnessed MacArthur's recall from the Pacific, the signing of the armistice in Korea, and the beginning of the Cold War with the Soviet Union. Adding these experiences to his frame of reference, Lombardi was ready to move to the next level and accepted his first National Football League position as offensive coordinator with the New York Giants.

## **TRANSFORMING PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL**

By 1954 when Lombardi arrived in New York the United States economy was enjoying an upward surge. Historians attributed this trend to two long term factors. First, Americans held in check by the depression followed by war time shortages and sacrifices, welcomed the opportunity to acquire material goods. The Cold War that followed saw a continued increase in defense spending and between the 1940s and the 1960s the Gross National Product more than doubled. Consumerism and the public's penchant for replacing the old with the new became the dominant theme of the 1950s.<sup>43</sup>

It was in the 1950s that professional football began its rise to prominence. Previously, professional football had occupied the bottom rung of the athletic ladder, well below college football, major league baseball, horse racing, and boxing which demanded greater media coverage and drew larger crowds. Professional football players were regarded as mercenaries who played for meal money and free beer.<sup>44</sup>

By 1954 perceptions were changing and American culture was dominated by anything new and modern. The general population was infatuated with purchasing the most technically

proficient, the biggest, the fastest and the sleekest of everything. In many ways, American's worshipped "the best," and this worship is what essentially defined a professional.<sup>45</sup>

The rise of television was the driving force that allowed professional football and Coach Lombardi to capitalize on this transformation. By the summer of 1954 there were more than 350 broadcasting stations, seven times the number that existed just 3 years prior. Simultaneously, private ownership of television sets exploded from one in five families to two of three having a TV in their homes.<sup>46</sup>

New York was the perfect place for Vince Lombardi to enter the National Football League and be exposed to a national audience. He quickly gained that exposure as the offensive coordinator for the New York Giants. In the 1950s, changes in the United States originated in the advertising offices of Madison Avenue, covered in national magazines and reported on TV networks centered in Manhattan.<sup>47</sup>

Lombardi found himself with the right team at the right time, as the Giants established themselves as a contender in the NFL. In his five seasons running the Giants offense, they did not have a losing season. Furthermore, the Giants accomplishments were witnessed by more Americans than ever before as Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) for the first time televised all NFL games. As 10.8 million viewers watched the 1958 championship game between the New York Giants and the Baltimore Colts, professional football occupied a place in the American consciousness like never before.<sup>48</sup>

In 1958 at forty-five years old and with his frame of reference anchored in nineteen years of coaching at the high school, college and professional levels, Vince Lombardi became the head coach and general manager of the Green Bay Packers. There were several factors which directly contributed to Lombardi's quick rise to national icon status. First, as one of the thirteen original NFL franchises and the only small market team to survive the Great Depression Green Bay provided the perfect setting. As head coach and general manager, Coach Lombardi controlled all aspects of football operations. This coupled with the fact that the Packers were owned by the citizens of Green Bay and could not be sold or moved, gave Lombardi all the control that he needed to implement his vision for the franchise. The stage was set for Vincent T. Lombardi to become much more than just another football coach.

## **GREEN BAY PACKERS**

To understand how a football coach in the NFL impacted the nation as a strategic leader, one must maintain focus on the strategic environment of the time. The United States and the Soviet Union both possessed nuclear weapons, and the Soviet Union was viewed by the U.S.

as its chief competitor and threat. Historians describe the feeling of panic in the U.S. as the Soviets took the lead in the space race with the successful launch of the Sputnik satellite in October 1957.<sup>49</sup> Many Americans felt like we had lost our competitive edge.

