

Major General Fox Conner: “The Indispensable Man”

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Abstract

Although every career officer prepares for command, the fact is that very few will do so at the senior level. The vast majority of Senior Service College graduates will spend the remainder of their careers on various staffs as advisors to commanders or civilian leaders. With this in mind, it is important that the services focus institutional education toward building the competencies of senior strategic advisors. Military history is replete with leaders who functioned as strategic advisors during critical periods. One such advisor is Major General Fox Conner. Arguably responsible for the development of a President, Secretary of State and one of the most prolific military leaders of a century, Fox Conner is largely an unknown figure in American history. This paper discusses Conner’s background and the attributes that made him such an effective advisor and leader. This paper will evaluate him against disciplines that James E. Lukaszewski proposes are crucial to maximizing the effect of strategic advice: be trustworthy, be a verbal visionary, develop a management perspective, think strategically, understand the power of patterns, advise constructively and show others how to use your advice.

Major General Fox Conner: “The Indispensable Man”

The moral of this quaint example, is to do just the best that you can, be proud of yourself but remember, there's no indispensable man.

—Saxon White Kessinger ¹

As a strategic advisor, was Fox Conner an indispensable man? In an interview with Stephen Ambrose for his book, *Supreme Commander*, President Eisenhower would say that “Fox Conner was the ablest man I ever knew”. Staggered by this statement, Ambrose would respond, “General Eisenhower, you have dealt with Roosevelt, Churchill, Marshall, MacArthur, Stalin and you say that Fox Conner was the ablest man you ever knew. My God!”² Retired General of the Armies John J. Pershing remarked, "I could have spared any other man in the A.E.F better than" Fox Conner.³

Despite praise from arguably the most famous if not most capable military leaders of the 20th Century, Fox Conner remains a mystery to most. Even in his time he was referred to as a “mysterious *grey eminence* in the Army, whose power was indirect and often concealed. Conner wielded immense authority years between the World Wars.”⁴ Fox Conner was visionary enough to believe in the importance of tanks as a new weapon that could change the modern battlefield.⁵ He deemed this so much that he persuaded Patton to become their champion.⁶ Seeing the ineffectiveness of the Army structure in World War I, Conner almost single-handedly set about to restructure the Army division resulting in his recommendations being used word for word in the National Defense Act of 1920.⁷ Convinced that the treaty of Versailles would create inevitable conditions for yet another war with Germany, Fox Conner selected, encouraged and developed an impressive group of military leaders to win the war he had predicted.⁸ Conner told these future leaders that in “fifteen, twenty, at most thirty

years... You must be ready! Make yourself strong and cunning. Don't waste a moment or overlook a bet. The survival of America and all that it means to humanity will depend on your will and fortitude alone."⁹ In totality, there is likely no other man who more profoundly influenced the outcome of a war in which he never directly participated.

Why was Fox Conner so universally trusted by both senior and junior leaders? How did he so accurately predict future conflicts and so effectively influence others toward their resolution? Why was he so often called upon to solve the most complex problems? Why was he so proficient in recognizing patterns? How was Conner able to see beyond the boundary conditions of his day and foster innovation? Why was he so adept at giving advice? Is there, or has there ever been an, "indispensable man"?

This paper will seek to answer these questions by exploring Major General Fox Conner's personal and professional life to determine what made him such an effective strategic advisor.¹⁰ With a few exceptions that will be discussed later, there is no course offered from any military institution directed toward creating effective strategic advisors. This paper will argue that the services are remiss to recognize that the vast majority of senior leaders will give more advice than they will receive. Therefore, it is vitally important that senior leaders build upon the identified competencies within this paper.

Strategic leaders, both civilian and military, are different than strategic advisors in that they are generally defined by the nature of their position. Anyone, regardless of rank or position may play the role of strategic advisor. Many, if not most, senior strategic leaders advise senior civilian and military leaders. To be a strategic advisor one must work at the strategic level of the organization and have access to strategic leadership. They must possess expertise, knowledge and skills in a particular area that is important

to their organization. They must engage in matters of strategic significance by evaluating, coordinating, institutionalizing, managing strategic assessments, resourcing, planning, and executing.

They must often collaborate across organizational boundaries toward a unified goal. Strategic advisors differ from strategic leaders in that they help make decisions for which they themselves may have no direct responsibility. Fox Conner was an effective strategic advisor and leader. His role in advising some of our nation's most significant leaders is a model against which strategic advisors can be formed.

The Life of Fox Conner

Early Life in Mississippi

On November 2, 1874, Fox Conner was born the first of three children to Robert Henry Conner and Nannie Fox. His father had been a Confederate sharpshooter who, blinded by a bullet wound, later became a teacher in the village of Slate Springs, Mississippi. He grew up in an occupied Mississippi during the reconstruction period following the Civil War. From the war stories he heard from his father, local Mississippians and Federal soldiers, he gained an appreciation for warfare and the military.¹¹ Both of Conner's parents were instructors in what became known as the Slate Spring Academy while they scratched out an existence through subsistence farming. Although military service was not an esteemed profession in the post-Civil War South, Conner sought and received a political appointment to the United States Military Academy in 1893 from United States Senator Hernando DeSoto.¹² Due to an illness, he was delayed a year. He used this extra year wisely and prepared for what he was certain would be a challenging academic environment.¹³ There is no recorded or

anecdotal evidence to suggest that the twenty year old Fox Conner had ever travelled beyond Jackson, Mississippi prior to boarding the train to West Point in 1884.¹⁴

