

“Worthy of His Sufferings”: How Strategic Leaders Learned from Failure

by

Lieutenant Colonel Brian L. Gilman
United States Marine Corps



United States Army War College
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Lieutenant Colonel Brian L. Gilman
United States Marine Corps

Dr. Christian B. Keller
Department of National Security & Strategy
Project Adviser

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

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History provides numerous examples of leaders who failed at some point in their career, yet went on to become great leaders. Their example demonstrates that experiencing failure does not necessarily equate to failed leadership – leaders can and do recover from failure to become better leaders. But how does this occur? How does a leader turn the psychological trauma of failure into an important learning experience that leads to personal growth? What leadership characteristics and actions are most important in recovering from a leadership failure? This paper examines these questions along several major themes: first, the psychological trauma of failure and the pathways to posttraumatic growth following failure; second, a study of how contemporary leaders grew from failure; and third, historical case studies on two strategic leaders who grew from the experience of failure: Ulysses S. Grant and Dwight D Eisenhower. In conclusion, the paper compares the lessons from these historical case studies to those drawn from the first two themes to identify the key leadership characteristics and actions that enable leaders to recover from failure.

“Worthy of His Sufferings”: How Strategic Leaders Learned from Failure

The way in which a man accepts his fate and all the suffering it entails, the way in which he takes up his cross, gives him ample opportunity - even under the most difficult circumstances - to add a deeper meaning to his life...Here lies the chance for a man either to make use of or to forgo the opportunities of attaining moral values that a difficult situation may afford him. And this decides whether he is worthy of his sufferings or not.¹

On April 11, 1854, Ulysses S. Grant resigned his commission as a newly promoted Captain in the United States Army.² Historians do not all agree on what prompted Captain Grant to end what was previously a promising career in the U.S. Army and return to his family a perceived failure. Josiah Bunting and Joan Waugh both write that Grant was forced to resign or face court martial because of his failure in performing his duties due to drunkenness.³ Pulitzer Prize winning writer William McFeely proposes that Grant resigned his commission and returned home because he was depressed as a result of being separated from his family for too long.⁴ Brooks Simpson claims that Grant was forced to resign because his commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Robert C. Buchanan, held a grudge against Grant and made “Grant’s life even more of a hell than it already was.”⁵ Regardless of why he resigned and left the Army, history records Grant’s resignation as one in a long series of failures that Grant endured between 1852 and 1861. Yet, despite this lost decade that Grant endured, in March 1864 Grant was promoted to Lieutenant General and assigned as General in Chief of all Union Forces, the position from which he would direct the Union’s defeat of the Confederate Army.⁶

In modern American culture, failure, especially when experienced by a leader, can be professionally catastrophic. Americans have little tolerance for failure. Failure is embarrassing, implies a fault in one’s character and/or capability, and is a sign of

weakness.⁷ However, Grant's historical example challenges this viewpoint and exemplifies the thesis of this paper: experiencing failure does not necessarily equate to failed leadership – leaders can and do recover from failure to become great leaders. But how does this occur? How did a man, who in 1854 was considered a patent failure by most of his contemporaries, become the most successful Union general of the American Civil War less than ten years later? What did Grant learn from his decade of failure? How did he apply these lessons and how did they manifest into different mindsets or behaviors that enabled Grant to achieve success as a strategic leader? The answers to these questions are profoundly important to any student or practitioner of leadership because they address an essential element of leadership – “the ability to reckon with one's own failures, make meaning of those experiences, and resolve to lead more effectively in the future.”⁸ After nearly two decades of leading Marines, memories of my leadership failures still sting, and they continue to prompt me to reflect on what I learned from them, and how I can do better next time.

To arrive at the answers to these fundamental questions on leadership, this paper will first set the stage by examining contemporary analyses on the subject. This will be accomplished by first briefly exploring the psychological impact of failure and the psychology behind growing from failure. Next, the paper will summarize the findings of a recent analytical study that explored how leaders learn from failure. With this frame of reference established – what happens emotionally to leaders who fail and how leaders theoretically go on to thrive following failure – the paper will then present historical cases by examining the failures and post-failure success of two prominent historical strategic leaders, Ulysses S. Grant and Dwight D. Eisenhower. Based on the

historiography of these two leaders, the paper will draw conclusions on how they recovered from failure and went on to thrive as strategic leaders. Finally, it will compare and contrast the historical lessons with the frame of reference established in the first half of the paper and draw conclusions on how leaders “can reckon with...and make meaning” of our failures today, specifically focusing on traits and actions that enable leaders to turn failure into an opportunity to grow.⁹

Contemporary Analysis on Learning from Failure

Failure in the Context of Leadership

Multiple definitions of failure can be found in Merriam-Webster’s dictionary, including: an “omission of performance,” “a failing to perform a duty or expected action,” and “a lack of success.”¹⁰ The Center for Creative Leadership defines failure as “missteps, faulty judgment, faulty or missing information, and lapses.”¹¹ In her dissertation on an analytical study of leaders learning through failure, Catherine Mulqueen defined failure within the context of leadership as a “lack of satisfactory performance or effect.”¹² While these definitions help to focus the reader’s understanding of failure within the context of leadership, they lack specificity and leave significant room for interpretation on what constitutes a leadership failure as well as how failures and simple mistakes differ. Of all the sources consulted, the most thorough explanation of what comprises a leadership failure is provided by the United States Military Academy. This should be no surprise considering West Point’s mission is to “educate, train, and inspire...leaders.”¹³