It climaxed with charges that the nation had lost its sense of purpose. President Eisenhower responded by appointing a Commission on National Goals "to develop a broad outline of national objectives for the next decade and longer." Comprised of ten prominent citizens from all walks of life the commission concluded, "... that rather than a change of direction, all the United States needed was a renewed commitment to the pursuit of excellence."<sup>50</sup>

On a national stage Coach Lombardi embodied anything and everything that could be even remotely connected with a commitment to the pursuit of excellence. The first four sections of this paper were devoted to a detailed description of the family, schooling and experiences which comprised Vince Lombardi's life and provided his frame of reference from which he observed and judged future events. At the same time, Lombardi was developing conceptual, technical and interpersonal core leadership competencies which were supported by his broad and rich frame of reference. As the head coach and general manager of the Green Bay Packers, Coach Lombardi served as a strategic leader within that organization, within the institution of football and as a national leader whose abilities transcended his sport.

## CONCEPTUAL COMPETENCIES

Although the development of one's frame of reference continues throughout a lifetime, this effort will shift its focus to a detailed analysis of Vince Lombardi's actions and his impact as a strategic leader. As described in The United States Army War College, Strategic Leadership Primer, a strategic leader's ability to formulate and articulate their strategic vision for the organization is perhaps their single most important contribution to the organization.<sup>51</sup> The Primer defines vision as, the leader-focused, organizational process that gives the organization its sense of purpose, direction, energy and identity.<sup>52</sup>

Lombardi had been waiting for the opportunity to coach professionally his entire life and he was ready to personally lead change in the challenging and complex environment of the NFL. Immediately upon his arrival in Green Bay, Lombardi held a team meeting and announced,

He would have no tolerance for the halfhearted, the defeatist, the loser. The goal was to be the New York Yankees of football. World champions, every day, year-around. Admired everywhere. No more T-shirts on the road. Team blazers and ties for everyone. Wherever you go, you represent the team. You will talk like, you will look like and you will act like the most dignified professional in your

hometown. Relentless in the pursuit of victory. Only winners. Anyone who didn't like it was perfectly free to get the hell out right now.<sup>53</sup>

Although some of the players on that first team may not have known exactly what they were getting into no one left. According to Willie Wood, a player on his first Green Bay team, Coach Lombardi told his team, "You were chosen to be a Green Bay Packer."<sup>54</sup> He made it sound like something unique and wonderful and the results were a bunch of players that felt that they were a select bunch of people. Lombardi took similar actions as he completely remodeled the front office, clearly sending the message that the hapless losing ways of the old days were gone, the Packers were starting over in the spirit of the new by not just starting with a new slate but by completely discarding the old.<sup>55</sup>

In a very short period of time Lombardi had infused a sense of purpose, direction, energy and identity into the organization. In addition to frame of reference development and the ability to envision the future, strategic leaders must have the ability to manage complex problems towards a desired solution. Effective problem management requires an advanced set of leadership skills that include utilizing both direct and indirect influence. A key component of problem management is the ability to recognize and avoid marginal or irrelevant issues.<sup>56</sup>

Much of Coach Lombardi's success rests in his ability to quickly identify and disregard irrelevant factors while successfully implementing his vision through indirect influence. When Lombardi arrived in Green Bay, his playbook was a mere one and one half inches thick in a profession where the norm was at least four inches. He taught a system that revolved around a few plays with many options, where his quarterback was charged with reading the defense and selecting the best option. Some mischaracterized Lombardi's approach as unimaginative, when in fact his entire coaching philosophy was based on legendary Army coach Red Blaik's belief that perfection came with simplicity. Blaik's theory was to discard the immaterial and concentrate your efforts on refining those few things that you did best.<sup>57</sup>

This philosophy was clearly evident in Lombardi's signature play, which came to be known as the 'Packer Sweep.' Although Lombardi had used the sweep when he served as offensive coordinator for the Giants, at Green Bay he transformed the play into something that was singularly identified with him and his Packers. For Coach Lombardi "The Sweep" defined team, all eleven offensive players thinking and reacting as one unstoppable body.<sup>58</sup> The Packers would drill this one play over and over against ever imaginable defense until it was more than routine, it was in their blood and part of their reflective being.<sup>59</sup>

