

THE BIG IDEAS

Read, Read, Read

Or be functionally illiterate.

Is It Hard Work or Luck?

"Yes!"

The Paratrooper's Prayer

Heroic poetry.

The Ultimate Battle

And how to win it.

The Art of Leading

What's your Commander's intent?

"Finally, I understood what President Eisenhower had passed on. 'I'll tell you what leadership is,' he said. 'It's persuasion and conciliation and education and patience. It's long, slow, tough work. That's the only kind of leadership I know.'"

~ Jim Mattis

Call Sign Chaos

Learning to Lead

BY JIM MATTIS AND BING WEST · RANDOM HOUSE © 2021 · 320 PAGES

"My purpose in writing this book is to convey the lessons I learned for those who might benefit, whether in the military or in civilian life. I have been fortunate that the American people funded my forty years of education, and some of the lessons I learned might prove helpful to others. I'm old-fashioned: I don't write about sitting Presidents. In the chapters that follow, I will pass on what prepared me for challenges I could not anticipate, not take up the hot political rhetoric of our day. I remain a steward of the public trust.

The book is structured in three parts: Direct Leadership, Executive Leadership, and Strategic Leadership. In the first part, I will describe my formative years growing up and then in the Corps, where the Vietnam generation of Marines "raised" me and where I first led Marines in battle. ...

In the second part, I will describe the broadening years in executive leadership, when I was commanding a force of 7,000 to 42,000 troops and it was no longer possible to know the name of every one of my charges. ...

Finally, in the third section, I will delve into the challenges and techniques at the strategic level. ...

The habit of continuing to learn and adapt came with me when I joined the administration as a member of the cabinet, where my portfolio exceeded my former military role. Yet at the end of the day, driving me to do my best were the veterans of past wars I felt watching me, and the humbling honor of serving my nation by leading those staunch and faithful patriots who looked past Washington's political vicissitudes and volunteered to put their lives on the line to defend the Constitution and the American people."

~ Jim Mattis and Bing West from *Call Sign Chaos*

General Jim Mattis is the former Secretary of Defense and one of the most formidable strategic thinkers of the twenty-first century. He wrote this book with Bing West, a former assistant secretary of defense and combat Marine.

This book is, as per the back cover, "a clear-eyed account of learning to lead in a chaotic world," in which Mattis "recounts the foundational experiences and lessons he learned over four decades and in three wars. It is a journey about learning to lead at every level, with insights equally applicable to the military, to business, and to individual growth."

I got this book on the recommendation of a new, dear friend who happens to be a long-time student (and Heroic Coach) who also happens to be a commanding officer in the U.S. military.

It's an absolutely FANTASTIC memoir packed with wisdom on how to lead—which is why it has nearly 5,000 5-star reviews. (Get a copy of the book [here](#).)

"Years later, I read the epitaph on Jackie Robinson's tombstone: 'A life is not important except in its impact on other lives.' That sentiment captured the credo of the generation that raised me."

~ Jim Mattis

The book reminds me of two other memoirs by military leaders I admire: Admiral William McRaven's [Sea Stories](#) and General Colin Powell's [It Worked for Me](#). It also reminds me of Phil Knight's memoir [Shoe Dog](#) and Ray Dalio's [Principles](#).

And... For related books on leadership, check out our Notes on General Stanley McChrystal's [Leaders: Myths and Reality](#) plus Doris Kearns Goodwin's [Leadership in Turbulent Times](#).

As you'd expect, this book is packed with Big Ideas. I'm excited to share some of my favorites so let's jump straight in!

