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THIS WEEK'S FEATURE

Twenty-Six Years Wasn't Enough to Teach Me How to Think. I Am Not Alone.

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What military leaders — and those who advise them — still get wrong about reasoning through hard problems

I spent twenty-six years in uniform. I attended the Air Force Academy. I led people. I was trusted with equipment, with budgets, with lives. Then I left the service and moved into advocacy work — and the view from outside the institution is clarifying in ways that twenty-six years inside it were not.

Today, my Walk the Talk Foundation team works daily with active and retired military and Coast Guard leaders, uniformed and civilian, on individual cases where the system has failed someone in it. We engage with DoD leadership — including, with particular regularity, on the subject of Inspector General reform. We work alongside the veteran and advocate community at large: the people who file complaints, support those who do, and spend their professional lives trying to make the institution more accountable to the people who serve it.

What follows is a catalog of the dissonances we encounter nearly every single day. These are not hypothetical reasoning errors lifted from a philosophy textbook. They are the actual responses — the deflections, the false equivalences, the credentialing, the intellectual shortcuts — that emerge when we raise hard questions with military leadership, DoD officials, and the online community of veterans and advocates who engage with these issues. And we see them in both directions. We see them on LinkedIn, where a byline reading "Strategist," "Senior Leader," or "Servant Leader" precedes a thread that deploys one — or several — of these exact logic failures. We see them across a conference table, from officers with multiple stars on their shoulders, who have navigated decades of institutional advancement and still reach for the same tired deflections when a hard question lands in front of them.

The setting changes. The thinking does not. The uniform deserves better than this. So do the people depending on it.

TWO THINGS CAN BE TRUE AT THE SAME TIME

Refusing to acknowledge that both good and evil can and do exist in parallel is not loyalty, it is a failure of intellectual honesty.

A good person can do a bad thing. A good unit can harbor a bad actor. These two statements are not contradictions — they are simply true, simultaneously, and with uncomfortable frequency. Yet in my experience, military leaders often treat

them as mutually exclusive. If someone has an outstanding record, the instinct is to protect them from the implications of a single serious allegation. If a unit has a trophy case full of awards, the notion that someone inside it committed misconduct feels like an attack on the whole organization.

This confusion is made worse by a phenomenon we examine in our piece "Everyone is a Good Dude" — the military community's deep-seated tendency to conflate personality, likability, and tribal markers (what someone flew, what unit they served in, how they carry themselves in a room) with actual competence and performance. General X is a great dude. Everybody loves General X. General X flew the right aircraft, commanded the right units, and tells a hell of a story at the O-club. And General X can simultaneously be an unequivocal failure at the parts of the job that actually matter — the accountability, the climate, the protection of the people in the formation. Not only can those two things coexist, they frequently do. The likability is often precisely what allows the failure to go unexamined for so long.

When we say "great dude," what we often mean is: I like this person, they are one of us, and I am therefore reluctant to look too hard at what happened on their watch. That reluctance is not loyalty. It is a protection of our own comfort at the expense of the people who were harmed. Likability is not a performance review. Charisma is not a defense.

The two things — the excellence and the misconduct — exist in parallel. Refusing to acknowledge both is not loyalty. It is a failure of intellectual honesty, and it leaves victims without recourse and organizations without accountability.

WHAT YOU SEE IS ALL THERE IS

> *Not seeing a problem is not the same as a problem not existing. Treat the limits of your own visibility as a reason for more inquiry, not less.*

The Nobel Prize-winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman identified a cognitive trap he called WYSIATI — What You See Is All There Is. The human brain, he observed in *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, is remarkably skilled at constructing coherent narratives from whatever information is in front of it, without stopping to ask what information might be missing. We do not naturally interrogate the edges of our own knowledge. We fill in the gaps with assumption, and we do so confidently.

A commander sees a tight formation, a clean barracks, and a high PT pass rate. What they see is all there is. They do not see the junior NCO who is terrorizing his team after hours. They do not see the service member who filed a complaint that was quietly buried. They do not see what their own position of authority prevents people from showing them. The solution is not to be paranoid — it is to be epistemically humble. To ask, routinely: what am I not seeing, and why?