## INTERPERSONAL COMPETENCIES

In addition to conceptual competencies, Lombardi also exhibited the interpersonal skills required of a strategic leader. These skills included the ability to build consensus within the organization, the ability to negotiate with external agencies, and the ability to communicate both externally and internally.<sup>60</sup>

In his first season as a head coach, Lombardi was voted 'Coach of The Year.' Three years later, he was on the cover of Time magazine which proclaimed professional football, "The Sport of the 60s." Professional football was hot, and Vince Lombardi represented American professional football. Lombardi understood that to retain this position of prominence would require the owners to adopt a previously unprecedented unity of purpose. As the undisputed leader in the institution of professional football, he facilitated the necessary cooperation among the owners. In 1962 the Green Bay Packers and the other teams signed a single network contract which strengthened the entire league.<sup>61</sup> Previously each team had negotiated independently from a much weaker position.

By 1965 competition between the National Football League and the American Football League had grown to a point where it required a great deal of Lombardi's attention as general manager. The Packers had never lost a first round selection to the "new league," and Lombardi had no intention of tarnishing that record. Rival teams in the NFL formed odd alliances of collusion to protect their draft picks.<sup>62</sup> In spite of his reputation as unrelenting and headstrong, the real secret of Lombardi's success was his ability to adapt without seeming to compromise.<sup>63</sup>

Perhaps Coach Lombardi's strongest interpersonal skill was his ability to communicate. According to Steve Sabol, the producer for NFL films, Lombardi's communicative ability all started with the voice. Sabol believed that the great leaders in history—Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., Roosevelt, Hitler—all had these really unique voices and Lombardi's voice was so unique, so strident, so resonant, it could cut through anything.<sup>64</sup> According to Packer quarterback Bart Starr, "You could tell that the coach believed in what he was doing. His tone of voice, his posture, his manner, it all made you believe."<sup>65</sup> As a strategic leader, Lombardi clearly understood that his actions and words were always carefully analyzed and he was equally talented utilizing both direct and indirect means.

The United States in the 1960s was a nation dealing with the Cold War, the construction of the Berlin Wall, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Civil Rights Movement, the assassinations of President Kennedy and Martin Luther King, the Vietnam War, and the increasingly violent anti-war protest. While the 1960s represented a period of upheaval and rebellion in the public mind,

Lombardi stood for the old virtues of loyalty, discipline and obedience and his victories were interpreted as vindication.<sup>66</sup>

Lombardi connected with the American people at a time when they were looking for someone to believe in and trust. In his book, "When Pride Still Mattered" David Maraniss described the scene at a Sheepshead Bay board of trade dinner dance,

Square and awkward he might be, yet he overpowers people with his will as he walks by. Character is the will in action, his Fordham tutors used to say, and here it is, embodied, magnetism of the will, asserting that life is not merely fleeting luck or chance, that discipline and persistence can prevail, even if it takes twenty years, and as he presses forward the crowd seems certain that he knows the way, the right way, that even if he has not won everything, he will, that he is beyond Sheepshead Bay and Green Bay, and that the applause wells up in the hall deafening now, and it lifts them out of their seats as he goes by and they want to follow him.<sup>67</sup>

By 1967 Green Bay had won five of the previous seven NFL championships and Coach Lombardi had become a leader that transcended the game of football.<sup>68</sup>

#### TECHNICAL COMPETENCIES

Unlike strategic leader conceptual and interpersonal skills, which involved many of the same skills utilized at the organizational level, technical competencies at the strategic level involved a unique set of skills. These skills include understanding how the organization fits into a much broader framework, operating in a multicultural environment, and, most importantly, in some way influencing interests and objectives at the national level.<sup>69</sup>