West Point teaches that leadership failures consist of 1) failures in what we do, 2) failures of who we are, and 3) failures of who we want to be.¹⁴ The first category includes leadership actions and/or decisions that result in negative consequences for

the leader and/or the organization. While the consequences of these failures can be potentially catastrophic, correcting them usually involves improving the leader's knowledge and skills – tasks that can be accomplished through education, study, and training.¹⁵

Failures of who we are relate more to the leader's personal traits and abilities than to the leader's decisions and actions. While failures in this category can be manifested in what leaders do, they are more often rooted in the leader's character, emotional intelligence, disposition, and world-view. Leadership failures of this type are revealed in the manner in which a leader manages relationships, how he/she delegates (or fails to delegate) responsibility, and how the leader manages his or her emotions. Unlike *failures in what we do*, *failures of who we are* often occur with little to no feedback for those who make them.¹⁶

The final category of leadership failures taught at West Point is *failures of who we want to be*. Failures of this type violate the leader's core values, fundamental beliefs, and personal purpose as a leader.¹⁷ Failures of this type often occur when the leader's defenses are down – when he/she is fatigued, emotionally spent, angry, or afraid. Unlike *failures of who we are*, *failures of who we want to be* are immediately recognizable and tell the leader that he or she is not living up to his or her own expectations.¹⁸

Although the consequences of each type of leadership failure can be great, *failures of who we want to be* traumatize leaders the most. They can cause immense self-doubt and usually result in severe disappointment because they are an overt demonstration that we are not living up to our deepest-held beliefs and values.¹⁹ As the

conclusions of this paper will draw out, our reaction to failure is a significant determinant of our ability to recover and go on to thrive as a successful leader in the future. With that in mind, we'll next examine the psychology behind experiencing failure.

The Psychology of Failure

For modern strategic leaders – people who are high achievers, highly competitive, and have been repetitively taught that “failure is not an option” – experiencing failure can be a traumatic experience. Any leader who has experienced a significant failure knows how it assaulted their psyche – leaving their self-confidence, world-view, and fundamental beliefs on their capacity as a leader damaged. When the leader's decisions can be the determinant of life or death for his followers, or when the outcome of the campaign or war hinges on the leader's actions, the psychological trauma of failure can be profound. Although the word “trauma” is normally associated with physical injury, psychologists also use the word “as a metaphor for life events that tear at the psychological skin that protects us, leaving us emotionally wounded.”²⁰ From a psychological perspective, trauma is defined by the reactions a person has to an event – how that event is perceived – more than by the event itself. Therefore, what may be highly traumatic to one person may not be to another.²¹

Despite the damage that trauma inflicts on us, it also presents an opportunity to grow beyond our previous limits – a phenomenon referred to by psychologists as *posttraumatic growth*.²² Man's general understanding that traumatic suffering can stimulate positive changes is ancient. The early writings of many cultures and religions, from the ancient Hebrews and Greeks to the early Christians, Hindus and Buddhists, refer to transformative changes that can result from trauma.²³ According to famed

psychologist Abraham Maslow, traumatic experiences can be the most important life lessons a person can experience.²⁴

The effects of psychological trauma can be crippling and are characterized by the terms *intrusion, avoidance, and arousal*.²⁵ Intrusion refers to the phenomena where the traumatic event revisits our memory involuntarily. It intrudes in our daily lives and prolongs negative emotional reactions to the trauma. In addition to the inability to remember facets of the traumatic event, the term avoidance describes the mechanism whereby people avoid stimuli – people, places, sounds, etc. – in order to block out memories of the traumatic event. The lingering effects of psychological trauma can also involve a heightened state of arousal where the victim experiences increased anxiety, insomnia, and difficulty controlling emotions.²⁶ The daily pressures that strategic leaders bear without these psychological demons are immense. The additional burdens that intrusion, avoidance, and arousal create have the potential to crush a leader under their weight, forever stunting their growth.

How does a leader bear these additional burdens and turn the psychological trauma of failure into what Maslow believed were the most important learning experiences a human could have? According to the psychology of posttraumatic growth, it is the leader's struggle with these burdens and the new reality he faces following failure that determines if he will grow from failure into a better leader.²⁷ A critical aspect of that struggle is the process of reflection:

Reflection is a highly personal cognitive process. When a person engages in reflection, he or she takes an experience from the outside world, brings it inside the mind, turns it over, makes connections to other experiences, and filters it through personal biases. If this process results in learning, the individual then develops inferences to approach the

external world in a way that is different from the approach that would have been used, had reflection not occurred.²⁸

Through reflection, leaders contend with the new reality created by their failure to make sense of it and to comprehend its significance.²⁹ To find this significance, leaders must rebuild their “assumptive world” - their framework of values, fundamental beliefs, goals, priorities, and purpose that guide their approach to leadership.³⁰ This framework is “the scaffolding of our lives...It is when this scaffolding comes crashing down that we...need to rebuild a new assumptive world” that reflects the reality we face following failure.³¹ Through the process of reflection, the failed leader rebuilds his assumptive world – the framework that guides his approach to leadership – in a way that accommodates the new reality he faces.³² Through this re-engineered framework, alternative leadership approaches are revealed that would otherwise remain hidden.

