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Teaching for Andy Marshall

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TWO INDIVIDUALS were instrumental in introducing me to AWM. First, Lionel Tiger commissioned me to write a paper for a project he was working on for Andy right after I made the academic leap from UCLA to the Naval Postgraduate School (NPS) in 1998. And then, Pat Parker, already an emeritus professor at NPS, had me meet Andy on one of Andy's many trips to Monterey. Had I ever heard of Andrew Marshall previously? Or, what did I know about the Office of Net Assessment at the time? Absolutely nothing. Nor did I have any inkling about the inner workings of the Office of the Secretary of Defense. The world of DOD research was nothing anyone I knew anything about.

Yet, here was Lionel Tiger, whose work, hypercritical to me, I didn't just admire but used frequently in the classroom. He spoke of Andy with unmitigated reverence. And then, so did Pat—Pat who was so well off in every sense that there was nothing he might have needed from Andy or ONA. Actually, it was the fact that both of these older, remarkably successful, incredibly well connected senior academics spoke with such unadulterated respect and were always keen to seek Andy's counsel that gave me initial pause. Otherwise, in my first few encounters with Mr. Marshall, I remained totally baffled. Clearly, the initials O-N-A held plenty of cachet around NPS. But—what was *Mr. Marshall's* draw? Especially since, as I was repeatedly told, he owed his longevity to never really uttering an opinion.

As for ONA, it was variously described to me as the Pentagon's internal think tank. With everyone else in the Pentagon mired in

putting out yesterday's fires today, ONA was apparently the only office with the pressing luxury of being able to look ten to fifteen years out. Among other things, ONA netted and assessed alternative futures: what should we be thinking about today to stand us in good stead tomorrow?—a question that has to be among the most potent questions any department of defense can ask and *keep asking*.

However, as became clear over time, Mr. Marshall wasn't just interested in alternative futures. He also "captured" individuals. As so many people have noted, he put a vast network of bright and independent-minded people to work on all manner of problems, so many over such an extensive period of time that only he probably knew just who he had set in motion on what. And though the 'on what' has seemed to draw most attention (and awe), the "in motion" might be even more salient, since who knew where people's thinking might take them? Indeed, I'd submit that *not* knowing—and not thinking he *needed to know*—was one of the hallmarks of Andy's genius.

Who else but Andy would refuse to insist that the cart must go in front of the horse? Certainly no sponsor of research I'd ever run across. Everyone else demanded likely findings before research had even begun.

To try to describe what made Andy's support so radically different from anyone else's, I should first say something about the two institutions that he straddled without belonging to either: academe and the military. Both have honed indoctrination to a fine art. For instance, take academe. From the outset it was clear that none of our professors in grad school were the least bit interested in our ideas. Instead, from our first submitted paper onward, they schooled—drilled—us, actually in our academic presentation of self. Consequently, grad school ended up being one long object lesson in stringing together others' arguments and citing them correctly. To be fair, it is not as though we didn't come out well trained. It was just our bad timing to be four generations removed from the founding of our discipline, so that everything exciting had already been hashed through multiple times. Collectively we never got to grapple with problems our elders didn't think they already knew—or knew how to get—the answers to.

The military, of course, conducts its conditioning slightly differently, but with somewhat similar results. Or as one major in one of my classes put it when we were discussing a book written by a partisan adviser during the Korean War, second lieutenants (which was the author's rank at the time of his exploits) don't yet know enough to self-censor; they'll likely try anything. Not so most career-minded O-3s and O-4s which, whenever I later cited Nick's "lieutenant theory," brought to mind the objection two other students made to a comment I'd scribbled at the end of each of their papers: "I think you can push your thinking further." Together they came to office hours to tell me that, no, they couldn't push their thinking further; they didn't understand why I thought they might have pulled their punches.

