

## BOOK REVIEW

# A Review of "Call Sign Chaos: Learning to Lead"

Jim Mattis & Bing West, New York, NY: Random House (2019)

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*"To each there comes in their lifetime a special moment when they are figuratively tapped on the shoulder and offered the chance to do a very special thing, unique to them and fitted to their talents. What a tragedy if that moment finds them unprepared or unqualified for that which could have been their finest hour." (pg. 54)*

*- Winston Churchill*

James Mattis retired as a U.S. Marine Corps (USMC) General and continued his service as the 26th Secretary of Defense. On 20 December 2018, he submitted his resignation to the President of the United States. He wrote, "Because you have the right to have a Secretary of Defense whose views are better aligned with yours on these and other subjects, I believe it is right for me to step down from my position." (pg. 246)

Some speculated he would write a tell-all account of his time as the Secretary of Defense. That would not be the case and it is not what this book is about. Mattis was clear he would not discuss a sitting President, a continuation of his lifelong commitment to the military serving civilian authority, "even when there are a hundred reasons to disagree." (pg. 124)

Instead, Mattis went to work with Bing West to finalize an account of his leadership growth during his four decades of public service, "...to convey the lessons I learned for others who might benefit." (pg. xiii) If one reads carefully, there is a storyline in the book guiding the reader to his resignation decision.

In writing the book, it appears Mattis continues the long line of writers that documented their experiences for which he relied on in his own preparation. In Mattis' words, "By studying how others have dealt with similar circumstances, I became exposed to leadership examples that accelerated my expanding understanding of combat. Reading is an honor and a gift from a warrior or historian who, a decade or a thousand years ago, set aside time to write – they are having a conversation with you." (pg. 42)

Of great importance is how the book uses Mattis' military experience at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels to guide leaders at all levels in their own development. In addition to the topic of leadership, Mattis makes clear his conclusions on the inseparable, vital importance of character and morality when America conducts military

operations, and the importance of cultural expertise and understanding. He repeats throughout the book the importance of “instilling personal initiative, aggressiveness, and risk-taking as it doesn’t spring forward spontaneously on the battlefield. It must be cultivated for years and inculcated, even rewarded, in an organization’s culture.” (pg. 45)

The book is organized around the three types of leadership Mattis found necessary in his experiences: direct, executive, and strategic. Each level of leadership, and how Mattis prepared, is conveyed through historical examples of his time leading Marines and joint/combined organizations later in his career.

Mattis communicated the leadership fundamentals of competence, caring, and conviction were necessary at all three levels of his leadership experience. It is important to note that these fundamentals guided his continuous focus on leadership competency throughout his career.

He is direct and unforgiving in his commitment to preparation and self-reflection, “in the military, we exist to be prepared...If you haven’t read hundreds of books, you are functionally illiterate and you will be incompetent because your personal experiences alone aren’t broad enough to sustain you...reading sheds light on the dark path ahead. By traveling into the past, I enhanced my grasp of the present.” (pg. 42) Always striving to ensure his preparation for each new and larger problem he was given, Mattis shows how he painstakingly sought the advice and expertise of others. Frederick the Great, Wellington, Marcus Aurelius, Sun Tzu, and Malham Wakin are just a few from the long list he consulted.

At every step of his experience, Mattis understood a leader’s role is problem solving. “If you don’t like problems, stay out of leadership...smooth sailing teaches nothing.” (pg. 158) This is a key point. Leaders learn from mistakes, their own and others’ mistakes.

Mistakes are the tuition and “a necessary bridge to learn how to do things right.” (pg. 166)

Finally, I found it refreshing and satisfying how Mattis’ writing conveyed the journey in his development of coup d’oeil during his career. Mattis quoted Napoleon’s memoirs, “There is a gift of being able to see at a glance the possibilities offered by the terrain...one can call it coup d’oeil (to see in the blink of an eye).” (pg. 53) He leaned further on Clausewitz, “his ability to see things simply, to identify the whole business of war completely with himself, that is the essence of good generalship. Only if the mind works in this comprehensive fashion can it achieve the freedom it needs to dominate events and not be dominated by them.” (pg. 53)

Mattis’ approach is especially useful to new leaders with a future of possibilities ahead of them. They get a detailed example of the constant preparation they will undertake in their own journey –developing rapid discernment of the relevant in complex and wicked problem sets. The more seasoned leaders will find comfort and familiarity as they will likely visualize their own reflections interlaced in Mattis’ work.