READ, READ, READ

"Reading is an honor and a gift from a warrior or a historian who—a decade or a thousand decades ago—set aside time to write. He distilled a lifetime of campaigning in order to have a 'conversation' with you. We have been fighting on this planet for ten thousand years; it would be idiotic and unethical to not take advantage of such accumulated experiences. If you haven't read hundreds of books, you are functionally illiterate, and you will become incompetent, because your personal experiences alone aren't broad enough to sustain you. Any commander who claims he is 'too busy to read' is going to fill body bags with his troops as he learns the hard way. The consequences of incompetence in battle are final. History teaches that we face nothing new under the sun. The Commandant of the Marine Corps maintains a list of required reading for every rank. All marines read a common set; in addition, sergeants read some books, and colonels read others. Even generals are assigned a new set of books that they must consume. At no rank is a Marine excused from studying. When I talked to any group of Marines, I knew from their ranks what books they had read. During planning and before going into battle, I could cite specific examples of how others had solved similar challenges. This provided my lads with a mental model as we adapted to our specific mission.

Reading sheds light on the dark path ahead. By traveling into the past, I enhance my grasp of the present. I'm partial to studying Roman leaders and historians, from Marcus Aurelius and Scipio Africanus to Tacitus, whose grace under pressure and reflections on life can guide leaders today. I followed Caesar across Gaul. I marveled at how the plain prose of Grant and Sherman revealed the value of steely determination. E. B. Sledge, in *With the Old Breed*, wrote for generations of grunts when he described the fierce fighting on Okinawa and the bonds that bind men together in battle. Biographies of Roman generals and Native American leaders, of wartime political leaders and sergeants, and in strategic thinkers from Sun Tzu to Colin Gray have guided me through tough challenges. Eventually I collected several thousand books for my personal library. I read broadly and selected a few battles and areas where I was weak to study deeply. Asked by a fellow Marine to provide examples, I sent him a list of my favorite books."

That's from one of the early chapters on Direct Leadership.

I read that with my jaw dropped while shaking my head in both awe and agreement—dropping large exclamation points in the side bar while knowing I'd be pulling this out as a Big Idea.

Here's the question for you, the Commander of YOUR life...

Are YOU functionally illiterate?

As Mattis, who NPR describes as a "warrior-monk," tells us: *"If you haven't read HUNDREDS of books, you are functionally ILLITERATE."*

Know this: We have been waging *external* wars for 10,000 years. And, we have been waging *internal* wars for at least as long. The wise sages across all cultures and times have blessed us with the gift of their hard-earned wisdom. It is simply *"idiotic and unethical to not take advantage of such accumulated experiences."*

PERIOD.

"Everyone has a plan, Mike Tyson said, until he gets punched in the mouth. The prepared fighter knows he's going to be rocked back on his heels. He's anticipated that before the brawl begins."

~ Jim Mattis

"Competence, caring, and conviction combine to form a fundamental element-shaping the fighting spirit of your troops. Leadership means reaching the soul of your troops, instilling a sense of commitment and purpose in the face of challenges so severe that they cannot be put into words."

~ Jim Mattis

Too busy to read? Don't have the time in your jumbo-packed days?

As I like to joke in our Mastery at 1:01 coaching sessions, let me follow you around for a day and see if we can find 10-15-20-30-60-75 minutes of spare time you're wasting on trivial activities—from Instagram and TikTok to Netflix and ESPN.

And... Let me remind you that 15 minutes a day is 5,475 minutes a year. That's 91 hours. That's more than TWO full-time weeks of work. Throw 30 minutes a day at reading and you're at over 10,000 minutes and nearly 200 hours of reading. That's a MONTH of full-time work reading PER YEAR. If you read 40 pages an hour, that's 8,000 (!) pages or 40 200-page books a year.

What battle are YOU waging these days and what's the next book you're going to read to tap into the wisdom of those who went before us so you can win that battle and give us all you've got in this precious life of yours, Hero?

Day 1. All in. LET'S GO!

IS IT HARD WORK OR LUCK? (YES!)