The Academy Years

It is clear that Conner was an enthusiastic student while attending the Military Academy. He would often write home to his family and relay his “works for the week” in great detail.¹⁵ He also did not chafe at the rigor and discipline of military life. He wrote, “I don’t care how hard they are on me as it will strengthen me and develop me generally,” and “I like it though even better than I had expected.”¹⁶ Conner would go on to graduate seventeenth of fifty-nine in his class.¹⁷ Although he had excelled in equitation while at West Point, his class rank coupled with the needs of the Army prevented his desired commission in cavalry. He was commissioned as a second lieutenant of artillery and assigned to Fort Adams, Rhode Island. Fox Conner was denied transfer to Cavalry on four separate occasions, but would go on to become one of the greatest artillerymen in American history.¹⁸

Early Career

Conner spent his first commissioned year as an artillerymen in Rhode Island, Alabama and Georgia. On 21 January 1899, he set out for Havana, Cuba for his first foreign tour.¹⁹ While in occupied Cuba, Conner became fluent in Spanish and passed his first examination for promotion. The board noted however, that there was “considerable room for increased technical knowledge of artillery and military engineering.”²⁰ Conner had obviously taken this evaluation seriously and went about becoming a technically proficient artilleryman during his next assignment in Washington, D.C. where again he passed his promotion examination. During this tour he showed his ability to innovate by designing an improved elevating hand wheel for mortar carriages

that was adopted by the Army. This recognized potential landed him an assignment at the War Department and later company command of the 123rd Coastal Artillery Company at Fort Hamilton, New York.²¹

By 1904, Fox Conner had become such a proficient artilleryman and administrator that he skipped the General Service School and attended the Army Staff College. Considered a shortcoming by Conner and his fellow students, the only available maps for study during his schooling at Leavenworth were of the Franco-German border area around Metz.²² These maps, and Conner's self-taught fluency in French as well as Spanish, would be of significant benefit to him in the very near future. Conner was assigned to a training unit at Fort Riley following his graduation from Staff College. His proficiency was again noted resulting in an assignment to the Army General Staff with the Army War College in route.

The War College of 1907 purposed to teach leadership through map exercises and the general principles of war. Military history played a significant role as it depicted the principles in application rather than in the abstract.²³ It was at the Army War College that Fox Conner gained an appreciation for history and the "causes of triumph and disaster" of strategy.²⁴ Again, Conner's performance was exemplary. As a result, he was asked to remain as one of five Army officers to teach strategy. Always an enthusiastic and self-motivated learner, Conner used his time to immerse himself in doctrine, tactics and a third foreign language: German.²⁵ While a student, he also participated in a group of staff officers who examined the United States history of preparedness to conduct war concluding that Congress should take "the reasonable and necessary measures to fulfill the duties imposed on it by the Constitution."²⁶ This statement, which he penned,

became the introductory line in the 1912 proposal for Land Organization of the United States."²⁷ This early demonstrated aptitude toward organizing units for combat would become important for Conner's future.

As his assignment came to a close, General Wotherspoon, the head of the War College, recommended him for a one year assignment in France as a liaison officer to a French Artillery Regiment. Conner served in the 22nd Regiment, Field Artillery, French Army. He remained in Paris to teach at the French War College, L'Ecole de Guerre, but his assignment was cut short due to a change in Army regulation requiring officers to spend two of every six years in line units.²⁸ Between 1914 and 1917 Conner stayed on the move in regiments from Fort Riley, Kansas to Laredo, Texas as well as training and administrative assignments from Fort Sill, Oklahoma to Washington, DC.²⁹ It would be on one of these train rides to Fort Riley, Kansas that Conner would meet a newly minted, yet already well known, Lieutenant George S. Patton.³⁰

World War I - American Expeditionary Force

Both Britain and France sent delegations to the United States to consult on the role of American Forces following the United States Declaration of War with Germany on 6 April 1917. Conner was selected as the liaison to the French delegation due to his mastery of French as well as his expertise in both French and American artillery. When President Wilson chose General John J. Pershing, to lead the American Expeditionary Force, Conner was one of the one hundred and eighty seven officers and enlisted men to accompany him on his initial reconnaissance to France. Conner's boss, the Division Inspector General Andre Brewster, selected Conner as his artillery expert to accompany Pershing.³¹ Since Pershing had heard of Fox Conner from his aide George Patton during the American Punitive Expedition in Mexico, he was more than comfortable with

the choice. It was also certain that Conner's fluent French would make him an important participant as the staff poured over the after action reports of the French military. While sailing for France, Lieutenant Colonel John M. Palmer, Pershing's Chief of Staff for Operations, became convinced that he needed Fox Conner to serve within the operations section. In a testament to Conner's reputation among his superiors, Palmer knew that Conner was senior and upon his promotion would displace him. Palmer would later say that Conner "soon proved his worth many times over in the Operations Section".³²

Conner's initial assignment as part of the American Expeditionary Force was to plan for the half-million man army's artillery needs. Since American factories had never produced the required guns, United States forces were required to utilize French cannon. These French cannons were the exact models Conner had mastered while assigned to the 22nd Regiment, Field Artillery, French Army.³³ His next task was to draw up the table for organizations of the Standard American Division as it would fight throughout the war.³⁴ Following several uneventful yet productive days at sea, Pershing's party landed in Liverpool, England on 8 June 1917. Throughout their time in England as well as after their arrival in France, there was much cause for celebration. While many would think that this time of celebration was wasted while allied men were dying in trenches, it bares mention that only one hundred years prior, British forces had burned the American capital to the ground. This time of celebration cemented trust and respect among the allies. Conner would learn that these relationships were integral to forming coalitions.³⁵ Some twenty-eight years later, the Supreme Allied Commander of

Allied Forces would credit Conner for teaching him how to successfully build the coalition that would gain a foothold in France on the beaches at Normandy.