Growing from the adversity of failure also requires a tolerance for uncertainty. Leaders must accept that the outcomes of their decisions and actions are never certain.³³ But first, leaders experiencing failure must accept that they are ultimately responsible for their decisions and their actions following a setback.³⁴ Although every leader will experience adversity, the true test of their character and the true determinant of their future leadership potential is how they contend with and take responsibility for their actions that led to failure.

Now that we have examined the psychological theory behind growing from failure, next we will look at a study that investigated how contemporary leaders grew following failure in order to determine if practice and theory align.

Analysis of Leader Behavior Following Failure

In her study entitled *Learning Through Failure: A Descriptive Analysis of Leader Behavior*, Catherine Mulqueen conducted an in-depth examination of how leaders learn from failure. Her study included an extensive literature review as well as qualitative inquiry to collect data through interviews of a group of leaders who experienced failure at some point in their career.³⁵ Doctor Mulqueen interviewed a group of forty-three leaders who were identified as good examples of the ability to learn from failure. The majority of the research subjects were senior executives in their organizations, with a minority serving as mid-level managers, academics, and one physician.³⁶ Doctor Mulqueen interviewed each subject and analyzed their responses to determine how they made sense of their failures, what they learned from them, and the behaviors they exhibited to recover and grow as leaders. Both aspects of the study revealed three major findings regarding how leaders learn and recover from failure.³⁷

First, the study demonstrated that for those who recovered from failure, the experience of failure incited critical reflection. Reflection following failure creates the opportunity for leaders to gain wisdom, insight, and valuable perspectives that otherwise may remain hidden. In the process of critical reflection, the study subjects noted that they took the time to critically reflect on their experience, sought and found new perspectives with regard to their leadership, and synthesized or made meaning of their failure experience. As a result, the study subjects were able to develop new expertise, skills, problem solving approaches, and an acute appreciation of what they were responsible for.³⁸

Second, the study revealed three key personality traits that enable leaders to learn and recover from failure – resilience, humility, and perseverance. The Center for

Creative Leadership defines resiliency as “the ability to recover quickly from change, hardship, or misfortune.”³⁹ Resilience is derived from self-confidence and attitude and provides a measure of immunity from the effects of stress that are caused by adversity.⁴⁰ Humility, in the context of the study, is described as the characteristic of remaining teachable – a mindset that there is always something to be learned. While the study participants didn’t overtly claim humility, their underlying humility was apparent in the character and substance of their interview responses. They demonstrated that throughout their struggle with failure, they remained open to alternative viewpoints and perspectives.⁴¹ In many cases, the study subjects believed that perseverance in correcting the weaknesses identified through failure was critical in the learning and recovery that followed.⁴²

Finally, the study revealed that leaders who recover from failure transform the experience of failure into an opportunity to learn and grow. These individuals view failure not as a state of being, but as an event that can be exploited for its experiential value. Embodying the phrase “no pain, no gain,” leaders who recover from failure understand that, while the experience is painful, it is a valuable lesson – a lesson with a powerful ability to broaden perspectives, illuminate new insights, develop improved skills, and defend against hubris.⁴³

With a better understanding of what the contemporary body of knowledge says about learning from failure, we now turn to history to see what it teaches regarding how strategic leaders learned and recovered from failure. Two great American strategic leaders will be examined – Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant and General Dwight D. Eisenhower. In each case, this paper will examine the strategic leader’s failures,

identify the outcomes and consequences of his failures, examine what he learned, and identify the leadership competencies, traits, and behaviors that he employed in recovering from and growing out of failure.

Historical Cases

Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant

Ulysses S. Grant represents a mystery to many historians and biographers. It is puzzling how a man so fraught with nearly a decade of disappointment and failure could rise to the pinnacle of Union military leadership only thirty-three months after he reentered the Federal army at the beginning of the United States Civil War.⁴⁴ While some authors attribute his ascendancy out of failure to great doses of resiliency and perseverance, others postulate that his long experience with failure played no role in his success as a strategic leader.⁴⁵ While the former explanation is plausible, the latter is barren and offers little in explaining Grant's rise from the ashes of failure.

Ulysses S. Grant was an accidental soldier. He lived an ordinary childhood under the careful eye of a demanding, although loving father. By the time he was a teenager, he exhibited few marketable skills and no interest in his father's profession as a businessman. Seeking alternatives for a son that demonstrated little proclivity for business, Grant's father, Jesse, obtained a nomination for Ulysses to attend the United States Military Academy. He did so without consulting his son first. Despite his initial protestations, Grant reluctantly entered West Point in 1839, graduating in 1843 as a second lieutenant in the United States Army.⁴⁶

Grant's initial trial by fire came early in his career during America's war with Mexico. In the course of the war, the accidental soldier proved to be a steady, introspective, yet aggressive combat leader. Assigned as an infantry regiment

quartermaster at the height of the war, Grant eschewed the protective shield that his support role provided and actively sought out the opportunity to engage in combat.⁴⁷ At Resaca de la Palma, Monterrey, and Chapultepec, he volunteered to participate in or lead assaults on enemy positions, demonstrating initiative and courage under fire each time. At Monterrey, he volunteered to conduct a risky ammunition resupply through an unsecured section of the city. Forced to use his horse's body as a shield from enemy fire while at full gallop, Grant made it through to retrieve the ammunition and fresh troops, but not before his beleaguered unit decided to retreat.⁴⁸ On two occasions during the battle of Chapultepec, Grant personally reconnoitered the enemy lines, found vulnerable enemy flanks and subsequently led attacks against them. In the second attack, Grant seized a church, ordered a disassembled mountain howitzer up into the church belfry, reassembled the howitzer and brought heavy fire onto the enemy positions.⁴⁹ Grant proved to be a courageous soldier who was possessed of ingenuity, aggressiveness, and a calm deportment under fire. Grant's performance in Mexico earned him a reputation as a "man of fire" among his fellow soldiers, but more importantly, taught him that he had what it took to lead men in combat.⁵⁰

