

Baptism by Fire: Leadership Lessons from Kasserine Pass and its Modern Applications

An Essay Presented

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Acknowledgements

Military history is such an important sub-discipline in the field of history, given its ability to illuminate our understanding of American identity and because of its national security implications, that I find it surprising that in recent years, historians have gradually shifted away from emphasizing studies in this field. Military history is nothing new and has evolved over time; as the old adage goes, “those who fail to learn from history are destined to repeat it,” and we would be foolish to ignore the lessons of military history which would pose problems for future American strategic interests.

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I. Introduction

“Even these many years later, it pains me to reflect on that disaster. It was probably the worst performance of U.S. Army troops in their whole proud history.”

- General Omar Bradley, 1983, *Reflections on the Battle of Kasserine Pass*¹

In the early hours of February 19, 1943, elements of the II Corps defending the Kasserine Pass were attacked by the German Afrika Korps. By the end of the next day, the German forces successfully routed the numerically superior American forces to take the Kasserine Pass, marking the United States Army’s first major defeat against the Axis forces in the North African Campaign. Yet, within the next few days, American forces had retaken the Kasserine Pass and enabled the Allies to resume their offensive against the Axis in North Africa. However, despite retaking the Kasserine Pass, the damage had already been done. The Battle of Kasserine was a highly embarrassing defeat that diminished American soldiers' morale and weakened American generals' confidence. Upon reflecting on the Battle of Kasserine Pass, General Omar Bradley considered the fighting “the worst performance of U.S. Army troops in their whole proud history,” a sentiment that continues to dominate in popular memory, current military doctrine, and the historiography of the Second World War.

In the aftermath of Kasserine Pass, senior American commanders studied the battle rigorously to learn any lessons that could be obtained from what they considered to be a catastrophic defeat. However, while the contemporary literature still tends to emphasize the shortcomings of American actors during the battle, such as General Lloyd Fredendall, recent scholarship has begun examining the role of German actors during this battle and exploring the

¹ Bradley, Omar. *A General's Life: An Autobiography*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983. 128.

possibility that Kasserine Pass was not truly a defeat for the United States.² This historical puzzle raised by the Battle of Kasserine Pass prompts multiple questions that are important for military historians to consider: What were the initial strategy and tactics of the North African Campaign that led to the defeat at Kasserine Pass, what changed after this defeat, and what insights can we draw in the present day from the North African Campaign? Additionally, more broadly, the legacy of the Battle of Kasserine Pass raises an intriguing question regarding the progression of the Second World War that understandably explains historians', both amateur and military, fascination with the conflict - how does a novice military consisting of primarily draftees go on to defeat a battle-tested war machine that had been preparing for war since 1933? To frame this broader question in another way - How did the United States go from such an embarrassing defeat to winning the Second World War? Or is it even correct to continue classifying the Battle of Kasserine Pass as a defeat?

In this essay, I will explore these questions by analyzing the North African Campaign and the Battle of Kasserine Pass and the lessons aspiring, and current military leaders can learn from the battle. In particular, I will focus on the role of General Dwight Eisenhower in shaping the outcome of the North African Campaign. The first section of this essay will focus on Eisenhower's initial strategy and tactics for the North African Campaign, which I identify as consisting predominately of an inadequate attempt to leverage his experiences as a career staff officer to plan for the North African Campaign. Despite his experience, Eisenhower's forces ultimately experienced significant logistical issues and difficulties in combat stemming from poor tactics and coordination. The second section of this essay will focus on the changes Eisenhower made after Kasserine Pass, which ultimately led to victory in the North African

² The National WWII Museum | New Orleans. "Kasserine Pass: German Offensive, American Victory," February 14, 2023.

Campaign. These changes included replacing General Lloyd Fredendall with General George S. Patton as the Commander of the II Corps, requiring greater coordination between combat units, and increased collaboration with Allied forces. The third section of this essay will focus on the leadership lessons from the North African Campaign that aspiring and current military leaders can learn from as they seek to become better leaders in their respective branches. Finally, I will contribute to the historiography of the North African Campaign by challenging General Bradley's assertion that the Battle of Kasserine Pass was the U.S. Army's "worst performance," arguing that the magnitude of American defeat was significantly less than other battles during the Second World War and that the battle provided the U.S. Army with significant insights that enabled it to become a more effective fighting force.

