Book Review

THE STRATEGIC CORPORAL REVISITED: CHALLENGES FACING COMBATANTS IN 21ST-CENTURY WARFARE

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The Strategic Corporal Revisited: Challenges Facing Combatants in 21st-Century Warfare is an edited book that explores the complexity of future warfare from an Australian military perspective. The concept of the 'strategic corporal' as explained by former United States Marine Corps Commandant, Charles Krulak, in his seminal article "The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War",[1] is used to assess and evaluate a wide variety of important current and future challenges for military leaders. The concept of the 'strategic corporal' refers to low-level military leaders who have to make critical tactical decisions in complex situations that could affect the operational and strategic levels. It also refers to the high demands that military leadership places on soldiers. "Three Block War" refers to different contingencies in which soldiers may have to make decisions while facing challenges or threats across the spectrum of conflict (humanitarian assistance, peacekeeping and warfighting) in the same vicinity (three adjacent city blocks), within a couple of

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[1] Krulak, CC 'The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War' (1999) 83 (1) *Marine Corps Gazette* at 18–22.

hours.

The book focusses on the increasing complexity of the roles and responsibilities of soldiers in demanding conflict situations involving 'three block war'. It points out that soldiers face higher expectations of technical proficiency in the information era to operate sophisticated equipment within interconnected communications and intelligence systems. At the same time, it explains that soldiers are expected to make critical decisions in situations beyond their traditional scope of responsibility and training, especially in complex emergencies, where so-called 'soft science skills' such as language, media liaison, mediation and legal skills become increasingly important. The importance of being able to operate within the context of unfamiliar cultures is highlighted. The book explains the strategic risk if soldiers who control increasingly destructive equipment, make mistakes in applying military force.

The central theme of the book is that the burdens placed on future military leaders will increase, while the future environments within which they will operate will become increasingly complex. The book maps out the various demands and challenges for soldiers, civilians and private contractors within the 'strategic corporal' and 'three block war' context. The preparation of future military leaders is presented as a continuous professional development process that must be supported by overlapping systems within military organisations, including the bureaucracy and leadership systems. The book highlights the importance of education, training and development for soldiers and especially junior leaders, including non-commissioned officers (NCOs). It emphasises the importance of having an overarching leadership system that inculcates the required values and ethics to which an organisation aspires.

The book includes important domains, such as cyber warfare, and considers the influence of advanced technology on future military leaders in complex operations. The book reflects on recent cases in terms of the confines of the Western way of using military forces and ethical questions around it. Besides looking at cyber warfare, new technological developments and future challenges, the book emphasises the negative influence of bureaucratic cultures in armed forces that stifle the concept of the 'strategic corporal'. It covers aspects that suppress the development of dynamic leaders who have to make tough decisions either during missions or in the best interest of a military organisation. The book provides a useful perspective on the overall military organisational requirements to enable the concept of the 'strategic corporal' within the context of Krulak's 'three block war'. While the importance of bureaucratic visions for what future leaders

should be able to do is recognised, although not overstated, the setting of realistic and achievable organisational goals is emphasised.

The underdevelopment of the concept of 'strategic corporal' is highlighted, as well as the paying of lip service to this concept and others, such as *Auftragstaktik*. A clear strong point of the book is that it does not present the concept of the 'strategic corporal' as a silver bullet for overall strategic success and it also does not assume that the military can provide all the solutions to armed conflicts or humanitarian crises. The importance of sound strategic decision-making is properly emphasised. In this sense, the book highlights that strategic blunders may still occur, even if the concept of 'strategic corporal' is applied. The book also presents warfare and its methods as a non-static and constantly changing phenomenon of action and reaction.

The book discusses the future challenges and constraints that soldiers face in 'three block war' situations in significant breadth. Matters discussed are, for instance, the need to operate autonomously, the deployment of fewer soldiers, the transfer of more specialised equipment to normal infantrymen, the importance of force protection, sensitivity to casualties and the well-being of soldiers. The book also considers private contractors, who are part of the strategic landscape. The strategic significance and utility of private contractors, as well as the challenges regarding their use are compared with those of regular troops. The book points out how similar the utility of highly trained soldiers and contractors are, especially in terms of special operations skills.

The overall themes of the chapters of the book can be divided into four parts. The first part (Chapters 1 to 3) pays attention to the contemporary meaning and implementation of the concept of the 'strategic corporal' and the obstacles in this regard. The second part (Chapters 4 and 5) applies the concept of 'strategic corporal' to military contractors and civilians. The third component (Chapters 6 to 8) deals with the challenges that soldiers face in so-called unconventional roles and specifically constabulary tasks, peacekeeping, counterinsurgency and cyber warfare. The last part contains a stand-alone case study on Singapore Armed Forces in Afghanistan, and a concluding chapter. Important features of each chapter are mentioned next.

