



by Grace Brooks

Leaders frequently find it difficult to make time for reading and sometimes even struggle to decide what to read. Simply stated, with books on every imaginable subject in existence, it's difficult to narrow down what will help and enlighten the leader looking for professional growth.

In the military, we are expected to read broadly and to focus on topics that will enhance our leadership skills. With our time in such high demand, many of us opt for self-help or quick-fix books on organizational skills and leadership. However, I would like to submit a modest (and hopefully convincing) argument for why we should read biographies and memoirs as a more beneficial approach to professional development.

The best answer is that reading biographies and memoirs will give you more return for time spent reading. We all suffer from time constraints and finding the right book to guide us through our current experiences can be elusive. [Secretary Mattis](#) emphasized this point

when he commented, “If you haven’t read hundreds of books, you are functionally illiterate.” This is where biographies and memoirs come into play. They offer more in-depth understanding of unique, specific experiences and provide the reader with historical context from which to learn.

### **Specific Experiences**

Every leader deals with their own personal struggles and challenges. So did the people in these books. In short, we are not the first generation of people to experience these situations. Biographies and memoirs provide the details, feelings, and context of decisions made. Memoirs provide detailed and thorough accounts of how that person tackled a problem and their personal opinions on the topic. Additionally, these books contain mental repetitions of experiences and situations you may one day find yourself in. Through reading these books, you can learn from the mistakes and past lessons of others before you and not make the same mistakes yourself. They also explain how that decision played out and what consequences came from them.

The best personal example I have is from reading books such as [Platoon Leader](#), [The Things They Carried](#), or [Black Hearts](#). These biographies and fictionalized accounts provide junior leaders with mental repetitions of decision-making in leadership challenges that they might encounter. The details and accounts from these books remain with me as I think through my own decisions, and their specific examples give me advice and easy reference whenever I encounter a difficult decision.

### **Historical Context**

The second main benefit of biographies and memoirs is the substantial historical context the book usually provides. Many follow the complete life of the person and give crucial details to their background not provided by a shorter vignette. Memoirs especially provide the rich personal histories and events that shaped a person’s worldview before they reached positions of power. Readers find that they receive the dual benefit of both learning about the history this person experienced and seeing these historical events from the view of that one specific person.

More importantly, readers learn about the context around important decisions made. Often people are bound by the constraints placed upon them when they make important choices. Knowing about these constraints provides crucial insight into why an individual made a specific decision and why that decision may or may not be tenable for the reader. Reading Barack Obama’s [memoir](#) provides immense details into the events and constraints

surrounding the decision to strike and kill Osama Bin Laden. Though this decision occurred on the strategic level, understanding the context and constraints are useful for those who wish to better grasp the processes and considerations behind military decision-making. Ultimately, the historical context in which a decision is made, and the constraints placed upon the decision-maker are frequently more valuable than the decision made.

### **A Final Argument**

In her [autobiography](#), Eleanor Roosevelt prefaced the book by saying “There is nothing particularly interesting about one’s life story unless people can say as they read it ‘Why this is like I have been through. Perhaps, after all, there is a way to work it out.’” This is, in better words than I could ever put it, the main objective and benefit of biographies and memoirs. When looking out at the vast sea of books to read, especially when you need true guidance, look no further than a biography or memoir.

Find a book about someone in a specific job you have or will have, or simply read the biography of someone you’d like to emulate. Self-help and leadership books do have value, but you’ll learn much more from specific experiences placed in historical context. Don’t be afraid of the big ones, as these usually have the most detail and value. And finally, don’t be afraid to put the book down if you find it disinteresting. There is always another biography waiting for you.

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