Ia. Methodology

Any historical study that attempts to explain the course and outcome of an event, as well as its modern applications, will have to utilize a variety of methodological approaches. In this study, I use techniques ranging from practices traditional to the historical discipline, such as primary and secondary source analysis, to sociological analysis. In this study, I use traditional historical narrative shaped by primary and secondary sources analysis to explain Eisenhower's initial strategy and tactics for the North African Campaign as well as the changes he made after Kasserine Pass that ultimately led to Allied victory. I choose to use traditional historical narrative as this method provides the most appropriate approach to illustrating the substantive events of the North African Campaign as well as the fact that the progression of the North African Campaign generally makes for good story. Additionally, while the German military is not the focus of this study, I will utilize comparative historical methods to provide a brief comparison between the strategy and tactics of the German and American militaries to illustrate how the American military went from initial defeat to eventual victory in the North African Campaign.

Furthermore, I will utilize sociological methods of leadership analysis to situate the successful and failed leadership of the North African Campaign in modern academic discussions of leadership that present-day soldiers and cadets can learn from, particularly in the context of the Reserve Officers' Training Corps curriculum. The sources consulted for my study include the autobiography of Eisenhower, historians' accounts of the North African Campaign and its key players, and publications from the U.S. Army Cadet Command. For each part of my study, I utilize the methodological approach that is most appropriate to the nature of the subject and the information that is available, which means my analysis will take this essay outside the scope of traditional historical methods. Through this mindset, I am following a valuable piece of advice for scholars of history. "Historians are – or ought to be – open to diverse ways of organizing knowledge," wrote award-winning Yale history professor John Lewis Gaddis. "Whatever works, in short, we should use."³ I have yet to find a better guide for methodology in the field of history.

II. Learning to Fight: Operation Torch and the Beginning of the North African Campaign

In the aftermath of the attack on Pearl Harbor, the American public as well as many in the government and military did not expect to join the Allies in their fight against the Axis Powers in Europe, much less North Africa. Detached from the conflict in Europe, many Americans were content with preserving the status quo of their involvement in the European front, considering their primary objective to obtain revenge in Japan for attacking Pearl Harbor. However, recognizing the larger threat that Germany posed to the world compared to Japan, President Roosevelt decided on a "Europe First" strategy to approaching the war, which prioritized

³ Gaddis, John. *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. 108.

American involvement and resources towards defeating Germany before Japan.⁴ While most Allied military leaders quickly accepted this strategic division of resources for the Second World War, they were less unified in how they believed the European Theater should proceed. Chief of Staff of the Army General Marshall and the War Department believed that a swift invasion of continental Europe as soon as possible was the best course of action to end the war whereas British leaders, whose forces comprised a majority of Allied soldiers at the time, advocated for a smaller operation to put pressure on Germany in a theater that had greater odds of success.⁵ Ultimately, the British prevailed in this debate, with Allied leaders selecting North Africa as the site of a 1943 invasion in order to put pressure on Germany as soon as possible as part of a larger strategy of weakening Germany over time through progressively more intensive campaigns that gradually inched Allied forces closer to Germany.⁶ General Marshall accepted this plan reluctantly and to ensure the operation proceeded smoothly, he selected his protégé Eisenhower to serve as the Supreme Allied Commander responsible for the North Africa Theater.

Eisenhower was not the expected choice. Indeed, a renowned staff officer for the entirety of his career, Eisenhower was selected by Marshall to lead the invasion of North Africa in large part because of his association with Marshall, as because he was most familiar with the war plans.⁷ Additionally, he was expected simply to pave the way for Marshall to serve in the role as Supreme Allied Commander for the future invasion of Europe, with Marshall planning on Eisenhower serving as his Chief of Staff. However, lending Eisenhower credibility in his role

⁴ Sainsbury, Keith. “‘Second Front in 1942’: A Strategic Controversy Revisited.” *British Journal of International Studies* 4, no. 1 (1978): 48.