Following the war, he married his sweetheart, Julia Dent, and started a family while continuing to serve in the peacetime army. Early in 1852, his regiment, the Fourth Infantry, was ordered to California. Unable to bring his young wife and son, Grant reluctantly departed their company and the source of strength that they provided him. Throughout the arduous journey that included a harrowing overland route across the Isthmus of Panama, Grant continued to demonstrate the characteristics and capability that served him well in the Mexican War. Assigned the responsibility of leading the

regiment's dependants and baggage across the isthmus, Grant battled against the terrain, weather, unreliable logistics and a cholera outbreak. Even though many dependants died during the journey due to these circumstances, those who made it attributed their survival to Grant's leadership and resourcefulness.⁵¹ Despite this triumph, Grant's arrival in California marked the beginning of his rapid downward spiral as a young army officer.

Grant's posting to California from 1852 to 1854 was marked by an acute longing for his family's presence, boredom, severe bouts of depression, and repeated failures in moneymaking ventures. In an attempt to fund his family's reunion with him in California (he could not afford it on his army salary alone) and prove his ability to prosper in business, Grant embarked on several economic ventures. Along with fellow officers, he grew and harvested crops, raised livestock, sold ice to San Franciscans and operated a boardinghouse. Due to imprudence, naivety, and much bad luck, he failed in all these ventures. In a letter to Julia in early 1854, Grant wrote "My dear Wife...You do not know how forsaken I feel here!"⁵² Grant was languishing in a sense of helplessness.

Grant's multiple requests for reassignment closer to his family were denied.⁵³ To make matters worse, his commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Robert Buchanan, disliked Grant. By all accounts a toxic leader, Buchanan held a long-standing grudge against Grant stemming from an incident that occurred when Grant was a young lieutenant and Buchanan was a Captain. In 1843 at Jefferson Barracks, Missouri, Captain Buchanan observed Lieutenant Grant arriving late to the officer's mess. As the president of the mess, Captain Buchanan imposed a fine of one bottle of wine for the infraction. When Grant remarked that many more such fines would leave him

penniless, Buchanan snapped back: “Grant, young people should be seen, not heard!”⁵⁴

As a result of this incident, Buchanan held a grudge against Grant and took every opportunity to make Grant’s already sorrowful existence in California even worse.⁵⁵

These circumstances ultimately led to Grant’s resignation from the army in 1854.

Historians do not agree on the ultimate cause of Grant’s resignation. While some attribute it to drunkenness on duty and the threat of court-martial, others explain that the totality of the circumstances, exacerbated by Buchanan’s grudge against him, left him with no other choice.⁵⁶

Regardless of the proximate cause of his unhappy departure from the army, the damage to his name and his self-esteem was done. He gained a reputation as a drunk and a failure who was forced out of the Army.⁵⁷ In his memoirs, Grant disposes of his departure from the Army in short shrift, writing only that “I saw no chance of supporting them [his family] on the Pacific coast out of my pay as an army officer. I concluded, therefore, to resign...”⁵⁸ Despite this, the psychological trauma of Grant’s failure to prosper in California must have been significant. Nineteenth century American culture equated a man’s success with the quality of his character. In addition to the intangible personal qualities that the word “character” implies today, in the 1800’s a man’s character was also judged by “the estimate attached to the individual by the community.”⁵⁹ Returning to his family in White Haven, Missouri, Grant must have felt the immense psychological burden of his failures, especially when combined with the harsh judgments of his father, peers, and community. Although his memoirs provide no evidence of this, the fact that he delayed the final leg of his journey home until he

received a letter from Julia encouraging him that he was still welcome, is a telling indicator of the state of his psyche at this time.⁶⁰

Grant experienced little success over the course of the next seven years. From the time that he reunited with Julia in 1853 until he was appointed a Colonel of Volunteers in 1861, Grant tried, and failed, to prosper as a farmer, a politician, and again as a businessman. At the start of the Civil War, Grant appealed to both the Adjutant General of the Army and to Major General George McClellan to restore his commission in the Army. The Adjutant General failed to reply to his request and General McClellan refused to see him. But on June 16, 1861, the governor of Illinois, Richard Yates, appointed Grant a colonel and the commander of the Twenty-First Regiment of the Illinois Volunteers.⁶¹ By March 1864, Grant was promoted to Lieutenant General and appointed the General in Chief of the Union Army.⁶² A little over a year later, Grant had forced Confederate General Robert E. Lee's surrender and effectively ended the war.

Grant's rise from failure between 1861 and 1865 was not without adversity. After rocketing into the national spotlight following his victories at Forts Henry and Donelson in February 1862, Grant was temporarily surprised by the enemy at Shiloh in April of that year.⁶³ His professional reputation once again questioned, Grant frustratingly slogged around Vicksburg in 1862 and 1863 before finally forcing the city's surrender after a long siege.⁶⁴ Later, after he had been brought to the East and achieved the highest military rank in Federal service, he still made questionable decisions that resulted in the horrible costs of Cold Harbor – decisions that he still regretted at the twilight of his life.⁶⁵ The fog, friction, and uncertainty of war gave him no quarter and he

made mistakes. Despite all these trials Grant learned from each experience, becoming more effective with each increase in responsibility.⁶⁶ Grant won campaigns, gained and maintained President Lincoln's confidence, and ultimately defeated the Confederate rebellion, becoming the most influential and successful Union general of the American Civil War.⁶⁷ Grant's immense success as a military commander ultimately led to his election as President of the United States in 1868. How did Grant transform his story from one of enduring failure to one of dramatic, resounding success and consequence? What did he learn from his decade of failure, how did it shape his subsequent strategic leadership, and how did these lessons manifest themselves in his actions?

