With summer vacations quickly approaching I reached out to a group of successful leaders, authors, journalists, and podcast hosts for book recommendations. I asked them to suggest a book and why they picked it.

The books on this list range from science fiction to leader development to quantum physics. I hope you find a title on this list that sparks your interest and you grab a book, a beer, and enjoy your summer.

General (RET) Stanley McChrystal, Managing Partner of McChrystal Group
I’ve just finished Max Boot’s The Road Not Taken, Edward Lansdale’s story, focused heavily on the Philippines and Vietnam. While it’s a good narrative of Lansdale’s unique role in America’s counterinsurgency efforts in Southeast Asia during the Cold War, the angle I found fascinating (and cautionary) was not Lansdale’s deft skill in dealing with foreign leaders like Magsaysay and Diem, but his failure within our own governmental bureaucracy. It raises the question to what extent his ideas struggled due to the messenger and not the validity of the message.

Admiral (RET) James Stavridis, Dean of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University
American War: A Novel by Omar El Akkad

A first novel by the Canadian-Arab journalist Omar El Akkad, this searing tale moves the reader forward over half-a-century into a dystopian future in which a second American civil war has unfolded. The south is again pitted against the rest of the country, this time over the use of hydrocarbons. Mexico has invaded the US and annexed portions of the southwest, and other parts of early 21st century America have succeeded. Florida is overcome by rising sea levels and no longer exists. Our society is brutally polarized. Against this backdrop, the characters of this novel grow, love, struggle, and sacrifice for the causes in which they passionately believe. Is this the future of the United States? Hopefully not; but the potential extension of the extreme divisions in our society today are clearly the inspiration for this brilliant and tragic tale.
Major General Mick Ryan, Commander of Australian Defence College

After reading this, I wanted to sign up for the author’s Yale grand strategy course. Early in the book, Gaddis defines grand strategy as the alignment of potentially unlimited aspirations necessarily limited capabilities. Drawing on ancient, medieval and modern history, Gaddis provides us with a grand tour of the development of strategic thought across the ages, and how it has balanced aspirations and capabilities. Reviewing how statesmen have thought about strategy, seeking to align unlimited aspirations with limited resources, this book provides highly relevant and useful context for military leaders and planners in studying the modern (and future) profession of arms. There is only one flaw; one could quibble over the fact that this is a Euro-centric book and lacks Asian case studies. Despite this, it is a thoroughly enjoyable and interesting book that deserves its pride of place on
Loren DeJonge Schulmen, co-host of Bombshell Podcast

With Us And Against Us: How America’s Partners Help and Hinder the War on Terrorism by Stephen Tankel
Building Militaries in Fragile States: Challenges for the United States by Mara E. Karlin

This summer I’m reading two books that address ideas that were supposed to be the secret sauce to current security challenges: partnered counterterrorism operations and building partner militaries. After reading his essay in Politico, you’ll want to pick up Stephen Tankel’s new book With Us and Against Us: How America’s Partners Help and Hinder the War on Terror. It makes an excellent companion to Mara Karlin’s book Building Partner Militaries in Fragile States: Challenges for the United States; she offers highlights of her findings in Foreign Affairs. Both are a reminder that these strategies are too often wrongly interpreted as easier, low-commitment approaches in terms of blood and treasure, and likewise demand significant strategic bandwidth and risk tolerance than typically assumed. Both are also solidly researched and beautifully written books on matters that have too much misinformed optimism floating around. Side note: everyone should watch the Hitler Learns About Sequestration Downfall parody.

Amir Husain, CEO of SparkCognition and author of The Sentient Machine
Fallen Leaves: Last Words on Life, Love, War, and God by Will Durant

Depending on how you look at it, it is perhaps both an alarming and cosmically comical element of the human condition that despite a hundred billion humans preceding us, we each must still answer the most basic questions about our existence for ourselves. What is a life well lived? How does one rationalize death? Life’s biggest questions seek answers from all of us. And this book, written by an American treasure, historian Will Durant, supplies the reader with some beautiful answers.

Dr. Anne-Marie Slaughter, President and CEO of New American Foundation and author of The Chessboard & The Web
The book I would recommend is the novel American War by a Canadian-Egyptian journalist named Omar El Akkad. It is a powerful and gripping story about the second Civil War in the United States, set in roughly 2075, complete with refugee camps, desolation and destruction. Most important, it brings home to American (and European) readers what it feels like to be the victim of a war actively fostered by foreign powers, who pour in arms and advice without accountability. Finally, a novel set a mere fifty years hence offers an entirely realistic picture of a redrawn national map as a result of rising seas.