"So here I was—offered an opportunity. Biographies of executives usually stress achievement through hard work, brilliance, or dogged persistence. By contrast, many who achieve less point to hard luck and bad breaks. I believe both views are equally true. Following the attacks of 9/11, when Al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan became the target, I was the next up to deploy. As Churchill noted, 'To each there comes in their lifetime a special moment when they are figuratively tapped on the shoulder and offered a chance to do a very special thing, unique to them and fitted to their talents. What a tragedy if that moment finds them unprepared or unqualified for that which could have been their finest hour.' Thanks to Vietnam veterans, at this 'special moment' I was prepared and qualified 'to do a very special thing.' While six months earlier, it would have been someone else leading our Marines into Afghanistan, mastering your chosen vocation means you are ready when opportunity knocks."

Is it luck or hard work?

Mattis says: "YES!"

As I read that passage, I thought of a slightly different take on that Churchill quote I have memorized and recited to myself well over 1,000 times. I also thought of some Teddy Roosevelt wisdom from Doris Kearns Goodwin's [Leadership in Turbulent Times](#). And, I thought of Jim Collins's scientific studies on luck.

First, the Roosevelt quote.

Doris Kearns Goodwin tells us: "Any man who has been successful, [Theodore] Roosevelt repeatedly said, has leapt at opportunities chance provides."

Now, the Churchill quote.

He tells us: "There comes a certain moment in everyone's life, a moment for which that person was born. That special opportunity, when he seizes it, will fulfill his mission—a mission for which he is uniquely qualified. In that moment, he finds greatness. It is his finest hour."

Mattis's version is roughly 10x more powerful. We must be prepared to seize that opportunity. (Are you?)

In *Beyond Entrepreneurship 2.0*, [Jim Collins](#) tells us that all companies experience good and bad luck. But... The GREAT leaders know how to get "a return on luck." (Do you?)

He also tells us: "You can look at life as a search for that one big winning hand, or you can look at life as a series of hands well played. If you believe life comes down to a single hand, of course, you can easily lose. But if you see life as a series of hands, and if you play each hand the

"The Marine philosophy is to recruit for attitude and to train for skills. Marines believe that attitude is a weapon system. We searched for intangible character traits: a quest for adventure, a desire to serve with the elite, and the intention to be in top physical condition. The strenuous task of the recruiter was to find young men and women with the right stuff to send to boot camp."

~ Jim Mattis

*" Success on the battlefield,
where opportunities and
dangers open and close in
a few compact minutes,
comes from aggressive junior
officers with a strong bias
for action. Unleashing this
quality among junior leaders,
disciplined by my commander's
intent, was always my vision.
Trust up and down the chain
must be the coin of the
realm."*

~ Jim Mattis

*" Regardless of rank or
occupation, I believe that all
leaders should be coaches at
heart. For me, 'player-coach'
aptly describes the role of
a combat leader, or any real
leader."*

~ Jim Mattis

best you can, there's a huge compounding effect. Bad luck can kill you, but good luck cannot make you great. As long as you don't get a catastrophic stroke of bad luck that flat-out ends the game, what really matters is how well you play each hand over the long haul. How will you play this hand and the next—and every hand you're dealt?

Imagine if after having been booted out of Apple in 1985, Jobs had said 'Well, I got a really bad break, a bad hand. Game over.' What if he'd lost his work ethic and his passion? What if he'd turned hurt into bitterness, instead of creating and moving forward? I used to think of Jobs as the Beethoven of business—a particular creative genius with a compositional body of work (the Macintosh as his third symphony, the iPod as his seventh, and the iPhone/iPad as his ninth). But my view has changed. I've come to see him more as the Winston Churchill of business—a hyper-resilient soul who exemplified the simple mantra, 'Never give in, never, never, never.'"

THE PARATROOPER'S PRAYER

"I remembered a poem written by French lieutenant André Zirnheld in 1942, as German Field Marshal Erwin Rommel was sweeping across North Africa. Knowing the odds against him were overwhelming, Zirnheld volunteered to parachute in behind German lines near the British-held port of Tobruk. He was killed. Zirnheld had remained loyal to his sense of duty. He had chosen to be a soldier. That didn't change because the Battle of Tobruk was lost. His poem was discovered when his body was recovered. Today it is known as 'The Paratrooper's Prayer.'