Writing about Grant's life prior to 1852, historians describe Grant as observant, self-reliant, loyal, contemplative, courageous, cool under fire, able to use common sense to solve problems and capable of making do with what he was given.⁶⁸ These same authors, in analyzing Grant's Civil War career, repeatedly examine these traits and abilities as they re-emerged from 1861-1865.⁶⁹ Grant therefore possessed the inherent leadership abilities and personal qualities that made him the most successful general officer of his generation before he suffered repeated failure. "The resources...on which he drew to win the war had been within him all along."⁷⁰ His failures did nothing to dilute these qualities. They did, however, strengthen those character traits that he relied on so heavily in leading the Union forces to victory - his resilience, determination, and perseverance. These characteristics, combined with a strategic brilliance found nowhere among his peers, enabled him to recognize and relentlessly pursue the one end that would bring a conclusion to the war – the destruction of the Confederate armies.⁷¹

While there is little in his memoirs to tell us that Grant reflected greatly on his failures, there is definite evidence that he was a man of reflection. During and after the war with Mexico, he reflected on the qualities and performance of his leaders, such as Zachary Taylor, whom he admired the most. He thought about the lessons that his first experience of combat taught him. He learned that bravery alone is no substitute for well-trained, effectively led soldiers. He concluded that the offense was preferable over the defense, and that offensive maneuver was his preferred technique over the frontal assault. He also learned that he was calm under fire.⁷² Reflecting on the tough strategic and political situation that Major General George B. McClellan faced in 1862, Grant claimed that he would have likely suffered the same fate as McClellan if he had not had the opportunity to fight “his way along and up” during the Civil War.⁷³

Colonel Arthur L. Conger, writing about General Grant’s performance in the Civil War, asserts that Grant’s success was due, in large part, to his capacity to reflect on his failures and alter his methods and concept of command as a result. Doing so enabled Grant to become a better general with each successive battle and campaign. Grant’s ability to reflect on his failures and learn from them distinguished him from most of his Federal contemporaries who failed to reflect on their own failures and repeated them as a result. Colonel Conger writes that Grant’s “periods of protracted inaction and reflection were as essential to his mastering of the military art as were the intermittent periods of activity.”⁷⁴

Although sparse, Grant’s own words reveal that he was a man who used reflection as a path to greater wisdom and growth. In a July 1879 letter to Admiral Daniel Ammen, Grant wrote: “After two days’ reflection on your suggestion of the part I

should take, or consent to take, if offered, in the matter of the Interoceanic Canal via Nicaragua, I telegraphed the Secretary of the Navy, Washington: Tell Ammen approve – Grant.”⁷⁵ Grant’s memoirs of the Civil War reveal that he reflected on his failures during the war. In one telling passage, he wrote: “I have always regretted that the last assault at Cold Harbor was ever made. I might say the same thing of the assault of the 22d of May, 1863, at Vicksburg. At Cold Harbor no advantage whatever was gained to compensate for the heavy loss we sustained.”⁷⁶

By reflecting on his failures, Grant gained a powerful sense of self-awareness. He gained a clear vision of himself as a man and as a leader. Through reflection on his setbacks Grant “taught himself who he was...When he looked inward, Grant had no illusions and few delusions.”⁷⁷ He gained humility and, as evidenced by the passage above from his memoirs, was able to admit to his own faults. Grant’s self-awareness also made him a resilient commander, able to absorb failure, rapidly adjust to the new reality he faced following failure, and continue the attack.⁷⁸ Through reflection on his failures, Grant also gained a tolerance for uncertainty, an understanding that despite his greatest efforts in life and in war, there were many things that were beyond his control. This gave Grant the confidence to trust in himself and solidified his theory of leadership in war: “Find out where your enemy is. Get at him as soon as you can. Strike him hard as you can and as often as you can, and keep moving on.”⁷⁹

We now shift focus to Dwight D. Eisenhower – a strategic leader who, like Grant, came from humble beginnings, stumbled accidentally into a career in the army, suffered significant failures, and went on to lead his country to victory in war.

General Dwight D. Eisenhower

Unlike Grant, whose military career was relatively short-lived before he experienced significant failure, Dwight D. Eisenhower was an exceptionally successful soldier for decades before the great failures that historians attribute to him. Graduating from West Point in 1914, by 1922 he had achieved the highest rank of anyone in his West Point class and was the only one to have been awarded the Distinguished Service Medal.⁸⁰ Having achieved these accomplishments despite missing the chance to lead men in combat in World War I is a testament to his success and the value that the army placed in his leadership.