American War: A Novel by Omar El Akkad

Ryan Evans, CEO and Editor-in-Chief of War on the Rocks
This is one of those books that I’ve been meaning to pick up for years and never did. I understand the reasons for the centrality of *On War* by Carl von Clausewitz to the study of strategy affairs, and I think most of those reasons are good. Still, I wonder if our debate is a little too “stuck” on an unfinished book by an 19th century Prussian general. But I am not yet prepared to do more than wonder, so I read. I also have noticed that many products of the U.S. professional military education system have an understanding of *On War* that departs rather dramatically from my own. But I am not yet ready to write about that, so I read. Paret wrote this book while he was doing his famous translation of *On War* with Michael Howard. They were published in the same year. To know more about the man and time that produced *On War*, this book – *Clausewitz and the State* – is critical, I am told. And so I read. I’ve only just cracked the first chapter and am impressed with its scope and the broad, deep reading that made that scope possible.

Elsa Kania, Adjunct Fellow at CNAS Technology and National Security Program
Quantum: Einstein, Bohr, and the Greatest Debate about the Nature of Reality by Manjit Kumar

Lately, I’ve been thinking through the implications of advances in quantum technologies, particularly considering China’s ambitions to lead this “second quantum revolution.” Along the way, I’ve become curious about and started delving deeper into the history and theories of quantum physics. This summer, I’ll be reading Manjit Kumar’s Quantum: Einstein, Bohr, and the Greatest Debate about the Nature of Reality and Adam Becker’s What Is Real?: The Unfinished Quest for the Meaning of Quantum Physics.

Lauren Katzenberg, Editor of New York Times At War
The Good Mothers: The True Story of the Women Who Took Down the World’s Most Powerful Mafia by Alex Perry

I had never heard of the ‘Ndrangheta before January, but I quickly learned it’s one of the most ruthless crime organizations in the world. Based out of Calabria, Italy, the family controlled 70% of the cocaine trade in Europe as recently as 2009 and for years seemed untouchable until Italian prosecutor Alessandra Cerreti found a way in: By turning the mafia wives, whose husbands use violence and intimidation to control the women in the family. The Good Mothers, by Alex Perry, due out in early June, is the true story of Cerreti’s fight to get two women to testify against one of the most powerful crime syndicates in history, risking their lives and their children in the process. For a sneak peak, you can find an excerpt from the book here.

Dr. Kori Schake, Deputy-Director General of International Institute for Strategic Studies

Aftershocks: Great Powers and Domestic Reforms in the 20th Century by Seva Gunitsky

My summer book is Seva Gunitsky’s Aftershocks, which is about the interplay between domestic politics and the international order. In particular, he argues that international changes drive domestic political upheaval in the 20th century, which seems obvious once you hear it but gives a different twist to thinking about great power behavior in the
international order. It seems especially applicable to China, which looks to be making tentative, incremental changes to achieve outsized ambitions, and might have implications for war-avoidance in crisis and also developing cost-imposing strategies for managing China, so I want to understand the subject much better. Gunitsky’s someone who meets Emily Dickenson’s challenge to “tell the truth but tell it slant.”

Kevin Kruse, CEO of Leadx and New York Times Bestselling Author

*Life 3.0: Being Human in the Age of Artificial Intelligence* by Max Tegmark

This summer I’m going deep into cognitive computing. AI will be at the core of conflict between countries, companies and socioeconomic classes for the next 100 years. “Mad Max” Tegmark is a hard-science MIT professor who makes it all accessible for the rest of us in his book *Life 3.0: Being Human In The Age Of Artificial Intelligence*.

Dr. Pauline Shanks Kaurin, Professor of Philosophy at Pacific Lutheran University
Why Honor Matters by Tamler Sommers

This summer I will be reading an intriguing book I came across whose project is to reclaim the idea of honor in modern political life. Our images of honor are often based in masculine oriented contexts, sometimes with reactionary or fundamentalist religious and cultural contexts. As a military ethicist, I am interested in how the arguments in this book might apply to military honor and whether the problems and concerns often raised about honor are problematic in military ethics. My initial thought (before reading the book) is that they may well be and if it is possible to construct a notion of honor oriented to virtues, rather than preserving specific religious, cultural or gender oriented worldviews, this could prove interesting and helpful in discussions about military ethics and honor. The military seems to be one place where honor still has a positive connotation, so I am intrigued by the possibilities in this book.

Tom Ricks, Columnist at Task and Purpose and author of Churchill and Orwell
This summer I’m reading all the ancient literature our Founding Fathers read. I’m writing a history of the education of the first four presidents and I want to spend as much time as I can with my head in the 18th century.

Omar El Akkad, author of *American War: A Novel*

*Memorabilia* by Xenophon

I recently finished re-reading *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* by Neil Sheehan. It is, in my opinion, one of the best pieces of journalism in American history. With absolute meticulousness, Sheehan documents the hubris and rampant miscalculation that defined one of this country’s most tragic military misadventures.
Perhaps the most timeless aspect of *A Bright Shining Lie* is the way it lays bare the communal delusions that so often mark state warfare – the unyielding belief that what worked in a previous conflict must surely work in the next.