Which brings us to a phrase I have heard more times than I can count, offered as evidence that a problem does not exist: "In my experience, I never saw that." It is delivered with confidence. Sometimes with indignation. And it is treated, by the person saying it, as a refutation — as though their failure to personally witness something is meaningful data about whether it occurred. It is not. It is, in fact, a near-perfect demonstration of WYSIATI in action.

The absence of something from your experience does not make it absent from reality. It means you did not see it. Those are very different things, and a leader who cannot hold that distinction is not equipped to protect the people in their charge.

GOOD DOES NOT NEGATE BAD

> *Accolades exist in one column. Harm exists in another. The columns do not cancel each other out.*

This point is so simple that stating it should be unnecessary. And yet it has to be stated. Repeatedly.

An outstanding evaluation report does not erase a substantiated harassment complaint. A unit's deployment record does not nullify a suicide that resulted from a toxic command climate. A leader's thirty-year career of distinguished service does not retroactively undo a single act of serious misconduct. Accolades exist in one column. Harm exists in another. The columns do not cancel each other out.

Watch what happens when bad news arrives in a military context. A service member comes forward with a complaint. A journalist files a story. An inspector general opens an inquiry. Before the facts are even examined, the response often follows a recognizable script: the unit's deployment record is cited. Awards are mentioned. The commander's years of service are invoked. The organization's history of excellence is placed, deliberately, between the question and the answer.

This is not coincidence. It is deflection. The recitation of achievements is offered not as context but as closure — as though a sufficient accumulation of good deeds forecloses the need to answer for a specific harm. It does not. It never has.

When advocates raise a concern and are met with a trophy case, the unspoken message is: we have done enough good that you should stop asking. That is not an answer. It is a strategy for not giving one. And it signals, loudly, that the leader deploying it has not thought carefully about what is actually being asked of them.

BAD, HOWEVER, DOES NEGATE GOOD

> *One covered-up incident can, and often does, become the defining story of an organization.*

The asymmetry is important and worth sitting with. While good does not erase bad, the reverse is not equally true. Serious misconduct, if unaddressed, does erode an organization's actual standing — its trust, its culture, its ability to accomplish its mission. A single unaddressed bad actor in a leadership position can undo years of positive command climate work. One covered-up incident can, and often does, become the defining story of an organization.

The same deflection mechanism operates here, but with higher stakes. When serious misconduct surfaces — a suicide, a covered assault, a pattern of retaliation — the institutional reflex is to remind everyone how much good the organization has done. The base's community outreach. The unit's combat record. The leader's unblemished file. These things are offered not as context for a difficult conversation but as a reason to end it. Leadership is essentially arguing: the ledger is positive, therefore nothing is owed.

The ledger does not work that way. Unaddressed misconduct does not sit quietly in a separate column while the good work proceeds. It actively corrodes trust, climate, and mission effectiveness. It tells every junior service member watching exactly how much their safety and dignity are worth when weighed against institutional reputation. That is not a counsel of despair. It is a call to take accountability seriously — not because regulation requires it, but because the cost of the deflection compounds in ways no award ceremony can reverse.

Unaddressed misconduct does not stay contained. It actively erodes the good an organization has built, and the cost compounds the longer it goes unaddressed.

I'VE BEEN GOLFING FOR OVER 30 YEARS — I'M NOT GOING PRO ANYTIME SOON

> *Longevity is not mastery. Doing something for a long time and doing it well are not the same thing, and the military — like most large institutions — has a habit of treating the former as evidence of the latter.*

I have played golf for over thirty years. I am not going pro. The repetition of an action, absent honest feedback, rigorous self-assessment, and genuine willingness to change, does not produce excellence. It produces the same swing, with the same flaws, hit with the same confidence, year after year.

This phrase gets deployed with particular frequency inside the Inspector General systems of the military — the very offices whose entire mandate is to find what is going wrong. When an IG investigator or official reaches for "I've been doing this for twenty years" as a shield against scrutiny of their own processes, the correct response is not deference. It is a quiet, honest question: yes, but have you been doing it well? Time in a role is a measure of duration. It is not, by itself, a measure of quality, growth, or judgment. An IG office that has been processing complaints incorrectly for two decades has not accumulated expertise. It has accumulated repetition. The distinction matters enormously when the people filing those complaints have nowhere else to turn.