With two successful tours commanding training units already under his belt, Eisenhower continued to excel. Although promotions in rank were extremely hard to come by in the American Army during the inter-war years, Eisenhower rose steadily in rank and exponentially in responsibility and influence. In addition to graduating at the top of his class in the Army Command and Staff College and the Army War College, Eisenhower went on to serve twice as a successful battalion commander, as a key aide to General Douglas MacArthur for seven years, and as a chief of staff at both the Corps and Army level.⁸¹

While Eisenhower's skill and performance was largely responsible for his ascendancy to the rank of Brigadier General by December 1941, chance played a major role in propelling him on the path to Supreme Allied Commander. Four days after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, a senior planner in the U.S. Army War Plans Division, Colonel Charles W. Bundy, was killed in a plane crash. Urgently needing a worthy replacement, Army Chief of Staff General George Marshall picked Eisenhower.⁸² Thus began the relationship that would set Eisenhower on the path to commanding all Allied

forces in the European Theater during World War II. Eisenhower's new assignment greatly increased his exposure to General Marshall, providing Marshall the opportunity to carefully observe Eisenhower's talents and consider his potential. Eisenhower impressed Marshall and gained his confidence. Less than six months later, Marshall would nominate Eisenhower for service as the Commanding General, European Theater of Operations. In doing so, Marshall promoted Eisenhower ahead of over 300 officers who were senior to him.⁸³

General Marshall expected nothing short of excellence from his General Officers. Prior to the United States' entry into World War II, General Marshall forced out of army service nearly 600 officers who were not performing to his exacting standards.⁸⁴ He created a system where high performance was rewarded by rapid advancement made possible by the rapid sacking of those who were not performing.⁸⁵ Marshall instilled this outlook on generalship in his subordinates, including Eisenhower. When Eisenhower assigned General Patton to command II Corps in Tunisia, he advised Patton "You must not retain for one instant any man in a responsible position where you have become doubtful of his ability to do the job. This matter frequently calls for more courage than any other thing you will have to do, but I expect you to be perfectly cold-blooded about it."⁸⁶ Eisenhower's inability to practice what he preached contributed significantly, however, to one of his major failures in World War II.

General Eisenhower's significant failures as the Allied commander of Operation TORCH, the Allied invasion of North Africa, are well documented by historians. His indecision, caution, and failure to impose his will on his commanders resulted in the Allied failure to rapidly capture Tunisia before the Germans reinforced it.⁸⁷ His failure to

remove ineffective commanders, as he told his subordinates that they must, contributed to significant Allied defeats at Sidi Bou Zid and Kasserine Pass.⁸⁸ He wrung his hands over the decision to relieve the incompetent and cowardly commander of II Corps, Major General Fredendall. His irresolution over Fredendall was highlighted by the episode in which he sent Major General Harmon to II Corps' command post and ordered him to report back to Eisenhower on whether he should relieve Fredendall or the commander of 1st Armored Division, Major General Ward.⁸⁹ This indecisiveness not only contributed towards the defeat at Kasserine Pass, but it also enabled General Rommel's escape after Kasserine. General Eisenhower ordered Fredendall to counter-attack, only to subsequently tolerate Fredendall's failure to act on that order.⁹⁰

Eisenhower's failures resulted in a stalemate in North Africa over the winter of 1942. This stalemate was not the only consequence, however. Following Kasserine, morale back home in the United States plunged as Americans' faith in their fighting forces was shaken. It also significantly damaged the weak confidence that the British already held in the fighting ability of American forces and their generals.⁹¹ Eisenhower continued to waiver in similar ways during Operation HUSKY in Sicily, where he allowed his commanders, Major General Patton and British General Sir Bernard Montgomery, to dictate the pace of the campaign and needlessly compete with each other. The result was an operational stalemate that allowed virtually all of the opposing German and Italian forces to escape to the Italian mainland.⁹² Again during Operation Avalanche, 5th Army's invasion of the Italian mainland at Salerno, General Eisenhower failed to follow his own advice in his handling of 5th Army's commander, Major General Mark Clark. General Clark's faulty plan and leadership put the success of the operation at

grave risk, but General Eisenhower could not put his friendship with Clark aside and remove him. Instead, he recast the blame of 5th Army's near defeat on one of Clark's subordinate Corps commanders, Major General Dawley, relieving him instead.⁹³

General Eisenhower's operational leadership in the campaigns of 1942 and 1943, when judged through the critical lens that General Marshall viewed other officers, was an abject failure.

Yet, General Marshall and President Roosevelt did not relieve General Eisenhower following these failures. Eisenhower was aware of them, and at times thought he may be sacked.⁹⁴ Why Marshall or the President did not relieve him is an interesting question, but is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, in December 1943 President Roosevelt appointed General Eisenhower as the Supreme Commander of Operation OVERLORD, the Allied invasion of Normandy.⁹⁵ Despite General Eisenhower's rocky start as a leader at the operational-strategic nexus, he went on to lead the Allies to total victory over Germany in the seventeen months that followed. His success in 1944 and 1945 illuminated his qualities as a leader so brightly that he no longer lived in the shadow of his mentor, General Marshall. Like Grant, General Eisenhower's success ultimately propelled him to the presidency of the United States. Besides being spared relief by his superiors, how did Eisenhower transform his failure into ultimate success in France and Germany? What did he learn from his failures and how did he put these lessons into action? How did he transform failure into such resounding success?