**Steve Leonard, Creator of **[Doctrine Man](https://example.com/)

![Image of On Grand Strategy by John Gaddis]

*I have a number of books already in the queue for the summer, but *On Grand Strategy* by John Lewis Gaddis is on the top of the stack. I’ve always enjoyed his reading — *The Landscape of History* is a personal favorite — and *On Grand Strategy* is shaping up to be just as good. His ability to establish historical context is second to none, and his writing style is simultaneously infectious and provocative. *On Grand Strategy* will hook you in the first 25 pages and wear out your highlighter before you finish the book.*

**August Cole**, coauthor of *Ghost fleet* and Non-Resident Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council Snowcroft Center for Strategy and Security
Plot twists are essential elements of a strong summer novel and *Underground Airlines* by Ben H. Winters delivers some of the tensest storytelling I’ve encountered in a long time. This is no popcorn thriller, however. It is a carefully told exploration of a present-day America in which the Civil War never took place and slavery persists in four southern states where human bondage is legal and an unacknowledged economic engine for the entire nation. The story follows Victor, a lethal off-the-books US government bounty hunter who tracks down slaves who have escaped from the “Hard Four.” Once a slave himself, he answers to a distant voice on the other end of the phone – and finally his conscience when he’s tasked with tracking down a target deep that takes him deep inside the secret network working to emancipate slaves one by one. Of note, *Underground Airlines* came out in 2016; since then it has been joined by other titles (out in paperback now) that follow similarly gripping dystopian American alternative-history paths exploring race, conflict, and justice such as Omar El Akkad’s *American War* and Colson Whitehead’s Pulitzer Prize- and National Book Award-winning *The Underground Railroad*.

Dr. Erin Simpson, Cohost of Bombshell Podcast
Unclear Physics: Why Iraq and Libya Failed to Build Nuclear Weapons by Malfrid Braut-Hegghamer

This summer—with much policy and political debate about North Korea’s successful nuclear program, *Unclear Physics* dives into the archives to explore how clandestine programs evolve over time bringing facts and light to a much over-heated debate. I’m also reading *The Eyre Affair*, by Jasper Fforde – a surprising exploration of veterans and society set in an alternate England full of literary detectives, SpecOps, and corrupt plasma gun manufacturers. In the 131st year of the forever war in Crimea, the pain and loss and absurdist humor hardly even feel fictional.

Dr. Steven Metz, Director of Research At Army Strategic Studies Institute
Disrupt! Think Epic. Be Epic: 25 Successful Habits for an Extremely Disruptive World by Bill Jensen

Just as every staff officer knows that a decision brief must include three courses of action — no more, no less — my early summer reading is proceeding in three distinct but parallel tracks. One is to expand my understanding of organizational leadership. I recently finished Bill Jensen, Disrupt! Think Epic, Be Epic and am diving into Martin Dempsey and Ori Brafman, Radical Inclusion. For strategic futures, I have Paul Scharre, An Army of None: Autonomous Weapons and the Future of War queued up. And to always — always — stay grounded in history and the classics, it’s John Gaddis’ wonderful On Grand Strategy.

Joshua Bowen, Founder and Editor of 3X5 Leadership
This past year of studying organizational psychology and leadership at Columbia University has really challenged many of my assumptions of how we build and lead effective teams in the Army. This is further compounded by the fact that the Millennial Generation (my generation) has become the majority in the work force now; many old ways of doing business in the workplace are no longer valid. Listening to Ryan Hawk’s Learning Leader podcast episode with author Dan Coyle really piqued my interest as he was talking about this very topic. Dan Coyle authored the new book, *The Culture Code*, which is about building highly successful groups through psychological safety, shared vulnerability, and establishing purpose. I have not been able to put this book down and many of my friends who’ve read it now feel the same. This is an incredible read to help adjust our attitudes on how to build and lead effective teams, which I believe many military leaders can learn from. Following this book, I’m diving into *Herding Tigers* by Todd Henry to continue learning how to build teams in our emerging, modern culture.

Nathan K. Finney, Visiting Fellow at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute and co-editor and author of *Redefining the Modern Military: The Intersection of Profession and Ethics*
I’ll admit up front my bias for the author of my choice this year, as well as the topic. Having known JP Clark for years, it’s no surprise his book, Preparing for War: The Emergence of the Modern U.S. Army, 1815–1917 is not only a well-researched and phenomenally written book, but also extremely relevant to the military as a profession. In Preparing for War JP describes the evolution of the Army following the War of 1812 up to the First World War by assessing personal experiences and the impacts of key leaders – from junior to senior levels – across this period of modern professionalism. What I enjoyed the most about this book, aside from its immense value to my own research into the Army in First World War, was that the entire work focuses on the shifting debates amongst the officer corps on the military itself – from the changing character of war to the responsibility of the military and its individual professionals. The best history shows the continuity of trends across time, which Preparing for War certainly does for the time period on which JP focuses. More importantly for this audience, it also educates military professional today that these continuing debates are not unique to today, but a core element of our service and foundational to our duty as professionals.

I hope you enjoyed this summer’s reading list! Feel free to share what you’re reading in the comments section below.