Yes, but have you been doing it well?

The IG officials worth trusting are not those who have simply lasted the longest. They are those who have treated every year as an opportunity to get better, who have sought out criticism of their own processes rather than insulated themselves from it, and who understand that experience in an oversight role is a platform for improvement — not a verdict that the oversight itself is above scrutiny.

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Time in a role is not the same as skill in a role. Longevity without honest feedback produces repetition, not expertise — and oversight bodies are not exempt from this.

YOU NEVER PLAYED PRO FOOTBALL — YOU CAN STILL CRITICIZE THE BEARS

> *The quality of the questions matters. The résumé of the questioner does not settle it.*

A reliably popular deflection in military circles is the argument from inexperience: "You've never commanded a battalion, so you don't understand what commanders face." "You've never worn the uniform, so your criticism isn't valid." "You haven't been in that position, so you can't judge."

This argument, if taken seriously, would eliminate most meaningful accountability for anyone in a position of authority. You have almost certainly criticized a referee's call without having been a professional referee. You have evaluated the performance of a surgeon, a politician, or a CEO without having held those roles. Domain knowledge matters, and lived experience informs judgment — but neither is a prerequisite for valid criticism, especially when that criticism is grounded in evidence, reasoning, and established standards.

The "you haven't served as X" retort is not an engagement with the substance of a critique. It is a technique for changing the subject. Advocates, journalists, auditors, inspectors general, and the families of service members all have standing to ask hard questions. The quality of the questions matters. The résumé of the questioner does not settle it.

Standing to criticize does not require having held the position being criticized. The quality of the argument is what should be evaluated, not the résumé behind it.

CRITICISM OF A SYSTEM IS NOT CRITICISM OF YOU

> *Criticism of the institution is not a verdict on everyone who served in it.*

This one is personal, because I have had to unlearn it myself.

When someone critiques the military justice system, the medical system, the promotion system, or the accountability mechanisms that govern uniformed behavior, they are describing structural features of an institution. They are not, in most cases, delivering a verdict on every person who has served in it or benefited from it. The conflation of institutional critique with personal attack is one of the most reliable ways that legitimate systemic conversations get derailed.

If you have built your identity around an institution to the point where you cannot hear criticism of it without feeling personally condemned, that is a problem worth examining — not in the critic, but in yourself. Institutions can be improved. That process requires people inside them who can hold two things simultaneously: pride in what they have been part of, and clear eyes about what still needs to change.

Institutional criticism and personal identity are separable. Learning to hear the former without experiencing the latter is a discipline worth building.

"THEY KNEW WHAT THEY SIGNED UP FOR"

> *"They knew what they signed up for" is not a legal argument. It is an intellectual abdication dressed as toughness.*

Few phrases in the military discourse cause more harm while doing less analytical work than this one. It is deployed reflexively whenever a service member raises a concern about their treatment, their rights, or the conditions of their service. The implication is that enlistment constitutes blanket consent to whatever follows.

Here is a question for the leaders who use this phrase: Do you actually know what Constitutional rights a service member retains? Do you know where they are curtailed, how they are applied in practice, and under what circumstances those curtailments have been challenged? Do you know the difference between what a service member signed and what the Uniform Code of Military Justice actually requires of leadership in return?

Most leaders, in my experience, do not. They have a general sense that service members give up some rights and that this creates broad latitude for command authority. That general sense is not a substitute for knowing. And leading with "they knew what they signed up for" as a conversation-stopper is not a legal argument — it is an intellectual abdication dressed as toughness.

Knowing what a service member actually signed up for is a prerequisite for invoking it. Most who use this phrase have not done that work.

THE PERFECT IS THE ENEMY OF THE GOOD

> *Paralysis dressed as rigor is still paralysis.*

Voltaire's maxim has perhaps never been more applicable than in conversations about military reform. Every proposal to improve accountability, to expand recourse for service members, to revise the structures that govern how misconduct is handled, is met with a version of the same objection: it won't be perfect. There will be edge cases. It could be gamed. The second-order effects are uncertain.