Historians describe Eisenhower as a strong leader from the very beginning of his military career. He led his fellow cadets at West Point in the pursuit of adventure and,

at times, against the machinery of West Point's rules.⁹⁶ As a young commander leading tank training at Camp Colt, Pennsylvania, his strong leadership was evident in the morale and discipline exhibited by the thousands of men under his command.⁹⁷ He was a demanding yet fair leader who understood the human dimension of leadership – the imperative to connect personally with his subordinates and build teams – and he eschewed regulations for common sense.⁹⁸ He was also proud and determined to stand out in the Army despite missing the opportunity to serve in combat during World War I.⁹⁹ He was selfless and entirely devoted to his duty as a soldier.¹⁰⁰ As a staff officer in the inter-war years he exhibited a boldness that later eluded him in the Mediterranean campaigns. Serving as Third Army's chief of staff during maneuvers against Second Army, Eisenhower was the chief architect behind Third Army's daring battle plan that decisively defeated Second Army not once, but twice.¹⁰¹ Although he learned the value of remaining calm under pressure, he still let his emotions get the best of him at times, especially during the years he worked as General McArthur's aide.¹⁰² During his initial trials as a theater commander, these emotions led him to worry incessantly about every detail, many of which he had no control over.¹⁰³ He was also at times hesitant and insecure, giving his subordinates too much rope and at times succumbing to bouts of depression when the chips were down.¹⁰⁴

By the time the Allies invaded Normandy, however, Eisenhower "had grown into his role as supreme commander, becoming big enough to carry it."¹⁰⁵ He found again the boldness that deserted him in the Mediterranean, accepted great risks, and was fully prepared to personally accept the consequences if those risks failed.¹⁰⁶ His failures had hardened him, making him a more resilient commander.¹⁰⁷ He became steadfast and

resolute in his convictions, bending his subordinates to his will, whether it was the question to go ahead with the airborne landings on D-Day or his determination to pursue a broad front over the protest of his ego-driven subordinates Montgomery and Patton.¹⁰⁸ Like his hero General Grant, he was aggressive, determined to grab onto his enemy and submit him to unrelenting pressure.¹⁰⁹ He willed himself always to remain calm under pressure and demanded optimism from his subordinates.¹¹⁰ He also learned to stop worrying about those things he could not control.¹¹¹

Eisenhower's performance in France and Germany was far from perfect. Following the war, some of his subordinate commanders accused him of being afraid to make tough decisions.¹¹² The sharpness of these criticisms is dulled, however, when one considers the political constraints that bound the Supreme Allied Commander's decision-making. He had to balance his decisions against the interests of both the British and American chains of command. He had to maintain unity of effort despite dealing with subordinates who were either unwilling or unable to consider the perspective he had to take in his position – where the military and political considerations of war collided.¹¹³ In spite of these constraints, Eisenhower managed to shed those characteristics and actions that hampered success in North Africa and Sicily while maintaining the best aspects of his leadership that he honed in the years before the war. He was a much more flexible commander in France and Germany, able to adapt his approach to leadership and command as the situation dictated.¹¹⁴

General Marshall's decision not to remove Eisenhower after his failures in TORCH and HUSKY gave Eisenhower the opportunity to experience failure as an event, or series of events, rather than a state of being. Given another chance,

Eisenhower was able to learn from experience. Eisenhower believed that this quality, the ability to learn from experience, was “priceless” in commanders.¹¹⁵ The historiography, as well as Eisenhower’s own writings, provides evidence that he learned from the experience of failure through critical self-reflection. Historian Geoffrey Perret tells us that, when Eisenhower found time, he reflected on his performance “looking at things he’d done wrong, or at least might have done better.”¹¹⁶ Eisenhower himself tells us that he spent time reflecting on his performance and decisions, trying to make meaning of them. Writing about his decision to enlist the French collaborator Admiral Jean Francois Darlan’s help in securing the French’s support in North Africa, Eisenhower writes that he conducted a “long retrospective study of the situation” that led to his decision to enlist Darlan’s help.¹¹⁷

Stephen Ambrose writes that following TORCH, Eisenhower reflected on his performance and recognized that he was not quick enough to fire commanders who failed to get the job done, especially Major General Fredendall.¹¹⁸ In his own memoir of the war, Eisenhower tries to be gentle regarding his belated decision to relieve Fredendall. He wrote that he “had no intention of recommending Fredendall for reduction or placing the blame for the initial defeats in the Kasserine battle on his shoulders...” although he later acknowledges in the same passage that Fredendall was not cut out for battlefield leadership.¹¹⁹

On this issue of relieving commanders who were not performing, Eisenhower’s approach was matured and nuanced through reflection. Rather than the dismissive view he proffered to subordinates during the Mediterranean campaigns, telling commanders that they must ruthlessly eliminate commanders who were not performing,

in his memoir written after the war, Eisenhower writes “The relief of a combat leader is something that is not to be lightly done in war.”¹²⁰ He applied this mature approach in dealing with General Patton in 1944. After Patton drew the rage of powerful critics back home over ill-considered public comments he made at the opening of a welcoming club in England, considering previous high-profile blunders Patton had already committed, Eisenhower had significant justification to relieve him.¹²¹ Rather than bending to the pressure and taking the easy way out, Eisenhower ultimately decided to retain Patton’s leadership, telling him that “You owe us some victories; pay off and the world will deem me a wise man.”¹²² Eisenhower recognized that Patton’s ability to persistently ravage the Germans outweighed his many faults that drew harsh criticism and took up so much of Eisenhower’s time.