Both as a head coach and as a general manager Lombardi demonstrated his expertise in moving beyond the internal processes to concentrate on systems integration. On game day Lombardi would be seen ranting and raving up and down the sidelines, but it was little more than that as game day execution was left to his assistant coaches.<sup>70</sup>

Because the Packers were owned by the fans, many of the traditional owner's duties fell to Lombardi as general manager. Lombardi and the owners recognized the prominence that professional football had achieved in the 1960s and they were all eager to maintain that momentum. Instrumental to this process was completing the merger of the NFL and the AFL. Coach Lombardi found himself increasingly involved in the league's new labor issues. Big money, free agency and the players union provided the players with new power and options. Assigned to the management negotiating team, Lombardi hated the players union getting between him and his players, but refused to entertain the thought of bringing in replacement

players. Again, the force of his will upon the owners played a significant role in reaching a deal and avoiding a long strike that would be detrimental for the entire league.<sup>71</sup>

Another technical competency essential to a strategic leader is the ability to operate in a multicultural environment. When asked how many black players were on the Packers Lombardi responded, "I can tell you how many players I have on the squad and I can tell you which ones aren't going to be here next, but I can't tell you how many are black and how many are white."<sup>72</sup> The significance of this response is that seventy-five percent of the NFL was white and there was separation of blacks and whites at meals and in hotels. Coaching in rural Green Bay, Wisconsin where less than one tenth of one percent of the population was black, Lombardi's position facilitated reducing the discrimination that plagued the nation.<sup>73</sup> From a broader perspective angry race riots broke out in 125 cities across the country in response to the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King.<sup>74</sup>

Equally impressive was Lombardi's treatment of gay players who he considered just another group which deserved respect. Lombardi made it clear throughout his career that he would not tolerate discrimination of any sort on his teams.<sup>75</sup> This was more than forty years ago, when gays were not accepted in society much less in the NFL. Howard Cosell described Lombardi as a leader with the ability to see beyond race, class and culture to build a loyal and dependable team out of disparate characters.<sup>76</sup>

By the late 1960s Vince Lombardi was clearly influencing the world outside professional football. Addressing the American Management Association in 1967, Lombardi acknowledged his emergence as a public figure known for more than winning football games.<sup>77</sup> He realized that he had a unique opportunity to influence national interests and objectives at a critical time for the nation. As Lombardi's audiences grew, his message inevitably took on larger dimensions, and he began to be viewed as an important voice in the natural cultural debate. The personal was transformed into the political, and people began talking about a football coach as a political leader.<sup>78</sup> At one point in the chaos of 1968 election both Hubert Humphrey and Richard Nixon seriously considered Lombardi as a possible running mate.<sup>79</sup>

It was Lombardi's opinion that modern society reflected a culture that had too much freedom and not enough respect for authority. He saw this reflected in a greater number of people turning away from competition and fewer striving for perfection.<sup>80</sup> In his first season out of football, Lombardi was booked as a motivational speaker, made a prime-time documentary and a motivational film, and was firmly entrenched in popular culture.<sup>81</sup> As a strategic leader in

the 1960s, Lombardi successfully utilized technical competencies to lead change during a difficult period in this nation's history.

## **CONCLUSION**

As a result of his tenure at West Point Lombardi developed a relationship with MacArthur which enabled him to view first hand the leadership style of this American hero. Through this close and personal friendship Lombardi was able to glean from MacArthur the traits and technical competencies conducive to success at the strategic level. Lombardi honed these skills to ensure the organizations he was associated with were not stagnant, but rather had a long term vision to successfully propel them through the future. As MacArthur told Lombardi, football is simply warfare played on a different field. Lombardi's understanding of this analogy and his focus on education and tradition allowed him to be seen as much more than a football coach and the nation's citizens needed a national figure of hope.