The war was lengthening. But that wouldn't change who we were or sap our fighting spirit. The Marine motto is 'Semper Fidelis'—always faithful, not just when things go your way. Nobody had forced us to be where we were; we had all volunteered to fight. My troops had kept faith, thanks to their will and discipline, and I said good-bye to my rambunctious and undaunted Marines by reading the French 'Paratrooper's Prayer':

*I bring this prayer to you, Lord,
For you alone can give
What one cannot demand from oneself.
Give me, Lord, what you have left over,
Give me what no one ever asks of you.*

*I don't ask for rest or quiet,
Whether of soul or body;
I don't ask you for wealth,
Nor for success, nor even health perhaps.*

*That sort of thing you get asked for so much
That you can't have any of it left.
Give me, Lord, what you have left over,
Give me what no one wants from you.*

*I want insecurity, strife,
And I want you to give me these
Once and for all.
So that I can be sure of having them always,
Since I shall not always have the courage
To ask you for them."*

That's from a chapter in Part II on Executive Leadership in which Mattis shares his experiences in 2004 leading American Marines in Afghanistan.

There's not much I can add to that passage except to encourage you to reread the Paratrooper's Prayer as you feel into the depth of that soldier's Heroic commitment to something bigger than himself.

*"When you are in command,
there is always the next
decision waiting to be
made. You don't have time
to pace back and forth
like Hamlet, zigzagging one
way and the other. You do
your best and live with the
consequences. A commander
has to compartmentalize his
emotions and remain focused
on the mission. You must
decide, act, and move on."*

~ Jim Mattis

And... As you reflect on the Wisdom and Self-Mastery and Courage and LOVE with which Lieutenant Zirnheld wrote that poem that millions of soldiers have used as their guiding star, know that this is EXACTLY what we are talking about ALL the time.

It's the most beautiful and poetically powerful encapsulation of Phil Stutz's encouragement to embrace the pain and uncertainty and hard work inherent to a great life that we discuss in this +1 playfully called "[I Love PUH](#)."

Remember: Your infinite potential exists on the OTHER side of your comfort zone. Even more importantly, remember that your commitment to something BIGGER THAN YOURSELF is, ultimately, the source of that type of Heroic Courage. I repeat... Your secret weapon is LOVE.

Here's to having the strength for two as we forge our antifragile confidence and say "BRING IT ON!" to any and all of the challenges we will face on our Heroic quests.

HOW TO WIN THE ULTIMATE BATTLE

"For me, direct leadership was all about preparing my troops to win in close-quarters combat. When you go into battle, you enter a different world. I set out to engrain in every grunt an aggressive spirit and confidence in winning. 'Whatever we learn to do, we learn by actually doing it,' Aristotle wrote. 'People come to be builders, for instance, by building, and harp players, by playing the harp. In the same way, by doing just acts we come to be just. By doing self-controlled acts, we come to be self-controlled, and by doing brave acts, we become brave.' Courage as an act of self-discipline can be infused by coaching a team until every member acquires the skills to have and to share confidence. Group spirit binds warriors together in a necessary way that keeps them distinct from the civilian society they are sworn to protect."

Want to cultivate Wisdom, Self-Mastery, Love, Courage, Gratitude, Hope, Curiosity, and Zest? Perfect. Me, too. As Aristotle would say, we must DO the things a Wise, Disciplined, Loving, Courageous, Grateful, Hopeful, Curious and Zesty person would do.

We MUST move from Theory to Practice to Mastery Together TODAY. And, as Mattis tells us, we must do it with an AGGRESSIVE spirit and with CONFIDENCE that we will win this ultimate battle of ours.

Phil Stutz and Barry Michels come to mind. So does Socrates.

Socrates tells us: "I desire only to know the truth, and to live as well as I can... And, to the utmost of my power, I exhort all other men to do the same... I exhort you also to take part in the great combat, which is the combat of life, and greater than every other earthly conflict."