By summer 1917, Fox Conner had been promoted and replaced Palmer as the Operations Chief of the American Expeditionary Force in France. In this position Conner sent for George Patton and introduced him to a French tank enthusiast. Upon hearing out the Frenchman, Patton responded in what he termed “euphemistic jargon appropriate for official correspondence”, that the “Frenchman was crazy and the Tank not worth a damn.”³⁶

On 1 September 1917, Colonel Fox Conner traveled with the Headquarters Company Commander, George Patton, to set up the American Expeditionary Force General Headquarters in Chaumont.³⁷ With more than 61,000 American Forces in France, Pershing was anxious to leave Paris to get closer to the fight. American Forces had swelled to more than 300,000, by 21 March 1918. The 1st American Division was ordered to join the French Army in battle at a place called Cantigny. Despite that by 21 May 1918 most of the German force had displaced, the American success in capturing the small town showed that American forces could execute operations at the division level.

During these operations, Conner had observed and began to groom yet another important figure, Lieutenant Colonel George C. Marshall, the 1st American Division’s Operations Officer during operations around Cantigny. Conner observed him throughout, devoting one day a week to mentoring Marshall at the 1st Division Headquarters in Menil-la-Tour. Conner set out to bring him into the American

Expeditionary Force's General Headquarters.³⁸ On 17 July 1918, George C. Marshall reported to Colonel Fox Conner at the General Headquarters in Chaumont.³⁹

Conner brought Marshall into the General Headquarters with the intent of launching an offensive through the Lorraine region. Since this had been the historic invasion route into France, Conner believed that an attack at this point could reduce the German salient that had formed at Saint-Mihiel.⁴⁰ Conner had become Pershing's chief advisor due to his mastery of French and familiarity with the French countryside. Marshall would essentially fill the role of the Chief of Operations under Conner's tutelage enabling him to spend more time advising the Commander. Conner assigned Marshall, with another more senior officer to prepare individual competing plans for the offensive in an effort to assess Marshall's capability. After assiduous weeks of planning and revisions, each officer presented his plan to Conner for review. Marshall's was the chosen plan to be executed beginning in September 1918. Against Conner's advice, Pershing named himself Commander of the First Army of the American Expeditionary force. Conner could not convince Pershing that his decision to simultaneously command both the American Expeditionary Force and the First Army with two separate and distinct headquarters was a mistake.⁴¹ To mitigate the risk of this decision, Conner assigned Marshall to the First Army as Pershing's Operations Officer. This move placed Marshall in the key position of implementing the plan which he devised.⁴²

On 30 August 1918, following the Second Battle of the Marne, recently awarded Marshal of France, Ferdinand Jean Marie Foch, visited Pershing and unexpectedly suggested that Pershing join the French Army in an attack into the Argonne Region.⁴³ This change would amount to Pershing fighting the force he spent more than a year

building in a piecemeal fashion. Pershing appealed, and the French and American leaders reached a mediated compromise in which the Americans joined forces with the French immediately after the attack on Saint-Mihiel. Although Pershing had little choice, this compromise amounted to two major operations that the First Army would have to conduct in less than two weeks.⁴⁴ Pershing, ever eager to prove the value of the American forces, knew that much of the German force had been withdrawn. He launched the assault into Saint-Mihiel on 12 September 1918 with more than half a million Americans organized into twelve divisions.⁴⁵ After the overwhelming success in Saint-Mihiel, Marshall executed the monumental task of moving more than 400,000 soldiers and equipment to Meuse-Argonne. The Meuse-Argonne Campaign, which began on 26 September 1918, broke the Germans rendering the historic city of Sedan within striking distance.⁴⁶

The Germans captured Sedan in 1870 during the Franco-Prussian war. It was such a symbolic objective for the French that Marshal Foch imposed a boundary that would prevent American forces from taking the city. Conner knew that the capture of Sedan appealed to Pershing so he set out to give his boss that honor. He dictated a memo to Marshall detailing the order to capture Sedan without Pershing's permission. This memo, known as the Souilly Memo, caused controversy for both Marshall and Conner long after the war. In his order to Marshall, Conner expressed that the Foch's boundaries between American and French forces were not to be considered binding, thus enabling Marshall to maneuver two divisions toward Sedan. The language to disregard boundaries nearly caused the two divisions to attack one another. So great was the confusion that another towering figure, then brigade commander Douglas

MacArthur, was detained for a period by members of another American brigade. This incident, would haunt Pershing, Conner and Marshall for years to come, but it would also seal the bond among them.⁴⁷

Peace and the Inter-War Period

Conner attended the signing of the Versailles Peace Treaty along with Pershing and later confided to Marshall that the agreement virtually guaranteed that war would soon return to Europe. Pershing, Conner and Marshall spent significant time together after the treaty attending to the business of redeploying more than two million U.S. soldiers. Knowing that Pershing would be called upon to share his views of the future of American forces, Conner and Marshall set out to assist him. Upon their return to the United States, they sequestered themselves at Conner's family home in New York finalizing Pershing's testimony on the future organization of the Army.⁴⁸ Pershing espoused the views of Conner and Marshall who happened to be the two men flanking him at the three daylong hearing.⁴⁹