All of this is true of every significant policy change in the history of governance. The question is not whether a reform is perfect. The question is whether it is better than what currently exists, whether it reduces harm on net, and whether its failures are correctable. Paralysis dressed as rigor is still paralysis.

Leaders who have genuinely internalized the mission — the welfare of the people they lead, the integrity of the institution they serve — do not wait for perfection. They identify the improvements available to them, they move out, and they remain willing to adjust course as they learn. That is not recklessness. That is leadership.

Waiting for a flawless solution guarantees no solution at all. Identify what is better than the status quo, implement it, and adjust as you learn.

"IT'S JUST AS BAD IN THE PRIVATE SECTOR"

> *Corporation X is not tasked with the defense of the nation. Recruiting, retention, and the health of a workforce are not matters of national security. The military's are.*

Perhaps Issue X is just as bad "on the outside." In some organizations, at some times, on some dimensions, workplace dysfunction in the civilian world rivals what occurs in uniform. This observation proves nothing useful.

Here is the relevant difference: a civilian employee who is harassed, discriminated against, or wrongfully terminated has recourse. They can sue. They can file with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. They can, in many cases, simply quit and go work somewhere else without penalty.

The Feres doctrine, established by the Supreme Court in 1950 and stubbornly preserved since, bars service members from suing the federal government for injuries arising from their military service — including harms inflicted by their own chain of command. The legal and structural protections available to a civilian worker navigating a toxic boss are, in many cases, simply unavailable to someone in uniform. The "private sector does it too" argument, therefore, does not miss the

point. It actively obscures the asymmetry in available remedies that makes the military context distinctly high-stakes.

There is also a dimension to this comparison that goes beyond the legal. Corporation X is not tasked with the defense of the nation. Its recruiting struggles, its retention problems, its internal culture failures — however serious to the organization — are not matters of national security. The military's are. A force that tolerates toxic leadership, unaddressed misconduct, and a perception that service members have no meaningful recourse does not just harm individuals. It degrades readiness. It drives away the people it most needs to keep. It sends a signal, loudly and over time, to every potential recruit weighing whether to raise their right hand. When we allow dysfunction to persist by pointing at a corporation across the street, we are not just making a weak legal argument. We are subordinating the health of the force — and by extension, the security of the country — to institutional convenience.

The private sector comparison fails on two fronts: service members have less legal recourse than civilian employees, and military dysfunction carries national security stakes that no corporation bears.

YOU HAVEN'T STOOD FOR ANYTHING IF YOU HAVEN'T MADE ENEMIES

> *"You have enemies? Why, it is the story of every man who has done a great deed or created a new idea. It is the cloud which thunders around everything that shines. Fame must have enemies, as light must have gnats. Do not bother yourself about it; disdain."*
> *— Victor Hugo, 1845*

You have almost certainly encountered this one, usually credited to Churchill: "You have enemies? Good. That means you've stood up for something, sometime in your life." Churchill never said it. The actual author was Victor Hugo, whose 1845 original is considerably sharper: "You have enemies? Why, it is the story of every man who has done a great deed or created a new idea. It is the cloud which thunders around everything that shines. Fame must have enemies, as light must have gnats. Do not bother yourself about it; disdain."

The misattribution is itself instructive. A sentiment that resonates, attached to a famous name, repeated often enough, becomes received wisdom — and no one checks. That is WYSIATI in a different register. The underlying idea, however, stands: genuine leadership will reliably generate opposition. That is not a bug. It is confirmation that something real is being attempted.

The converse is equally instructive. A long career of uniform accolades, command tours, and institutional recognition, unaccompanied by a single meaningful moment of friction with authority or convention — what does that signal? Perhaps exceptional judgment that aligned perfectly with institutional needs at every turn. More often, in my observation, it signals that the person never pushed hard enough on anything that mattered to find out where the walls were.

The leaders who have most improved the institutions they served are rarely the ones who were universally beloved throughout their careers. They are the ones who identified something wrong, said so clearly, and accepted the professional consequences. They are not always comfortable colleagues. They are often essential ones.