This incident occurred in the first year I taught special operations forces (SOF) officers. After a further twenty years, I'd now say that among the greatest challenges of professional military education is to get officers to be willing to unfetter their thinking. This can almost never occur in an "I transmit, you receive" environment. Instead, fearless thinking requires something like the atmosphere fostered by Andy (and Jim Roche) at the Newport summer studies.

Lionel led the first Newport summer study I attended (on "Recent Findings in the Biosciences: Implications for DoD"). Among the many interesting things I observed during those ten days in Newport, I couldn't help but notice that several of the officers who had been "voluntold" to attend ended up fully invested. Ditto the following summer, when I knew next to none of the officers assigned to help me tackle "The Military Officer of 2030." Yet, several again proved much more fully committed than some of the civilians who were there on generous honoraria; they *wanted* to dig in; they didn't want to quit at 4:30 or 5:00—which eventually led me to see if Andy and Andrew May wouldn't let me try something similar at NPS. Would they give students and me a problem to chew over—something none of us had worked on previously?

Neither Andy nor Andrew hesitated. So, in 2006, we held our first Long Term Strategy Seminar. We kicked it off with both of them and several other ONA familiars in attendance. And then, the eleven students I'd cherrypicked and I got to work. One difference: Newport was wonderfully intense. Ten days in which to discuss, assemble,

disassemble, and reassemble the "deliverable," which was a fifty-minute-long briefing. With the briefing delivered, we then dispersed.

In contrast, any number of things vied for the students' attention at NPS: other classes, family, surgery, surfing, who knows what. Thus, no matter how carefully I thought I'd chosen participants who would relish tackling a problem the *Director* of the Office of Net Assessment *personally* wanted us to work on, not everyone dug in. But, enough always did.

In all, Andy and ONA sponsored six seminars over the course of twelve years, each of which produced a Newport-style deliverable: a fifty-minute-long briefing, with one slight wrinkle, a wrinkle inspired by Pat Parker.

The same year that Lionel was given the biosciences to tackle in Newport, Andy asked Pat to lead an NPS effort on a topic related to the War on Terrorism. All told, Andy assigned the same question to teams at four different institutions. Interestingly, Pat was the only one to bring his entire team to Washington for the day-long weekend briefing to a roomful of "principals." In Pat's view: we'd done the work; it was only fair that we be there for any Q&A, or feedback. And, given the audience and assignment, he also thought it would prove hugely educational, which it definitely did. Of course, Pat could have left us all back in Monterey and done the entire briefing himself. But—that wasn't Pat. Nor was it Mr. Marshall, since clearly Andy had to have approved Pat's plan or we wouldn't have been present.

Pat's example, under Andy's aegis, left me with three indelible impressions. If I ever did something similar, the students, not I, should brief our results. Ideally, that wouldn't just incentivize, but reward them. That way, too, they'd get to hear Mr. Marshall's feedback directly. While third, and something Mr. Marshall and Andrew would later repeatedly have to remind me: the real value in putting together the "deliverable" was always dual. There was what we came up with. And then there was how we came up with it. The latter, and enabling O-3s and O-4s to think at the strategic level, was the more important of the two.

The difficulty this presented me is that I invariably developed Stockholm Syndrome for our results. Whether the topic was strategic blindside, regional stability, SOF 2030, SOF in China, strategic ambush,

or existential fears, I always thought we came up with good stuff. And I was always anxious that something "happen" with the good stuff we came up with.

Yet mercifully (probably), regardless of how gung-ho I wanted the most gung-ho officers to stay, they moved on, literally; they graduated and were assigned a permanent change of station. This is why Andy's and Andrew's understanding of what was of most value was so important. Even if the students continued to care about whatever problem we had chewed over, they had been exposed to the difference it makes when someone from on high (aka Mr. Marshall) sanctioned them to engage in fearless thinking. Ideally, *this* is what they would remember whenever they found themselves in a position to unfetter others' thinking in their turn.