By 1920, Conner's circle of officers were well placed throughout the Army. Pershing was the Army Chief of Staff with Conner as his chief of staff and Marshall his aide. George Patton had formed an Infantry Tank School at Fort Meade, Maryland.⁵⁰ By coincidence it was in this position that Patton would introduce Conner to his most heralded protégé. In October, Conner and his wife travelled to Fort Meade to visit with the Pattons. Conner was to take command in Panama and mentioned that he needed a capable executive officer. George Patton lived next to a young Major named Dwight David Eisenhower, known to all as "Ike".⁵¹

Eisenhower and Patton had very little in common. Patton, six years Eisenhower's senior, was well known and socially connected. Eisenhower and his wife were folksy

and mostly kept to themselves. The Patton's maintained a formal recurring Sunday dinner party. On one occasion, they invited the Eisenhower's to meet the Conners. This dinner proved to be the pivotal moment in Eisenhower's career.⁵² At their first meeting Conner did not mention the assignment in Panama but Eisenhower was certainly in need of a change and a mentor. The Eisenhowers had lost their son to scarlet fever and Ike had not been making any friends within the Infantry community as a tank champion. Eisenhower also had significant guilt for not having combat experience in an Army just returned from war. His leadership was not supportive of his departure partly because he was a very successful football coach on Fort Meade. The combined effects of all these factors weighed heavily on the Eisenhowers. Although it would take a year and the personal intervention of Conner and Marshall on his behalf, the Eisenhowers joined the Conners in Panama on 7 January 1922.⁵³

Conner took personal interest in Ike. The two spent long hours in what Eisenhower later referred to as "a sort of graduate school in military affairs and humanities, leavened by the comments and discourses of a man who was experienced in his knowledge of men and their conduct".⁵⁴ Eisenhower was not an enthusiastic student, nor had he ever been. In his own words he declared "I didn't think of myself as either a scholar whose position would depend on the knowledge he had acquired in school, or as a military figure whose professional career might be seriously affected by his academic or disciplinary record."⁵⁵ Conner saw and developed Eisenhower's potential. He relayed his belief that the Versailles Treaty had left war virtually inevitable and determined that Eisenhower would have a significant role. Twenty-four years before Eisenhower would lead allied forces in the Normandy Invasion, Conner went to great

detail describing how to build coalitions, and even drilling Eisenhower on cross channel amphibious operations.⁵⁶ Conner and Ike forged a lasting bond in Panama that would influence American history. Conner was not about to see all of this development go to waste at the end of Eisenhower's tour in Panama. In response to Eisenhower's less than stellar next assignment, Conner called in several favors to remove Eisenhower from the control of his branch so that he could attend the Command and General Staff College where, in his class of two-hundred and seventy-five, he finished first.⁵⁷

This would not be the only time that Conner would intervene on behalf of his protégés. George Patton, as would happen throughout his career, managed to have himself removed as the G3 in Hawaii as a result of his outspokenness. Conner, who replaced the previous division commander, held significant influence over the division chief of staff who quickly remedied the Patton situation through a glowing evaluation.

Personal encounters between Conner, Eisenhower, Marshall and Patton would become infrequent following Conner's assignment in Hawaii. Each exchanged extensive correspondence throughout the remainder of their lives, but rarely met personally. In one such letter to Eisenhower in 1934, Conner said he would resign if offered the nomination for Chief of Staff of the Army. Later that year President Roosevelt himself hinted at such an opportunity to which Conner responded, "I wouldn't go to Washington for a damn sight. I'd resign first."⁵⁸ Having flatly refused the President, Conner recommended that Roosevelt consider Marlin Craig or George Marshall to succeed MacArthur. The President did so in exactly that order.

Conner and his wife retired quietly to their property in upstate New York in 1938. He and his protégés corresponded on matters both professional and personal for two

decades. Marshall became the Chief of Staff of the Army and named Eisenhower as the Supreme Allied Commander. Although the two had only met twice, and only briefly, there is little doubt that Marshall's confidence in Eisenhower was due to his association with Conner. Conner advised Eisenhower by letter to open a second front to relieve the pressure on Russia and regularly received messengers from Washington laden with packages full of maps and plans to review. Conner's emphasis on coalition building as a result of his World War I experiences in France was not lost on Eisenhower. Ike became so obsessive about coalition operations that at one point he relieved an officer who disagreed openly with a British counterpart.⁵⁹

Fox Conner's story can be told based on the writings and comments of very prominent leaders he helped to develop. Conner was self-deprecating, often saying "always take your job seriously, but never yourself".⁶⁰ Offered the chance to have a book written about his service with the American Expeditionary Force, Conner did little to trumpet himself. Ultimately, until Edward Cox's book published in 2011, there was no book written about Conner because he actively withheld information that may have been disparaging to his superiors and his protégés.⁶¹ While sailing across the Atlantic Ocean to attend the twentieth anniversary of the invasion of Normandy, President Eisenhower read aloud the following portion of a poem to relate his profound sense of self and his place in history: "The moral of this quaint example, is to do just the best that you can, be proud of yourself but remember, there's no indispensable man."⁶² Perhaps looking back across a century punctuated by a resurgent, unified and powerful Europe, the decline of communism and a world view of war as a coalition endeavor, it is certainly

arguable that Fox Conner, as a strategic advisor, may have been an indispensable man.