A career devoid of friction with the institution is not necessarily a sign of good judgment. It may be a sign that nothing important was ever risked.

THE HUMBLEBRAG AS ARGUMENT

> *Credentials are not arguments. They are context. The distinction matters.*

"In my thirty-one years of service…" "Across my four command tours…" "Having served at every level from platoon to theater…"

Know your audience. In a room of peers or subordinates who share your frame of reference, this kind of credentialing has a place. In a conversation with a grieving family, a service member who has been wronged, or an advocate trying to fix a broken process, it lands differently. It sounds like a prelude to dismissal. It signals that what follows will be shaped more by institutional loyalty than by honest engagement with the problem at hand.

The humblebrag does not exist in isolation. It is a symptom of something more pervasive in military culture: hubris. Not the ordinary confidence that the profession rightly cultivates — the kind that allows a person to lead under pressure, make decisions with incomplete information, and project steadiness when others cannot afford to waver. That confidence is earned and necessary. Hubris is its corruption. It is the point at which confidence curdles into the belief that accumulated rank and experience have placed one beyond the need for outside input, challenge, or accountability.

The military is a particularly fertile environment for this. Hierarchical by design, it rewards deference to rank and penalizes visible dissent. Leaders advance, in part, by projecting certainty. The feedback loops that might correct hubris in other environments — market consequences, public accountability, the ability of subordinates to simply leave — are structurally weakened or absent. Over time, in the absence of honest feedback, confidence calcifies. The leader stops asking whether they are right and starts assuming it. The credential stops being a marker of experience and becomes a substitute for thought.

The effect is predictable and damaging. Hubris in a senior leader narrows the information that reaches them, because people learn quickly not to bring news that will be unwelcome. It concentrates decisions in the hands of someone who has stopped genuinely consulting. It models, for every junior person watching, that rank is a destination rather than a responsibility. And when that leader eventually sits across a table from an advocate, a grieving family, or a DoD oversight official and opens with "In my thirty-eight years…" — what follows is not wisdom. It is armor.

When the people whose institutional mandate is to listen to the force instead reach for their résumé to end the conversation, that is not a communication style. That is a choice. And it tells you a great deal about whose interests are actually being served.

Years of service are context for a credential, not a substitute for engaging with the substance of what is being asked. Read the room before reaching for the résumé.

DON'T BE AFRAID TO CRITIQUE A SYSTEM YOU SUCCEEDED IN

> *I did well here, and I can still see how it is broken.*

Kahneman documented the self-serving attribution bias with characteristic precision: when we succeed, we credit our own skill and judgment; when we fail, we attribute it to circumstances, to bad luck, to the interference of others. The military is

not immune to this dynamic. Leaders who rose through the system tend to interpret their own advancement as evidence that the system works — and, by implication, that those who struggled through it simply lacked what it took.

This is almost certainly incomplete. Success in a large institution reflects a combination of individual merit, mentorship, timing, access, and the structural features of the institution itself — some of which actively disadvantage people who deserve better. Acknowledging this does not diminish what you earned. It opens the door to honest conversation about what the institution can do better for the people coming up behind you.

The leaders most worth listening to are those who have the confidence to say: I did well here, and I can still see how it is broken.

Success within a system does not prove the system is fair to everyone who passes through it. The people who benefited from it are well positioned to help fix what is broken in it.

A FINAL WORD

None of the above is an argument that military leaders are uniquely bad at thinking, or that the institution is beyond redemption. The opposite, in fact, is what motivates writing like this. The military draws some of the most capable, dedicated, and mission-focused people this country produces. It deserves leadership that thinks as rigorously as it trains.

The habits described here — the false dichotomies, the credential-waving, the conflation of criticism with betrayal — are not character flaws. They are learned reflexes, reinforced by cultures that reward cohesion and penalize dissent. They can be unlearned. They must be, if the institution is going to do right by the people who take an oath to serve it.

Lt Col (Ret) Ryan Sweazey is the President and Founder of the Walk the Talk Foundation. All articles are posted on LinkedIn and online at walkthetalkfoundation.org. The Star Chamber podcast is available on Apple, Spotify, and YouTube.

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