The first chapter, written by Lovell, provides a background on Krulak and the influence of his work. It also serves as an introduction to the book and explains that the 'strategic corporal' is used as a metaphor or lens to study the high demands and challenges that junior military leaders face as warfare changes in asymmetric ways. The second chapter by Jans focusses the attention on the effect that organisational behaviour (at all levels in a military) has on the overall culture

of leadership. Jans argues that a style of 'stewardship' and 'shared leadership' should be facilitated by leaders to harness both the individual and collective expertise within a group to operate more effectively, instead of just relying on seniority and rank. This chapter points out the barriers to 'shared leadership' within armed forces. The third chapter is an insightful chapter by Adams, with short cases/examples that explain how armed forces can sometimes become complacent and mediocre, conceal the truth, and avoid difficult and unpopular decisions by hiding behind bureaucracy and red tape. The chapter explains this as a major impediment to the development of military capability, as well as the concept of 'strategic corporal' and mission command. It emphasises that military leaders are often not allowed to make decisions based on their values, ethics and military principles pertaining to effectiveness. The tendency to reward compliant behaviour instead of sound leadership is an important issue raised in this chapter, which also covers the tension between the so-called corporate (headquartered) and field armies.

The chapter by Baker and Pfotenhauer, pays attention to the unexpected prominence of private contractors in the new millennium and explores the effect of their use in armed conflict in conjunction with regular troops. It does this by using four themes from Krulak's article: the fluidity and complexity of the tactical environment; the influence of low tactical decisions on strategic success; the outcome of distributed operations and difficulty to provide mutual support in various forms, including command and control; and the omnipresent media. The chapter considers the inherent tensions and blurred lines between being a contractor and being a professional soldier. The campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq (as part of the 'War on Terror') are used as backdrops for the discussion. The fifth chapter, by Ryan, emphasises the important role of civilians (in armed conflict) in order to guide and pursue political and strategic success by means of diplomacy in peace agreements, utilising strategic windows of opportunity, as well as providing expert capacity for operations. The requirement for civilians that could match the level of expertise of their military counterparts is an important point of this chapter.

In Chapter 6, Wills pays attention to how unprepared NCOs often are for low-intensity operations and peacekeeping, especially in terms of training, experience and education. This chapter also highlights that soldiers are often involved in human rights violations and that militaries should provide the necessary training, awareness and systems of reporting and accountability. Chapter 7 by Buchan deals with the ascendance of cyber warfare and the implications of it, which includes the prominent use of civilian contractors. The chapter then raises legal questions on when civilians or civilian contractors can be defined as 'direct participants in hostilities' in cyber warfare and the implications this has for armed

conflict and cyber counter-attacks. Chapter 8, by Lovell, addresses the change in the characteristics of warfare and the reality of unexpected and unconventional tasks that militaries will face in future conflict, including constabulary roles, responding to disasters and counterinsurgency. It argues that technological advances often create the misimpression that warfare no longer involves inputs from human power or fatalities. It explains how soldiers should be educated from a career-path perspective. This is one of the most important chapters in the book.

The chapter by Chan, is a case study on the Singapore Armed Forces. Chan considers their relatively successful role in Afghanistan from 2007 to 2013, as part of the United Nations-sanctioned and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). This case study indicates that the concept of 'strategic corporal' does not have to be pursued consciously for militaries to achieve success in operations. The epilogue by Moffit provides an important and brave criticism and reality check on elitism within military hierarchies from an NCO perspective. He does this by highlighting that strategic failures are often blamed on junior leaders and their poor decision-making and judgment, while strategic successes are claimed by senior officers. Moreover, it is argued that 'lower ranks' receive harsh punishments for mistakes, while senior officers often walk away scot-free from their failures, without being held accountable. It is argued that the solution to eradicating elitism in armed forces is to build adaptive and meritocratic militaries by unlocking the full potential of human capital, as opposed to investing predominantly in expensive military hardware. It is argued that free self-determined and blended educational opportunities should be provided for all soldiers throughout their careers, as a strategic priority. This will fundamentally improve preparedness for unforeseen complex military contingencies and provide career and social mobility within and beyond military service.

The book has three shortcomings. Firstly, although this book is not about military sociology, it says little about the current nature of the military profession and where it is headed. The state of the military profession within a particular country provides important characteristics about the military that should inform current and future measures of reform in armed forces. Secondly, while the book refers to the importance of education and certain subjects, it says little about the current and future trends and thinking on educating future leaders, especially since education is a key element for preparation for an uncertain future. Thirdly, the book does not discuss the training of soldiers for future contingencies at individual, team or unit levels. Consequently, a question that is left unanswered is what the required mix between education, training and development of soldiers should be as part of their career path.

To conclude, the context within which the 'strategic corporal' is used in this book relates predominantly to wars of choice and unconventional operations. The book emphasises that militaries have to adapt, and this has to take place at various levels, including organisational, unit and individual level. At individual level, education is emphasised as a critical success factor to enhance the adaptability of soldiers. Although the book is written largely from an Australian armed forces perspective, it is applicable to other democracies and small powers. This book is strongly recommended for professional soldiers of all ranks and can be a useful reader for leadership and military courses.