Fox Conner - Strategic Advisor

The Disciplines of an Effective Strategic Advisor

The preceding pages laid out how important Fox Conner was as a strategic advisor. But why is it important that the military develop effective strategic advisors? On the whole, a miniscule percentage of all military officers lead at the strategic level. Moreover, even the most senior strategic leaders are in actuality advisors to civilian leaders. In a strictly military context, few codified jobs contain the title of strategic advisor. Since personnel systems do not provide strategic advisors, many commanders and senior leaders have assembled shadow staffs specifically charged with the task of providing advice. Neither Joint nor Army doctrine provide a definition of the role. In fact, neither the word strategic nor advisor appears in the Department of Defense Dictionary.⁶³ Perhaps, it is the lack of definition or nebulous set of requirements that have caused the military services to neglect addressing the core competencies of a strategic advisor. While there are numerous institutional professional military education opportunities, there is no military school with an institutional focus on being an effective strategic advisor. Further, there is no agreed upon set of disciplines that would be taught if such a course did exist.

In more recent history there are notable examples of strategic advisors available for study. General Colin Powell is often cited as an effective strategic advisor, while General William Westmoreland is often cited by some as ineffective. However, studying these examples with no criteria against which to measure them, is fruitless. The

following pages propose a list of disciplines or competencies of effective strategic advisors. To amplify the disciplines, Fox Conner will be evaluated against each of them.

The disciplines proposed in James E. Lukaszewski's book, *Why Should the Boss Listen to You?* provide a useful guide. The book's goal of, "becoming the number one Number Two", has its focus on personal professional gain, but the tenants laid out in the book provide useful insights regardless of their motivation. These disciplines are as follows: being trustworthy, being a verbal visionary, developing a [leadership]⁶⁴ perspective, thinking strategically, understanding the power of patterns, advising constructively and showing others how to use your advice.⁶⁵

Being Trustworthy

This discipline seems obvious. However, it is the most important as it provides a bedrock for the remaining competencies. At the very core of the leader-advisor relationship is his or her belief that the advisor is acting on their behalf. Irrevocable damage to the relationship results if the advisor's motivations are for personal gain rather than to benefit the leader or organization.

Advisors build trust through competence in their own field. Strategic leaders are rarely experts in every facet of their broad span of responsibility. They must rely on advisors who are highly experienced in at least one aspect of their area of responsibility. Advisors who exercise good judgment within their area of expertise gain trust and thereby increased access to, and influence on leaders. Strategic advisors at senior executive levels agree that access is vital to being an effective advisor.⁶⁶

Trust is the discipline in which Fox Conner likely cements his place in history as an exceptional strategic advisor. Conner built trust largely because he was remarkably humble. This humility, rooted in a childhood in impoverished and occupied Mississippi,

attracted and disarmed his protégés and superiors. Conner never sought personal gain in any of his relationships. He was offered and refused the Army's most coveted position. Even in the twilight of his career he refused to boast about his experiences because he believed that doing so might disparage others. Rather than write a book about his achievements for recognition, Conner routinely spoke at professional forums and chose to influence the Army through coaching and teaching. Pershing, Marshall, Patton and Eisenhower revered Conner, while at the same time they considered him a friend and recognized that he placed their welfare above his own.

Become a Verbal Visionary

No leader ever follows advice they do not hear. Advisors must anticipate the decisions required of a leader and be prepared to provide timely, accurate and memorable counsel. Because strategic leaders often do not have time for lengthy detailed discussions, their advisors must use short bursts of time to guide their boss toward the best decision. Good advisors communicate through facts, questions, comparisons, recommendations and options pulled together in a coherent storyline that is easily understood and conveyable to other leaders.⁶⁷

Fox Conner was certainly a verbal visionary. From his meeting of George Patton on a train to Fort Riley, to his interactions with Pershing during the interwar period, Conner delivered succinct counsel tempered by historical fact. The relationship between Pershing and Conner best exemplifies this discipline. Pershing had been hit with tragedy in 1915 when his wife and three daughters were killed in a house fire while he was preparing for expedition into Mexico to capture Pancho Villa. From that point on he was a terse man with little patience for prolonged and embellished rhetoric.⁶⁸ Conner had great empathy for Pershing. Since he understood that Pershing could be short and

stern, he tailored his interactions with Pershing into concentrated events. Although their personal relationship grew after their time together in the American Expeditionary Force, Conner's succinct, matter-of-fact style suited Pershing. Much of what Conner said or wrote was used verbatim by Pershing. Conner wrote the National Defense Authorization Act of 1920 for General Pershing. Conner's ability to capture Pershing's attention while communicating effectively was so well developed that the opinions of the two were considered by most as indistinguishable.

Develop a Leadership Perspective

Good advisors are advocates for their boss and the organization. If the advice cannot be implemented, it has no value. Leaders need advisors who understand their authorities and guide within them. Often advisors mistake the nature of the relationship with their boss and sound off on the ills of the organization. Although the boss may agree, that advisor is placing himself between his boss and the organization. This could ultimately weaken the leadership team environment, diminishing the advisor's role. Advisors need to help their bosses solve problems, not merely highlight them.

