Tarnished: Toxic Leadership in the U.S. Military

by George E. Reed

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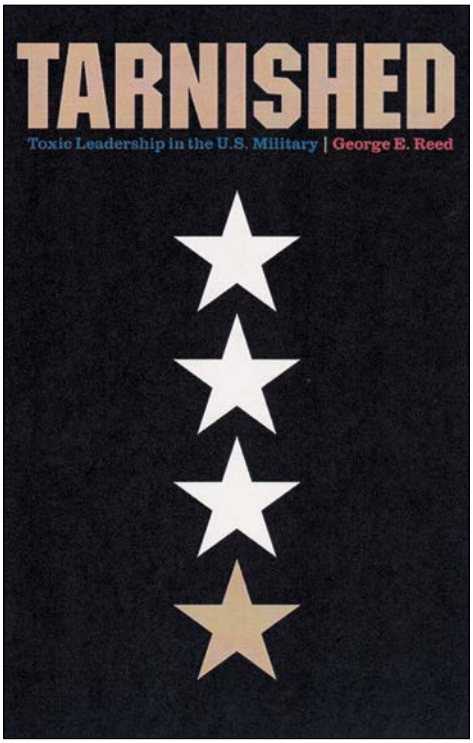

Reed's book is one of the latest in a long line of well-researched studies on the US Army's leadership challenges published over the past four decades, another being "Lying to Ourselves: Dishonesty in the Army Profession," written by researchers at the US Army War College.[1]

Currently dean of the School of Public Affairs at the University of Colorado following a 27 year career as an army officer, including six years as the director of command and leadership studies at the US Army War College, Reed brings a great amount of credibility to this topic.

He acknowledges that the majority of leaders in the US military are good leaders; however, toxic leaders have a disproportionately negative effect on their organizations. A few points he makes seem especially salient to me. The first is that the higher one ascends in the organizational hierarchy, the more favourable one's interpretation of organizational dynamics tends to be. This helps to account for differing views of organizational effectiveness and health among different groups in an organization.

Second, in leadership situations, objective reality is less important than the perceptions of followers; therefore, it is not the intentions of leaders that matter most to followers but their *perceptions* of leaders' intentions, as well as the outcome of the leaders' actions, i.e., good intentions will not help leaders if their intentions are perceived negatively by their followers, or if their actions result in negative outcomes for their units, especially in the area of organizational health. Reed expands upon this point, and notes that if mission accomplishment is always put ahead of how missions are accomplished, militaries will often accept resource-mission mismatch situations, which can lead to cheating and a military culture of "busyness." This view is echoed in the "Lying to Ourselves: Dishonesty in the Army Profession" report.

Third, wise leaders increase subordinates' ability to tolerate uncertainty and avoid engendering a false sense of certainty in their units.

Fourth, typically, there is little policy change outside of periods of crisis response, and even then, reforms often target symptoms of problems, not their causes. Those who have studied the CAF's various responses to sexual misconduct over the past three decades will recognize the validity of this observation in a Canadian context. And those dealing with these issues today will find Reed's chapter on "Toxic Leadership and Sexual Misconduct" instructive.

An underlying theme in Reed's work is the failure of US military personnel evaluation systems to weed out toxic leaders; in fact, they often facilitate toxic leaders' rise in the hierarchy. This is largely due to the fact that these evaluation systems focus unduly upon short term mission accomplishment, the 'what' of mission execution, and give little weight to organizational health during a leader's tenure, the 'how' of mission execution. This can result in toxic leaders rising in an organization while leaving in their wakes a series of demoralized units with unnecessarily high attrition rates. Reed shows that a "circle the wagons" approach can be used by those in power to defend the culture of the organization that has raised them to positions of influence, to cover for toxic leaders, and to curtail the career opportunities of their critics. Recent examples of lying and cover-ups of incidents of harassment, bullying, and sexual assault on sports teams, at universities, and at military academies in Canada and the US, show that this behaviour is not limited to the US Army.

I addressed some of these issues over ten years ago and summarized studies going back to the 1970s that highlighted a "serious gap between the espoused, traditional values and the actual values-in-use of the US armed services, particularly the Army."[2] For example, Reed notes that the US military still has an "up or out" career policy, despite, as noted over 30 years ago, its detrimental effects upon organizational health, and its tendency to perpetuate some of the most dysfunctional behaviours found in US military culture, i.e., micromanagement, a "zero defects" culture, an inability to manage risk wisely, and the widespread deception and dishonesty reported in the "Lying to Ourselves: Dishonesty in the Army Profession" study.

Notwithstanding the emphasis on mission command in CAF doctrine, its culture also supports and rewards micromanagement, as I pointed out in this journal.[3] One reason is that, due to "the tyranny of the posting cycle," CAF leaders have a two-to-three year tenure in command positions where they are evaluated on what change they have initiated change in their units, but rarely are they held accountable for how those changes were executed, because they have moved on to other positions – often promoted for their initial "energy" in getting something started. This cycle encourages leaders to focus upon achieving set goals in a relatively short period of time, the 'what' of performance measurement, but there is little focus in the current CAF performance evaluation system on the 'how,' or the health of a unit, during the tenure of a given leader. Why is this type of behaviour so hard to eradicate?

One reason is that problems related to toxic leadership can be described as 'wicked' problems, because they have social and cultural components which must be addressed in a nonlinear fashion due to incomplete or contradictory knowledge, the number of people and opinions involved, and the interconnected nature of these problems with other problems. However, these leadership issues are often seen by militaries as 'difficult' problems that are linear in nature, and that can be addressed by a step-by-step solution process, such as variants of the Operational Planning Process (OPP). Until the true nature of these problems is recognized, they are unlikely to be solved.

In summary, while this book has some weaknesses, notably Reed's choice of examples in some cases (they could be better given the extensive literature on this topic), it deserves a wide audience. It is easy to read and succinctly summarizes the extensive literature on this topic. I agree wholeheartedly with a colleague who said that "every senior CAF officer should read this book. And a good number of public service Executives working in DND!" I would extend that recommendation to every member of the CAF and DND who has an interest in improving leadership practices. Perhaps equally important is for scholars to give leadership in the CAF the same scrutiny as their American colleagues have given leadership in the US military.

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NOTES

1. Leonard Wong and Stephen J. Gerras, "Lying to Ourselves: Dishonesty in the Army Profession," (Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, February 2015) at http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/PUB1250.pdf, Accessed 10 March 2016.
2. Allan English, *Understanding Military Culture: A Canadian Perspective* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004), p. 81.
3. Allan English, "Whatever happened to mission command in the CAF?" in *Canadian Military Journal* 14, No. 3 (Summer 2014), pp. 73-75.