



By Oren Abusch-Magder

Former Defense Secretary Mattis famously once [wrote](#), “Thanks to my reading, I have never been caught flat-footed by any situation, never at a loss for how any problem has been addressed before. It doesn’t give me all the answers, but it lights what is often a dark path ahead.”

In order to light my path, I have often turned to books. Of the books I have read, five have been particularly instrumental in my development as a leader. They are from a wide array of

genres, including both fiction and non-fiction, history, psychology, and organizational leadership. The lessons found in these books helped me navigate the experiences of being a cadet and have helped me to think ahead about what I need to successfully lead soldiers. If I could charge every cadet in the country with doing one thing before commissioning, it would be to read these books.

### **The Ballads of Soldiering: [Starship Troopers](#) and [Gates of Fire](#)**

These are well-written and quick reads. These two books are a great place to begin for cadets who are not avid readers (and are equally important for those of you who are).

On the surface, the two appear to be dramatically different. *Starship Troopers* is about a futuristic war that is fought on faraway planets against alien bugs. The soldiers carry nuclear weapons and use them like grenades. *Gates of Fire*, on the other hand, is historical fiction about the battle of Thermopylae where the soldiers fought with spears, swords, and arrows. Despite their apparent differences, the two tell the same story: that of the ground soldier and small unit leader.

Two seasoned combat veterans recommended each of these books to me. They each explained to me that while their experiences in Afghanistan as infantrymen had been different than the combat from these books, it helped shape their ideas of leading soldiers at the unit level.

Many military history books focus on higher-level leadership, painting a picture of the broader battlefield. However, both *Gates of Fire* and *Starship Troopers* are books that focus on small units. As opposed to focusing on tactics, they focus on the personal experiences of individual soldiers as they train and fight. As a cadet, it may be hard to learn tactics, but understanding soldiering is even harder. These two novels gave me a perspective that most classroom lessons can not.

**Adding to Your Leader Toolkit: [The Checklist Manifesto](#)**

The Army is full of highly technical checklists. The TLPs, GOTWAs, METT-TC, and other checklist acronyms in the Army exist so that you can be *more* creative as a leader, not less so. As the book demonstrates, simple checklists allow professionals (whether they are pilots, surgeons, or PLs) to ensure that they have not missed a crucial step, so that they can focus on how to do their job, and not on whether or not they have forgotten something. It explains how one can both utilize and create a checklist that helps accomplish the mission.

Reading this book helped me use these checklists both in administrative and tactical environments. The book gives one a clear understanding not just of the importance of checklists, but how to use them for maximum effect. Like understanding a weapon system's capabilities, utilizing your checklists is a force multiplier.

**Understanding the Human Brain: [Thinking Fast and Slow](#)**

As author Robert Greene stated in a [recent post](#) on this site, knowledge of human nature is a critical factor in great leadership. *Thinking Fast and Slow* is the product of research that led to an entirely new field of academics, [behavioral economics](#), and [won](#) the Nobel Prize. Luckily for us, Daniel Kahneman has distilled most of that work into one very enjoyable read.

While this book isn't military-focused. (though the two did use their research to [optimize](#) officer candidate selection, and perhaps more importantly, which food soldiers preferred in their prepared meals), it teaches us quite a bit about the world around us, and about how our brains perceive it. This book dissects the (often false) assumptions that power the human brain. It captures how we have two types of thinking—fast and slow—and how we get in trouble when we use the wrong one.

For years, economics operated under the model that humans are rational actors. The

research behind this book proves that we are not. We are unpredictable, assumptive, and biased. As Sun Tzu [instructed](#) us to “know the enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be in peril,” a young lieutenant must understand that both he or she and their enemy bring their humanity to the battlefield. This book helps young leaders understand how that humanity informs our decision-making.

### **A Case Study in Leadership: [Truman](#)**

There is no better way to learn about leadership than to read biographies. As you learn about the traits that make someone a successful leader, it makes you look for those traits that you want to develop. Harry Truman’s exceptional life provides many leadership lessons and traits to learn from. For cadets looking to push themselves intellectually, this book is a great choice.

Our 33rd President oversaw the end of World War II, dropped the bomb, started the Cold War, and relieved MacArthur. As a President, he transformed America, and yet his pre-Presidential life is equally compelling. Whether or not you like his policies, and whether or not you care about policy, President Truman’s life is a gold-mine of leadership lessons. This biography, written by David McCollough (one of the premier American historians), is very long but equally rewarding. It feels more like an unbelievable work of fiction than it does a dry presidential biography.

During World War I, Captain Truman risked court-martial during the Meuse-Argonne offensive when he provided fire support for the neighboring 35th Division in danger of being overrun. Despite explicit orders from his battalion commander to only fire in support of his division, Harry Truman chose to do what he knew was right (both morally and tactically).

Reading President Truman’s biography taught me that good leaders are decisive and encourage decisiveness in their subordinates. He was famous for saying that “[the buck stops here](#),” and showed that good leaders own the consequences of those decisions. As a

future leader, this is a powerful lesson to internalize.

## What Next?

Maybe you've read these five books already, or maybe they aren't for you. No matter what, these are just some of the many great books one can read for personal development. Start by reading something that excites you, no matter what it is, and slowly branch out. One Colonel explained to me that he reads "two for me, one for them." He will read two books that interest him, and then one that is out of his comfort zone. This is one of many approaches to force yourself to read something new. No matter what you're reading, or how you're reading it (hard copy, Kindle, audiobook, stone tablet), go out there and read!

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