In their great book [Coming Alive](#), Phil and Barry encourage us to AGGRESSIVELY engage in the ultimate combat and tells us that: "The more persistently you fight Part X, the more you feel the bracing wind of life's limitless potential. Your problems no longer stop you—they energize you to work even harder for your aspirations."

How about YOU? How can you dial up YOUR intensity and confidence just a bit more Today?

P.S. The commanding officer who recommended this book to me told me that he would follow Mattis anywhere, anytime. You could feel the affection Mattis had for his team (and country) and the affection THEY had for him. Which leads us to how he got his call sign. Here's the story...

"On the board, in capital letters, he had written C H A O S. Curious, I asked him what he was thinking. He handed me the chalk. 'Does,' he asked, 'the Colonel Have Another Outstanding Solution?' Thus did Chaos become my call sign. Rumors later claimed that Chaos referred to my desire to inflict bedlam in the enemy ranks. That was true. But the underlying reality is that my often irreverent troops assigned me the call sign. There's always a Toolan waiting out there to keep your ego in check, providing you keep the risk takers and mavericks at your side."

*"A leader's role is problem
solving. If you don't like
problems, stay out of
leadership."*

~ Jim Mattis

"The tougher the situation, the more I needed to choose to set a calm example, not allowing long hours and wicked issues to dictate my behavior around a team doing their utmost."

~ Jim Mattis

THE ART OF LEADING

"I learned then and I believe now that everyone needs a mentor or to be a mentor—and that no one needs a tyrant. At the same time, there's no substitute for constant study to master one's craft. Living in history builds your own shock absorbers, because you'll learn that there are old solutions to new problems. If you haven't read hundreds of books, learning from others who went before you, you are functionally illiterate—you can't coach and you can't lead. History lights the often dark path ahead; even if it's a dim light, it's better than none. If you can't be an additive leader, you're just like a potted plant in the corner of a hotel lobby: you look pretty, but you're not adding substance to the organization's mission."

From the classrooms of Quantico to the training fields to the battlefields, I winnowed information to what proved most beneficial in coming to grips with war's realities. From a leader's perspective, intent is the starting point. 'Commander's intent' has a special meaning in the military that requires time and thought. A commander must state his relevant aim. Intent is a formal statement in which the commander puts himself or herself on the line. Intent must accomplish the mission, it has to be achievable, it must be clearly understood, and at the end of the day, it has to deliver what the unit was tasked with achieving. Your moral authority as a commander is heavily dependent on the quality of this guidance and your troops' sense of confidence in it."

That's from the final chapter called "Reflections" in which Mattis wraps up his decades of leadership experience into a series of final thoughts.

Here are a few more gems throughout my heavily underlined copy of the book:

"Conviction doesn't mean you should not change your mind when circumstances or new information warrant it. A leader must be willing to change and make change. ... Every few months, a leader has to step back and question what he and his organization are doing."

"A former boss, Navy Captain Dick Stratto, who was held in the Hanoi Hilton for 2,251 days as a 'prisoner of war,' had taught me that a call from the field is not an interruption of the daily routine; it's the reason for the daily routine."

"Strategy is hard, unless you're a dilettante. You must think until your head hurts."

All that leads to the final and most important question... As the commanding officer of your life, what is your Commander's intent for your life?

Let's unplug from Nonsense, Inc., read a book or three hundred and do the HARD work to craft a coherent strategy and mission for our Heroic lives.

Day 1. All in. LET'S GO.

B

Brian Johnson,
Heroic Philosopher CEO

About the Author of This Note

BRIAN JOHNSON



Brian Johnson is the Founder + CEO of Heroic. He's spent half of the last 25 years as a Founder/CEO and the other half as a Philosopher. Brian loves integrating ancient wisdom and modern science to help YOU become the best, most heroic version of yourself so we can create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by 2051. Learn more at heroic.us.

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