The most striking example of Conner's mastery of this discipline was during the Saint-Mihiel, Meuse-Argonne Campaign when Pershing named himself commander over both the American Expeditionary Force and the First Army. Unable to convince Pershing otherwise, Conner mitigated the decision by assigning Marshall as the First Army Operations Officer. Although in this example, his advice was ignored, he remained an advocate for Pershing, keeping Pershing's success and that of the organization paramount.

Conner never groused to Pershing about Marshal Foch's ego driven decision to force the sequential conduct of the Saint-Mihiel and Meuse-Argonne Campaigns.

Although such complaining would have been welcomed, it would have placed Conner between Foch and Pershing. Rather, Conner went about ensuring success of the mission regardless of his leaders' egos.

Think Strategically

Strategic thinkers intentionally vary their approaches to important decisions and question every assumption.⁶⁹ Strategic advisors use reflective, critical thinking to deconstruct problems and develop solutions to the sub-components, rather than becoming bound by the whole problem.⁷⁰ Strategic thinkers are effective advisors because they provide options that are implementable.

Evidence that Conner was a strategic thinker is apparent in his interactions with Eisenhower. Conner had correctly predicted that Eisenhower would be instrumental in the war soon coming to Europe. He developed a personal curriculum for Eisenhower that included education on building and maintaining coalitions and cross-channel amphibious operations.

Conner also helped maintain force structure in the Army through the National Defense Authorization Act as well as revising the personnel replacement system that he believed would be ineffective in any coming conflict. His predictions on personnel losses during the Normandy invasion were much more accurate than those who ultimately chose a North African loss model.⁷¹ Conner would lecture at the Army War College more than a dozen times on topics ranging from personnel and logistics to operations. In 1934, President Roosevelt ordered Conner to put down strikes among a number of New England textile factories and to "return violence with violence" if required. Understanding the strategic implications of this order, Conner replied that force would not be necessary. He settled the matter peacefully.

Be a Window to Tomorrow

Effective strategic advisors understand patterns and avoid applying failed solutions to like problems. Strategic advisors who exercise this discipline look to the past to anticipate, and develop advice for problems that their bosses have yet to encounter. Where trust is the bedrock of the advisor-leader relationship, this discipline enhances each of the other disciplines.

Perhaps Fox Conner's the most remarkable attribute was his near prophetic ability to predict future events. His certainty that there would be another world war within thirty years of the First World War was crucial in the development of three of the most influential leaders of the century. Conner was adept at recognizing patterns and had rightly predicted, not only that there would be war, but also that there would be a need for a cross-channel invasion of the European continent. He also developed specific ideas on how means would be applied during that war.

Conner identified the significance of the tank as to any future war. His prediction likely enabled the United States to enter into tank development early enough to make a difference in World War II. He personally witnessed the manner in which World War I was fought and understood that the Germans would develop methods to defeat static defenses in France, later known as blitzkrieg.

Conner also used this discipline to predict the loss rates of a cross-channel invasion. This led to the development of a personnel and logistics system to mitigate the predicted losses. In a number of War College lectures, he coached future leaders by using the patterns of his own experience to illustrate his points.

Advise Constructively & Show the Boss How to Use Your Advice⁷²

Effective advisors align their way of thinking and decision making behavior with the leader they are advising. The way in which information is structured is often more important than the information itself. Learning how an audience receives information is vital to advising constructively. These disciplines focuses on delivering advice in a way that will not offend. One must advise from a position of humility with a focus on service to the leader and the organization. Success across all the other disciplines will not mitigate failure in these disciplines.

Arguably, Fox Conner advised two of the most difficult military leaders of the twentieth century in John Pershing and George Patton as well as two of the most loyal in George Marshall and Dwight Eisenhower. In each case, Conner delivered his advice in a manner which it would be best received. Notably, of the four, only Eisenhower recognized himself as a Conner protégé. Marshall looked to Pershing who did not have a teacher's temperament and Patton recognized no one as superior enough to be called his mentor.⁷³ Even with this deleterious mix of personalities, Conner gave sage counsel to each of them. He innately knew how each man would receive his counsel and adjusted his delivery. Perhaps because of his humility and tact, Conner formed relationships that were not only close, but useful to the person he was advising.

Pershing was reliant on Conner to rebuild the Army during the interwar years. Conner formulated many of his opinions on the Army structure during his service in the American Expeditionary Force but only Pershing had the influence sufficient to implement the recommendations. Pershing saw Conner as a loyal, trusted servant and Conner delivered even when his boss went against his advice. Pershing needed Conner and Conner humbly served Pershing.

Patton viewed Conner as an older brother. Patton fawned for Conner's attention and sought his constant approval. Like a proud big brother, Conner doted over Patton dismissing many of his shortcomings because he recognized his operational genius. In this relationship, Conner delivered counsel in a way that preserved Patton's self-image. Even though he was very senior to Patton, Conner portrayed himself as a peer.

Marshall viewed Conner as a friend and confidant and maintained the most consistent contact with Conner following World War I. This contact became even more frequent during World War II when Marshall served as the Army Chief of Staff. Marshall regularly confided in Conner in what both men viewed as a peer relationship.

Perhaps Conner's masterpiece relationship was with Dwight Eisenhower. This was a true protégé-mentor relationship. During their time in Panama the two had formed a near pact with one another. Conner agreed to teach and guide, Eisenhower to learn and act. Although their contact was less frequent during World War II, Ike would ask Conner specific questions of operational and strategic importance because both men recognized their roles in relation to one-another. Though Conner's interaction with each of the four was significant, it was the recognition of this mentor-protégé relationship between Conner and Eisenhower that made it so productive.