Bouncing Back From Failure

The study of the psychology of failure and the contemporary analysis of learning from failure identifies specific traits that leaders who recover from failure exhibited. These included resilience, humility, perseverance, and a tolerance for uncertainty. Both General Grant and General Eisenhower exhibited most of these traits in large doses following their failures. General Grant’s repeated failures between 1852 and 1861 hardened him against adversity. When he found a second chance to lead men at arms, this resilience enabled him to singularly focus on victory, to persevere in the face of tactical defeats and the horrible human costs that he had to pay to attain that victory.

Although General Eisenhower’s failures were less acute than Grant’s and bore fewer personal consequences, they nevertheless hardened him for command in France and Germany. Like Grant, Eisenhower learned to weather setbacks, tactical defeats, and the squabbling of his subordinates, always determined to keep the pressure on the

German Army until he achieved its destruction. This was most apparent during the Battle of the Bulge when Eisenhower insisted that the German counterattack into the Ardennes in December 1944 was an opportunity to destroy the counterattacking German forces rather than a disaster for Allied forces.¹²³ Eisenhower persevered in his convictions on the broad front strategy and the hard, uncertain decisions that he had to make, such as insisting on the airborne landings on D-Day.

As born out in the discussion on the psychology of failure and the contemporary analysis of learning from failure, critically reflecting on their failures is an instrumental action that leaders take to recover and grow from failures. Through critical self-analysis, leaders are able to make meaning of failure and reframe their conception of how to lead. Both Grant and Eisenhower reflected on their failures, and from this reflection, they emerged more effective leaders. In Grant, reflection enabled him to cast aside self-doubt and unleash the military commander who was dormant in the decade of failure that he endured. His confidence restored, Grant became unrelenting in pursuit of his strategic objective: destruction of the Confederate Army with the resources he had at hand. In Eisenhower, reflection matured his approach to leadership, revealing the boldness he misplaced during the Mediterranean campaigns and instilling in him the resolute determination and confidence he needed to hold his strategy together in France and Germany without harming the delicate political balance of the Alliance in the process.

Finally, another key factor that enabled Grant and Eisenhower to recover from failure and go on to become the most successful strategic leaders of their time is the second chance that they were given. The Governor of Illinois gave Grant his second

chance when he appointed Grant Colonel of the Twenty First Regiment, Illinois Volunteers.¹²⁴ Eisenhower's second chance came in the form of General Marshall's benevolence. Rather than swiftly relieving Eisenhower like he did so many other officers, Marshall held on to General Eisenhower. Given a second chance, both Generals Grant and Eisenhower were able to apply the lessons of failure, becoming true strategic leaders and charting the course of world history.

Perhaps, in the end, this is the greatest lesson that we can learn from the study of Grant's and Eisenhower's failures. All leaders will fail at some point – either in what they do, who they are, or who they want to be. Failure will cast the leader at the feet of their superior where second chances will be offered or denied. Leaders in the position to give a second chance, therefore, must first understand that failure is an event that will happen to every leader at some point in their career. After witnessing failure on the part of their subordinate, leaders must also be able to recognize whether their subordinate will be “worthy of his sufferings” or not.¹²⁵ Considering the examples provided by Grant and Eisenhower, these insights suggest some modifications that the U.S. military profession should make to leader development programs.

First, leadership training and education should instruct leaders on the concept of leadership growth through failure. Rather than treating leadership failure as a binary function – that a leader is either a failure or he is not – this education should acknowledge that failure is not a state of being, but rather it is an event that can result in leadership growth. West Point's lesson on leadership failure cited at the beginning of this paper is a good start. But this education should be expanded to all officer candidate schools, Reserve Officer Training Corps programs, and noncommissioned

officer courses. It should also deliberately explore the failures of great leaders, the consequences of those failures, and highlight how they emerged from the adversity of failure to become great leaders. This education should be reinforced throughout the professional military education continuum, with implementation and incorporation into curricula that is tailored to the education and experience level of the students. While its implementation at the entry level may best be accomplished in the form of a lecture, at the intermediate and senior level it could be addressed through case studies, guided discussions, or facilitator-led seminar dialogue.

In addition to acknowledging that all leaders fail at some point and that these failures can be opportunities for leadership growth, leader development programs must also address how leaders can distinguish between failures that should be tolerated and those that should not or cannot be tolerated. Unlike most other professions, failures in military leadership often have deadly consequences. As a result, tolerance for failure in the military has to be limited and highly discriminatory. This tolerance however, cannot be proscriptive, as these decisions by their nature do not conform to a set of black and white rules. This topic – how to educate leaders to recognize whether a subordinate leader is “worthy of his sufferings” as a result of failure – merits a detailed treatment beyond the scope of this paper and should be considered as an additional line of research and study. It too, however, should be continually reinforced throughout the professional military education continuum.

Finally, our leadership development programs should introduce the importance of reflection as a tool for growth early in the military leader’s career. The U.S. military culture emphasizes leadership through decisive action. Leaders are taught that our

decision cycles must be faster than our enemies' decision cycles, that hesitation in thought and action can cost lives. We are rightly taught these things because across the range of military operations they are true. We are not, however, taught early or often enough the value of using the lulls in action that we all experience throughout our career as opportunities for serious and deliberate reflection on our experiences. Neither are we educated on the various techniques that have been developed to facilitate effective reflection.¹²⁶ We put as much time and effort into the After Action Review or Hot Wash that our hectic schedules allow, only to file the reports away and quickly move on to the next operation or training exercise. Only through deliberate reflection, however, can we fully comprehend the meaning of General James Mattis' message that leaders must "engage your brain before you engage your weapon."¹²⁷

Endnotes

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