⁵ Ibid. 52. This soldier imbalance is important for understanding the reason for why Allied forces decided to invade North Africa first. Given that they had more troops committed at the time, the British government possessed significantly more leverage than the Americans in negotiations regarding planning strategy for the war.

⁶ Ibid. 53-55.

⁷ Eisenhower drafted these plans in his capacity as part of the War Plans Department.

was not only approval from his superior officer Marshall, but also from the many general officers, such as MacArthur, whom he had worked with in the past.⁸

Bringing his experiences as a seasoned staff officer to his role as the Supreme Allied Commander, Eisenhower recognized the importance of cultivating a cohesive team to ensure operational success. Consequently, Eisenhower's first acts as Supreme Allied Commander pertained to ensuring this, selecting staff officers who were similarly skilled in their logistical and organizational planning abilities in order to prepare Allied forces for the invasion of North Africa.⁹ Such extensive preparation was important, as Eisenhower recognized that the U.S. Army that he would have to lead into combat was a highly inexperienced fighting force; consequently, Eisenhower ordered intensive trainings and field exercises to prepare his soldiers for the rigors of battle.¹⁰

Preparing his staff and soldiers for the invasion of North Africa only comprised the first half of the equation; as Supreme Allied Commander, Eisenhower had to consider plans for the invasion itself. In considering potential landing sites for the commencement of Operation Torch, Allied planners initially considered an American attack solely on Casablanca with the objective of denying the Axis West Africa as a submarine base; however, this plan was quickly dropped in favor of a more ambitious invasion plan that incorporated British forces.¹¹ With these new parameters designated, Allied planners debated primarily between two plans for Operation Torch: firstly, Allied forces could land at Casablanca, Oran, and Algiers, or secondly, a landing could occur at Oran, Algiers, and Bône.¹² Eisenhower strongly supported the second option,

⁸ Ambrose, Stephen. *The Supreme Commander: The War Years of Dwight D. Eisenhower*. Anchor, 2012. 47, 50.

⁹ Eisenhower Dwight D. *Crusade In Europe*. London: William Heinemann Limited, 1948. 83-84.

¹⁰ Ambrose, *The Supreme Commander: The War Years of Dwight D. Eisenhower*. 60-61.

¹¹ Eisenhower Dwight D., *Crusade In Europe*. 87.

¹² *Ibid.* 89.

given his belief that capturing Tunis quickly would facilitate an earlier invasion of continental Europe. However, the Combined Joint Chiefs of Staff selected the first plan, deeming it a tactically safer option to consolidate forces over a smaller geographic range as well as a politically safer option to deter the Spanish government from entering the war on the side of the Axis.¹³ Given that the three landing zones were significantly geographically spread apart, each landing force was led by its own general with the intention of them combining to form the British First Army and advance eastwards towards Tunisia.¹⁴

These political considerations of the North African Campaign were considerably important for the development of initial Allied strategy and tactics. In addition to deterring the Spanish from entering the war, Eisenhower's initial strategy involved turning Vichy France forces in North Africa against Germany to facilitate a quicker campaign while minimizing casualties. Allied forces sought to achieve this by framing the invasion as primarily an American operation, only supplemented by British forces, as well as conducting the operation with overwhelming speed and numbers to force a quick surrender and cooperation by Vichy French forces.¹⁵ Eisenhower ordered his landing forces to be prepared for resistance from French forces but was optimistic and hopeful that they would quickly capitulate.¹⁶ This lack of resistance ultimately manifested, although not without significant political maneuvering by Eisenhower, with him successfully convincing François Darlan, the commander of all French forces in Africa, to order his forces to join the Allies in their invasion against the Axis in exchange for Darlan

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Barry, Stephen. *Battalion Commanders at War: U.S. Army Tactical Leadership in the Mediterranean Theater, 1942 - 1943*. University Press of Kansas, 2013. 63. Generals George S. Patton, Lloyd Fredendall, and K. A. N. Anderson led their respective forces in landing at Casablanca, Oran, and Algiers.

