



by Jay Carmody

The game of chess has experienced a resurgence in the United States, due in large part to popular tv series and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic driving people to board games. As the civilian world rediscovers chess, it is time that military leaders take a fresh look at the oldest war game. When viewed through social, historical, and strategic perspectives, chess demonstrates its value as both a fun and relevant hobby for service members of all ranks.

My own Captains Career Course (CCC) small group's chess club kicked off with one student bringing in their copy of [The Immortal Game](#), a short history of chess and its impact on society. After reading the book, a few of us downloaded a free chess app and began playing with each other. This quickly turned into a round robin chess night and a trip to the [World Chess Hall of Fame](#), a two-hour drive from Fort Leonard Wood. Ultimately, chess served as a primary means to form social connections outside of the office.

Any accessible, non-work-related hobby can help a new group coalesce. However, the simple rules, critical thinking, and low barrier to entry of chess allows people who have never played before to quickly gain experience and compete. Additionally, [studies have shown](#) that chess improves cognitive functions such as memory, creativity, and the ability to take another person's perspective.

As far as hobbies go, chess is inexpensive, easy to learn, and has proven benefits for mental health. Fortunately, I am not the first military officer to learn this lesson. Playing chess has ample historical precedent in both military and political leaders.

Chess and the Military

Napoleon required his officers to play and was often defeated by his subordinates during his years campaigning. During his final exile to St. Helena, he continued to maneuver his now all wooden army against his aide, General Bertrand, on his final, eight-by-eight tiled battlefield. The United Kingdom's most famous Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, played throughout his military and political career. On the west side of the Atlantic, several founding fathers are recorded to have been enthusiastic chess players. [Benjamin Franklin](#) went so far as to publish an article titled "*The Morals of Chess*" in which he describes the positive benefits of playing chess.

Chess was so popular among politicians that the United Kingdom's House of Commons played the United States House of Representatives in a series of "Chess Cable Matches" from 1896 through 1911.

Playing chess, even at a beginner level, puts the military leader in noteworthy company.

The same concepts that characterize military operations are fundamental to chess. This may seem intuitive, as chess is a simplified battle, but despite the chess vernacular used in our military ("Queen of Battle" comes to mind), we do not discuss the game itself.

Chess and the Character of War

When contemplating how chess applies to the character of war, one simply has to look at the characteristics of the offense for example and proof.

Audacity, tempo, mass, and surprise are terms that can be found on chess forums and magazines as easily as they are found in Army doctrine. Sacrificing a pawn to gain tempo is a common tactic in several famous openings.

Surprise is how chess grandmasters continue to defeat their opponents after centuries of games have been studied and analyzed. Although warfare has only grown in complexity since the early days of chess, the underlying concepts of Large-Scale Combat Operations (LSCO) can be found on a 64-tile board.

Unlike Napoleon on St. Helena, today's service members can select from a myriad of hobbies, board games, and past-times. Despite this, few offer the same level of complexity, analytics, and positive mental benefits as chess. I would encourage every military leader to consider dusting off their neglected chess-board or downloading any of a number of apps to play online.

After a millennium of continuous play, chess remains the most popular war game and can bring countless benefits to even the most casual player.

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