Diagnosed with intestinal cancer, Lombardi died on September 3, 1970. That same year Lombardi led the Washington Redskins to their first winning record in fourteen years. The debate continues today on whether or not Vince Lombardi would have eventually led the Redskins to Super Bowl success; however, what is not debatable is the tremendous success that Lombardi enjoyed as a football coach. In his ten seasons as a head football coach in the NFL, Lombardi compiled a remarkable 105-35-6 record and he never suffered a losing season.

While this record in and of itself was a significant accomplishment, on a much larger scale it thrust Lombardi onto the national stage. With a broad frame of reference developed over a lifetime, Lombardi possessed the tools and the opportunity to exercise his leadership at the strategic level. Grounded with a solid foundation built upon the firm embrace of his family, his Catholic faith, and his education by the Jesuits at Fordham University, Lombardi learned lessons that carried him throughout the rest of his life and enabled him to effectively transform not only the Green Bay Packers but the entire NFL from a fledgling league to a position of prominence.

Although he never commanded a great Army in battle in what has come to be the traditional role associated with a strategic leader, Vince Lombardi was very much such a leader. He evoked, from deep within the American fabric, what it means to be the best. These symbols of American life, discipline, teamwork and loyalty were represented and articulated by Lombardi. He preached his philosophy and principles and society loved it; believing that if he could beat the odds then they had a chance to do it too. The fact remains that the principles that Lombardi stood for do work and are still working. During a critical and confusing period in history he used



a platform of athletic success to deliver a powerful message. He said it best, "Once more we need to develop in this country a strong spirit of competitive interest. We fail in our obligation unless we preserve what has always been an American zeal- that is, to win and to be first, regardless of what we do."<sup>82</sup>

WORD COUNT = 6,855

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> John Powers, "Taking a Demanding, Complex American ICON," 10 December 1999; available from <http://proquest.umi.com/pdqweb>; Internet; accessed 19 November 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Roderick, R. Magee II, ed., Strategic Leadership Primer (Department of Command, Leadership, and Management, United States Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA 1998), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> David Maraniss, When Pride Still Mattered (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 404.

<sup>7</sup> George F. Will, "Rough Rider in Green Bay," 8 November 1999; available from <http://proquest.umi.com/pdqweb>; Internet; accessed 19 November 2001.

<sup>8</sup> "The Lombardi Era," available from <http://www.packers.com/history/chronology/lombardi.html>; Internet; accessed 7 November 2001.

<sup>9</sup> Powers, 1.

<sup>10</sup> "Vincent T. Lombardi The Early Years," available from [http://pawlowski24.homestead.com/files/MGT\\_388\\_Biography.html](http://pawlowski24.homestead.com/files/MGT_388_Biography.html); Internet; accessed 7 November 2001.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Maraniss, 147.

<sup>17</sup> Maraniss, 190.

<sup>18</sup> Maraniss, 228.

<sup>19</sup> "The Lombardi Era," 1.

<sup>20</sup> "Vince Lombardi's Biography," available from <<http://www.vincelombardi.com/>>; Internet; accessed 24 October 2001.

<sup>21</sup> "Vince Lombardi's Biography," 2.

<sup>22</sup> David Maraniss, "Won and Lost; Vince Lombardi was an American icon, a symbol of competitiveness, a legend for asking his players to play the price for victory. By the time he arrived in Washington, he'd begun to wonder if there were hidden costs," 5 September 1999; available from <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb.html>; Internet; accessed 19 November 2001.

<sup>23</sup> Powers, 1.

<sup>24</sup> Maraniss, 19.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>28</sup> Robert A. Devine et al., America Past and Present (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991), 747.

<sup>29</sup> Maraniss, 33.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>33</sup> "Vince Lombardi's Biography," 1.

<sup>34</sup> Maraniss, 84.

<sup>35</sup> "Vince Lombardi's Biography," 1.

<sup>36</sup> James Bowman, "Sacking Lombardi," 6 December 1999; available from <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb/html>; Internet; accessed 19 November 2001.

<sup>37</sup> Maraniss, 102.