¹⁵ Eisenhower Dwight D., *Crusade In Europe*. 90. The reason that an Americans needed to be the primary invading force, for propaganda purposes, was that the French government had resented the Britain for sinking a large portion of its fleet at the Battle of Mers-el-Kébir in 1940.

¹⁶ Barry, *Battalion Commanders at War: U.S. Army Tactical Leadership in the Mediterranean Theater, 1942 - 1943*. 65.

becoming the High Commissioner of France in Africa. Although controversial, given Allied heads of government's low opinion of Darlan and the latter's significant collaboration with the Axis powers, Eisenhower's decision ultimately ensured Operation Torch commenced without significant bloodshed, thus beginning the march eastward towards Tunisia.¹⁷

However, once Allied forces had successfully taken their landing zones across North Africa and commenced their advancement towards Tunisia, significant shortcomings in initial Allied tactics, leadership, and planning emerged. Despite Eisenhower's significant experience as a staff officer which theoretically would have served him well for organizational planning and leadership, "logistical shortcomings and convoluted command structures" were commonplace among Allied units, thus contributing to significant losses on the battlefield. Additionally, inexperienced leadership and Eisenhower's failure to explicitly task his officers with coordinating operations between units resulted in battalions often fighting "as separate entities or part of combat commands with little to no division oversight." Regimental and division commanders provided little support for commanders at the battalion level, failing to provide adequate indirect fire, air support, or intelligence for their subordinate units, resulting in a lengthier, more costly campaign.¹⁸ Furthermore, Allied armor doctrine was significantly inadequate to fight against German forces effectively, prioritizing speed through lightweight tanks that worked well against infantry soldiers, but could easily be destroyed by the heavier tanks German forces regularly employed.¹⁹ While Allied forces steadily progressed eastwards towards Tunisia, the combination of these shortcomings gradually became increasingly difficult

¹⁷ Ambrose, Stephen. *The Supreme Commander: The War Years of Dwight D. Eisenhower*. Anchor, 2012. 118-120.

¹⁸ Barry, *Battalion Commanders at War: U.S. Army Tactical Leadership in the Mediterranean Theater, 1942 - 1943*. 66, 115.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

for Allied forces to overcome, ultimately leading to the disappointing engagement at the Battle of Kasserine Pass.

III. Kasserine Pass: Reflection, Reorganization, and the Tactical Genius of Patton

Inspecting the II Corps on February 13, 1943, Eisenhower became deeply concerned at the state of his soldiers. Inexperienced and unmotivated, the soldiers of the II Corps appeared ill-prepared for the intensive fighting that was required of them to defeat the experienced German forces defending Tunisia.²⁰ However, Eisenhower was even more concerned about the leader of these soldiers – General Lloyd Fredendall – for his disposition and conduct. Out of an excessive concern for personal safety, Fredendall led his soldiers miles away from the front lines, despite American military doctrine traditionally requiring generals to establish command posts close to the front lines.²¹ Furthermore, Fredendall demonstrated an often lackadaisical, if not dysfunctional approach to leading and working with his subordinates, abandoning his post during stressful situations and being extremely distrustful of his subordinate officers, thus cultivating a hostile work environment in which the worst in everyone was brought out.²² Furthermore, Fredendall simply demonstrated an ineptitude for the tactical knowledge required to be a successful leader in the military, such as through providing orders that were often incomprehensible through his use of unorthodox slang such as “walking boys” and “pop guns” to describe infantry and artillery respectively.²³

These leadership shortcomings on the part of Fredendall consequently in large part contributed to the disappointing outcome at Kasserine Pass. A few days after Eisenhower’s visit

²⁰ Ambrose, Stephen. *The Supreme Commander: The War Years of Dwight D. Eisenhower*. Anchor, 2012. 168.

²¹ Ibid. 167.

²² Carlson, Cody. “‘THE MARSHALL SYSTEM’ IN WORLD WAR II, MYTH AND REALITY: SIX AMERICAN COMMANDERS WHO FAILED.” Dissertation, University of North Texas, 2020. 22, 26, 27.