The Missing Discipline: Access through Competence

The previous pages have evaluated Fox Conner against Lukaszewski's seven disciplines. However, a common thread spanning the seven disciplines is that strategic advisor's gain access through competence. Access to strategic leaders is granted to advisors based on their technical and conceptual competence and their capacity for learning. Fox Conner gained access to his strategic leaders because he was, first and foremost a trusted expert in artillery. His assignments to the French Field Artillery

Regiment, the Army Inspector General and eventually the Operations Officer for the American Expeditionary Force were the result of this specific expertise. Conner was an aggressive student of the profession while having a voracious appetite for learning outside of his area of expertise. He anticipated and built expertise in areas he believed would be important. Conner taught himself Spanish, French and German. Although the Army provided the instruction in artillery, his mastery of French rendered him invaluable in preparing Pershing for operations in France. The seed of Conner's influence on history was sewn by this self-study of languages and his professional competence in artillery.

Conclusion

An emotionally distant General, an arrogant and wealthy lieutenant, a virtually unknown staff officer and a demoralized mid-grade Army major revolutionized the way America fought, rebuilt Europe and changed the world. Pershing, Patton, Marshall and Eisenhower, all had one thing in common: they all were recognized, encouraged, developed and advised by Fox Conner. Each of these great men, considered pillars in American history, had innate talent. However, absent the influence of one man, that talent may have gone unrecognized and uncultivated.

Undoubtedly, there are people with talent of this magnitude in military service today. The services should recognize the need to generate strategic advisors with the requisite disciplines. To that end, the service Senior Service Colleges should refocus their missions on developing strategic advisors. There are at least two formally established elective courses at the Senior Service Colleges that specifically purpose to deliver strategic advisors who can immediately impact the Joint, Interagency,

Intergovernmental, and Multinational environment.⁷⁴ However, the throughput is insufficient to meet the demand for effective advisors at the strategic level.

Some may contend that programs such as the Army's Strategist profession, "career field 59", or the Schools of Advanced Military Studies and Advanced Warfare are sufficient. While these programs have certainly filled a gap in planning, they have not met the need generated by strategic leaders for advisors as presented in this paper. This is evident by the current and increasing trend of strategic leaders forming advisory groups outside of their organic staffs. Although the strategist profession and these schools provide personnel who have expanded capabilities to plan at the strategic level, they lack the professional competence in a specific field sufficient to gain access to strategic level leadership. Since the majority of leaders at the executive level will never command beyond Senior Service College, it is imperative to educate leaders skilled at providing advice. This is the shrewdest use of dwindling resources and the surest way to develop a broader base of talent.

Fox Conner was an indispensable leader who had instinctive abilities established through a lifetime of uniquely humble service. He was never taught the disciplines that are discussed in this paper, yet he exhibited each of them in great measure. Our military and, to some extent, society may have overemphasized competition to command and leading from the top. In doing so, we have overlooked the critical role that advisors play. This is evident by the fact that someone as important as Fox Conner was not even included on Mississippi's list of significant individuals until 1987, thirty six years after his death.⁷⁵ Certainly competitiveness and the drive to lead from the top is advantageous at the tactical and operational levels. Yet, commanding at the strategic level will be

unattainable to the vast majority of professionals. Becoming a strategic advisor who develops great leaders such as Fox Conner did is a worthy effort that will have a greater and more enduring impact on our nation.

Endnotes

¹ Carlo D'Este, *Eisenhower: A Soldier's Life* (New York: Henry Holt, 2002), 705.

² William B. Lee, *Major General Fox Conner, November 2, 1874-October 13, 1951*. [S.I. : s.n., between 2002 and 2008], 3.

³ Edward M. Coffman, *The War to End All Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 267

⁴ Martin Blumenson, *The Patton Papers and Patton: The Man behind the Legend, 1885-1945* (New York: Morrow, 1985)

⁵ Matthew F, Holland, *Eisenhower, Between the Wars, Making of a General and Statesman* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001), 99.

⁶ Carlo D'Este, *Patton: A Genius for War* (New York: Harper, 1995), 202-204.

⁷ Roger J. Spiller, ed. *Dictionary of American Military Biography, Volume 1 (A-G)* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984), 200.

⁸ Matthew F, Holland, *Eisenhower, Between the Wars, Making of a General and Statesman* (Westport CT: Praeger, 2001), 90.

⁹ Alden Hatch, *General Ike: A Biography* (New York: Henry Holt, 1944), 79.

¹⁰ Throughout this paper the author has deliberately omitted the ranks of many of the actors to eliminate confusion. Throughout this period officers rose and fell in rank based on their position and the issue of the day. During World War I, Conner and Marshall would be given temporary ranks and would revert after the war. The reader should note that Patton, Marshall and Eisenhower were at the time of their meeting with Conner, significantly junior to him in rank and time in service. Marshall and Patton were contemporaries while Eisenhower was six years junior to both.

¹¹ Lee, *Major General Fox Conner*, 4.

¹² Edward Cox, *Grey Eminence, Fox Conner and the Art of Mentorship* (Stillwater, OK: New Forums Press, 2011), 5.

¹³ United States Military Academy, *School History of Candidates*, Vol. 1 1880-1899 (West Point: United States Military Academy).