Consequently, all the tributes to Andy as a futurist tend to miss this key dimension: he was peerless at "paying it forward." He granted the widest possible latitude, whether for a seminar or a research project. I never received more than suggestions. Never any detailed guidance. There were seldom parameters and just a few reminders: don't come up with singular solutions, but alternative futures (plural) instead.

At this point, I think I can safely say that many officers—to include lots of Special Operations officers—have a hard time operating with few guidelines. Again, it is hard to undo all those years of conditioning or purge one's head of all the rules. For instance, when I came up with what I thought the students would consider the easiest, as in most appealing, topic yet—SOF 2030, what might SOF need to look like in 2030? what might SOF forces need to be capable of?, etc.—eleven of the thirteen I'd carefully selected for the seminar couldn't (or didn't want to) make the leap; they couldn't fast forward to 2030. Instead, they kept reverting to what they were already familiar with and extrapolated into the future from there. Only our lone Marine and one Special Forces officer were willing to brief a totally new way of doing business—which I took as further evidence for what Andy had long known: setting the conditions so that people feel capable and comfortable (never mind eager) to think fearlessly is *really* difficult, while the fact that it is impossible to accurately predict what

might work is another ONA lesson Andy and Andrew always reiterated—and purposely risked.

Again, I don't know of any other DOD research sponsor who could match the license Andy granted academics to pursue untried trains of thought, no matter where they led. Which is not to suggest that Andy was cavalier. Far from it. Leaps had to be grounded in reality. You had to be able to write clearly and support your points. For instance, take us humans and the likelihood that such a thing as "human nature" actually exists. How would you go about examining this in a way relevant to DOD? You might ask: what about us has changed? What hasn't? What won't?

My sense is that Andy didn't just agree that it is foolish to wish away realities, but wishing them away almost always yields flawed strategy, especially since realities often become constraints. The trick, then, should be figuring out how to turn these constraints into opportunities. To me, this has always defined being unconventional, while identifying those who can think unconventionally is something DOD should be better at than it is. Granted, the best assessment and selection courses, like the best field exercises, put individuals into the kinds of unsettling situations that help them discover things about themselves they might not have otherwise realized. But too often these have to do with strength and stamina. What, we might wonder, represents a strategically oriented assessment and selection? Is it even possible to find enough individuals in uniform willing to re-conceive what they have been formally and informally taught, *without* their being militarily undone in the process? Or is it better to work on DOD from the outside in?

Clearly, Andy was always aiming for both. He found academics who *wanted* to be challenged, and who didn't mind—and actually enjoyed—consorting with members of the military and, equally important, each other (which itself represented another form of liberation: what, there really like-minded souls out there?!). At the same time, Andy was able to grant a God-level imprimatur to all of us to at least temporarily think way above our pay grades.

Case in point, say the U.S. and China went to war. That was the conundrum he lobbed at us in 2013: what role would, could, and should SOF play? Tellingly, the officers who participated in that

seminar (some of whom are now moving into highly coveted tactical battalion command positions) continue to come back to Mr. Marshall's questions today. They do so for the obvious reason that this topic has new relevance (circa 2019). They also do so because it didn't resonate in the Pentagon at the time. Indeed, when we went to Washington to present our findings, we ended up presenting our results to a single, very small audience; apparently, too few people in the Pentagon or the Administration were willing to countenance the possibility that China *might* become an adversary—which then became *the* takeaway for the students.

All dozen participants were stunned. They found the fact that the Department of Defense wasn't already—routinely, proactively—thinking defensively about any and all possible contingencies involving every possible adversary and ally, to be more than sobering. It was galvanizing. Suddenly, these rising officers understood the significance of ONA. *And* of fearless thinking.

As for what else we should be thinking about today (beyond adversaries, allies, alternative geopolitical, biosocial, brighter, or more dissolute futures), I now count on these officers. I have every confidence they will keep paying Mr. Marshall forward—a direct and indirect consequence of the impact his impact had on those who ensured he impacted me.