²³ Atkinson, Rick. *An Army at Dawn: The War in North Africa, 1942 - 1943*. 1st ed. Henry Holt & Co, 2002. 304.

to the frontlines, American forces had established a defensive position at the Kasserine Pass, a strategic location in the mountains of Tunisia that was instrumental to hold should either side seek to move its soldiers across the Tunisian countryside.²⁴ Considering the strategic importance of the Kasserine Pass, it would be expected that Fredendall would assign the majority of his soldiers to defend this location. However, Fredendall failed to do so, jeopardizing the defense of the Kasserine Pass. This failure proved costly; German forces commenced their attack on February 18, 1943, and by the 20th, they had taken the Kasserine Pass from the defending American forces. In the following days, heavy fighting ensued for the Kasserine Pass, and by the 23rd, American forces had retaken the Kasserine Pass, enabling the Allies to continue their eastward advance across North Africa.

In conducting an after-action report following the Battle of Kasserine Pass, Eisenhower recognized he had multiple problems. Firstly, the II Corps was now demoralized because of their engagement at Kasserine Pass. Secondly, Eisenhower had to decide on his course of action with Fredendall. Through his failed leadership during the Kasserine Pass, Fredendall, a general partially tasked with spearheading the Allied advance in the North African Campaign, had proven himself to be an inadequate leader. This proved to be significantly embarrassing for Eisenhower's superiors, who had given Fredendall glowing recommendations, and for Eisenhower himself, who utilized these recommendations in his decision to install Fredendall as Commander of the II Corps. Recognizing the potential fallout that could ensue by relieving Fredendall from his command, Eisenhower chose to do so anyway, in his place appointing

²⁴ Sherwood, Chris. "Bloodied but Bruised: How the World War II American Army at Kasserine Pass Grew Up in North Africa." *Florida State University Libraries*, 2015. 50.

General George S. Patton, the commanding general of the invading force at Casablanca, to take his place as Commander of the II Corps.²⁵

Patton proved to be a drastically different commanding officer compared to Fredendall. While Fredendall chose to lead from miles behind the front lines, Patton led from the front alongside his men. While Fredendall often shirked away from combat out of excessive fear for personal safety, Patton demonstrated a larger-than-life sense of bravado without fear of combat. While Fredendall provided laissez-faire leadership for his soldiers, Patton was deeply invested in the success of his soldiers, requiring intensive training from all soldiers under his command to prepare them to be more effective for the rigors of battle. While Patton's strong personality in large part drove his uncompromising leadership style, Eisenhower's reflections from Kasserine Pass and subsequent thoughts on leadership partially influenced this new paradigm of Army leadership; upon appointing Patton to command the II Corps, Eisenhower implored the general to remove any officer from command that he deemed inept.²⁶ Furthermore, Patton brought an unparalleled knowledge of military tactics that was necessary to defeat Axis forces, incorporating his wealth of knowledge in tanks, maneuver warfare, and German blitzkrieg tactics to defeat the enemy.²⁷ Patton's leadership ultimately proved successful in revitalizing the II Corps. Indeed, it is because of Patton's successes in battle that Eisenhower provided him with the superlative praise in his memoir of having "no superior in the Army."²⁸

In addition to installing Patton as the new Commander of the II Corps, Eisenhower made significant changes that ensured eventual Allied victory in the North African Campaign.

²⁵ Eisenhower Dwight D., *Crusade In Europe*. 166.

²⁶ Ambrose, Stephen. *The Supreme Commander: The War Years of Dwight D. Eisenhower*. Anchor, 2012. 175.

²⁷ Nye, Roger. *The Patton Mind: The Professional Development of an Extraordinary Leader*. Garden City Park, NY: Avery, 1993. 120-122.

²⁸ Eisenhower Dwight D., *Crusade In Europe*. 166.

Learning from the shortcomings that led to the disappointing performance at Kasserine Pass, Eisenhower made an array of sweeping changes. Firstly, Eisenhower recognized the problem of battalions fighting largely independently without support from their regiments or divisions; to rectify this issue, Eisenhower began emphasizing a greater unity of command, requiring divisions to operate as a single, cohesive unit.²⁹ Additionally, Eisenhower recognized the need for his soldiers to be well trained to succeed in battle, consequently requiring soldiers to always be training or preparing for future battles in order to remain highly skilled.³⁰ Furthermore, recognizing that British forces had been fighting in North Africa for years before American forces had arrived, Eisenhower established liaison officers with the British military to learn from the experiences as opposed to practicing a hostile working relationship with his British counterparts that had plagued Fredendall's tenure.³¹ Through this combination of organizational, tactical, and leadership reforms, Eisenhower had reformed the U.S. Army into a much more effective fighting force that was ultimately equipped to defeat the Axis forces in the North African Campaign.