¹⁴ Russ Stayanoff, "Major General Fox Conner: Soldier, Mentor, Enigma: Operations Chief (G-3) of the AEF," <http://www.worldwar1.com/dbc/foxconner.htm> (accessed February 15, 2016).

¹⁵ Lee, *Major General Fox Conner*, 4.

¹⁶ Theodore Crackel, *West Point: A Bicentennial History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 87-88.

¹⁷ Lee, *Major General Fox Conner*, 5.

¹⁸ Spiller, *Dictionary of American Military Biography*, 198.

¹⁹ Brevet-Major-General George W. Cullum, *Biographical Register of US Military Academy*, Supplement, Volume IV (Cambridge, MA: The Riverside Press, 1901), 646.

²⁰ Spiller, *Dictionary of American Military Biography*, 198.

²¹ Ibid.

²² I. B. Holley, *General M. Palmer, Citizen Soldiers, and the Army of a Democracy* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982), 186.

²³ Major E. Swift, *Remarks on the Course of Instruction, Academic Year 1907-1908, Army War College Curricular Archives* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, 1907), 8-14.

²⁴ Ibid., 5-7.

²⁵ Spiller, *Dictionary of American Military Biography*, 199.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Virginia Conner, *What Father Forbad* (Philadelphia: Dorrance, 1951), 26-27.

²⁹ Spiller, *Dictionary of American Military Biography*, 200.

³⁰ Louise Ligon, "Biographical Sketch of General Fox Conner," *The Monitor-Herald*, March 12, 1936, 2.

³¹ Joseph W. A. Whitehorne, *The Inspectors General of the United States Army 1903-1939* (Washington, DC: Office of the Inspector General, U.S. Army), 116.

³² Holley, *General M. Palmer*, 278-279.

³³ Lee, *Major General Fox Conner*, 6.

³⁴ Ibid., 7.

³⁵ Cox, *Grey Eminence*, 61.

³⁶ Blumenson, *The Patton Papers and Patton*, 403.

³⁷ Ibid., 415.

³⁸ Forest Pogue, *George C. Marshall: Education of a General* (New York: Viking Press, 1963), 142.

³⁹ Ibid., 169.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 170.

⁴¹ Ibid., 172.

⁴² Frank Vandiver, *Blackjack: The Life and Times of John J. Pershing, Vol. I* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1977), 936-939.

⁴³ Larry H. Addington, *The Patterns of War Since the Eighteenth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 167-68.

⁴⁴ Cox, *Grey Eminence*, 72.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 73.

⁴⁶ Vandiver, *Blackjack*, 984.

⁴⁷ Cox, *Grey Eminence*, 76.

⁴⁸ Larry I. Bland and Sharon R. Ritenour, eds. *The Papers of George Catlett Marshall, 2 Volumes* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 194.

⁴⁹ Mark Stoler, *George C. Marshall: Soldier-Statesman of the American Century* (Boston: Twayne, 1989), 46.

⁵⁰ Cox, *Grey Eminence*, 81-82.

⁵¹ Ibid., 83.

⁵² Dorothy Brandon, *Mamie Doud Eisenhower: A Portrait of a First Lady* (New York: Scribner's, 1954), 112-122.

⁵³ Lester David and Irene David, *Ike and Mamie: The Story of the General and His Lady* (New York: Putnam, 1981), 89.

⁵⁴ Bradford G. Chynoweth, *Recollections of His Army Career, 1890-1941* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army Military History Institute, 1967).

⁵⁵ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *At Ease, Stories I Tell My Friends* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1967), 10, 12.

⁵⁶ Lee, *Major General Fox Conner*, 16.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 23-27.

⁶⁰ Stephen E. Ambrose, *IKE/Abilene to Berlin* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 56.

⁶¹ George C. Marshall, *The Papers of George Catlett Marshall: 'The Soldierly Spirit,' December 1800- June 1939 (Volume 1)* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1981), letter dated April 25, 1934.

⁶² D'Este, *Eisenhower: A Soldier's Life*, 705.

⁶³ "DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms," November 8, 2010, as amended through October 15, 2015, http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/dod_dictionary/index.html?zoom_query=STrategic+Advisor&zoom_s ort=0&zoom_per_page=10&zoom_and=1 (accessed March 4, 2016).

⁶⁴ James E. Lukaszewski, *Why Should the Boss Listen to You?* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2008). The discipline of "Develop a Management Perspective" is changed by the author to "Develop a Leadership Perspective" in order to have a more understandable and acceptable military meaning.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁶⁶ During a staff ride to Washington, DC, several senior government, industry and academic leaders attested that access was crucial to being an effective advisor.

⁶⁷ Lukaszewski, *Why Should the Boss Listen to You?* 68.

⁶⁸ Vandiver, *Blackjack*, 593-594.

⁶⁹ Lukaszewski, *Why Should the Boss Listen to You?* 119.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁷¹ In planning for the invasion of Europe personnel and equipment loss models from the invasion of North Africa. Conner recognized that these models were going to be inaccurate and set about to influence Eisenhower to rework these systems.

⁷² These two disciplines for this section are combined as the examples from Fox Conner's life illustrate both.

⁷³ Holland, *Eisenhower, Between the Wars*, 94.

⁷⁴ These courses are the Advanced Strategic Arts Program and the Basic Strategic Arts Program at the Army War College.

⁷⁵ Stayanoff, "Major General Fox Conner: Soldier, Mentor, Enigma: Operations Chief (G-3) of the AEF."