<sup>38</sup> Maraniss, 100.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 118-119.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>43</sup> Devine, 858.

<sup>44</sup> Maraniss, 158.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>46</sup> Maraniss, 151.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 159-160.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 189-190.

<sup>49</sup> Devine, 865.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 866.

<sup>51</sup> Magee, 40.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>53</sup> Maraniss, 217.

<sup>54</sup> Don Phillips, "Vince Lombardi on Coaching Leadership," 2001; available from <http://www.afca.com/lev1.cfm/117>; Internet; accessed 19 November 2001.

<sup>55</sup> Maraniss, 206.

<sup>56</sup> Magee, 39.

<sup>57</sup> Maraniss, 222.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 224.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>60</sup> Magee, 42.

<sup>61</sup> Maraniss, 324.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 383.

<sup>63</sup> Adam Gopnik, "America's Coach," The New Yorker 27 (20 September 1999): 129.

<sup>64</sup> Maraniss, 373.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 213.

<sup>66</sup> James DiGiacomo, "Coaching with Character," 18 – 25 December 1999; available from <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb.html>; Internet; accessed 19 November 2001.

<sup>67</sup> Maraniss, 271.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 372.

<sup>69</sup> Magee, 42.

<sup>70</sup> DiGiacomo, 2.

<sup>71</sup> Maraniss, 442.

<sup>72</sup> Phillips, 2.

<sup>73</sup> Maraniss, 239-240.

<sup>74</sup> Divine, 923.

<sup>75</sup> Maraniss, 471.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 359.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 400.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 445.

<sup>79</sup> George F. Will, "Rough Rider in Green Bay," 8 November 1999; available from <http://proquest.umi.com/pdqweb.html>; Internet; accessed 19 November 2001.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 402.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 448-449.

<sup>82</sup> "Advice to Businessmen on How to Lead," U.S. News and World Report, 20 February 1967, 14.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

"Advice to Businessmen on How to Lead." U.S. News and World Report, 20 February 1967, 14.

Bowman, James. "Sacking Lombardi." 6 December 1999. Available from <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb/htlm>. Internet. Accessed 19 November 2001.

Breen, T. H., Robert A. Devine, George M. Fredrickson, and R. Hal Williams. America Past and Present. New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991.

DiGiacomo, James. "Coaching with Character." 18 – 25 December 1999. Available from <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb.html>. Internet. Accessed 19 November 2001.

Gopnik, Adam. "America's Coach." The New Yorker 27 (20 September 1999): 129.

Magee, Roderick R., II., ed. Strategic Leadership Primer. Department of Command, Leadership, and Management, United States Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 1998.

Maraniss, David. When Pride Still Mattered. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1999.

Maraniss, David. "Won and Lost; Vince Lombardi was an American icon, a symbol of competitiveness, a legend for asking his players to play the price for victory. By the time he arrived in Washington, he'd begun to wonder if there were hidden costs." 5 September 1999. Available from <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb.html>. Internet. Accessed 19 November 2001.

Phillips, Don. "Vince Lombardi on Coaching Leadership." Available from <http://www.afca.com/lev1.cfm/117>. Internet. Accessed 19 November 2001.

Powers, John. "Tackling a Demanding, Complex American ICON." 10 December 1999. Available from <http://proquest.umi.com/pdqweb>. Internet. Accessed 19 November 2001.

"The Lombardi Era." Available from <http://www.packers.com/history/chronology/lombardi.html>. Internet. Accessed 7 November 2001.

"Vince Lombardi's Biography." Available from <http://www.vincelombardi.com/>. Internet. Accessed 24 October 2001.

"Vincent T. Lombardi the Early Years." Available from <http://pawlowski24.homestead.com/files/MGT>. Internet. Accessed 7 November 2001.

Will, George F., "Rough Rider in Green Bay." 8 November 1999. Available from <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb>. Internet. Accessed 19 November 2001.