IV. 80 Years Later: The Modern Applications of the North African Campaign

The events of the North African Campaign provide valuable lessons in leadership that aspiring and current Army leaders can learn from to improve their leadership skills in the present day. Such analysis with a future-oriented purpose, unique to military history, is essential to ensure the future success of the American military. In this section, I will utilize sociological models of leadership to explain the leadership outcomes of the principal actors in the Battle of

²⁹ Ambrose, Stephen. *The Supreme Commander: The War Years of Dwight D. Eisenhower*. Anchor, 2012. 175.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid. Carlson, "'THE MARSHALL SYSTEM' IN WORLD WAR II, MYTH AND REALITY: SIX AMERICAN COMMANDERS WHO FAILED." 24-25.

Kasserine Pass and the North African Campaign, with these being: Eisenhower, Fredendall, and Patton.

IVa. Eisenhower as a Case of Adaptive Leadership

Responsible for all Allied forces in the North African Campaign, Eisenhower inherited a difficult task, not only given his limited past command experience, but also because his responsibility required him to lead a diverse array of soldiers hailing from different cultures and backgrounds, ranging from battle-tested British forces to novice American soldiers.

Compounding this difficulty was the Battle of Kasserine Pass in which German forces initially dislodged the American II Corps from their defensive position. Despite this setback, Eisenhower's ensuing actions ensured Allied success during the North African Campaign, explainable through the framework of adaptive leadership. Pioneered by the work of Harvard Kennedy School lecturer Ronald Heifetz, adaptive leadership involves "mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges," which often require novel solutions and require leaders to be risk-taking, effective at communication, and a change agent.³² In the aftermath of Kasserine Pass, Eisenhower took swift action by relieving Fredendall from his command. The significance of this latter action should not be understated, especially considering that Fredendall was a politically well-connected general who could have diverted political attention and scrutiny to Eisenhower while absolving himself of a significant portion of the failure at Kasserine Pass.³³ Recognizing the severity and risk of this action, however, Eisenhower remained firm in his decision, understanding that the morale and safety of his soldiers were more important to succeed in the North African Campaign than his own career advancement in the Army. These actions, in

³² Heifetz, Ronald, Marty Linsky, and Alexander Grashow. *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World*. Harvard Business Press, 2009. "MS201, Lesson 6: Adaptive Leadership; Leaders in History." United States Army Cadet Command, March 31, 2022.

³³ Carlson, "'THE MARSHALL SYSTEM' IN WORLD WAR II, MYTH AND REALITY: SIX AMERICAN COMMANDERS WHO FAILED." 42.

conjunction with his decision to install Patton as the new commander of the II Corps, helped bolster the morale and fighting effectiveness of the II Corps, enabling Allied forces ultimately to succeed in the North African Campaign. In doing so, Eisenhower's actions provide powerful leadership lessons that form the foundation for successful Army leadership education in the 21st-century: the notion of country over self and the ability to adapt to new challenges while inspiring subordinates to follow similarly.

IVb. Fredendall as a Case of Failed Skills Approach to Leadership

As the first commanding officer of the II Corps, Fredendall was uniquely entrusted to help spearhead the North African Campaign. He achieved his position largely because of his successes in stateside service but he ultimately proved to be an inept leader that cost Allied forces valuable time, resources, and manpower at Kasserine Pass. In addition to successes, examining failure is an important component of reflection to determine what it means to be an effective leader. Fredendall's failure can be explained through a skills approach analysis of leadership – a leader-centered perspective on leadership that emphasizes the competencies of leaders. Introduced in 1955 by Robert Katz in his article “Skills of an Effective Administrator,” the skills approach explains leadership as comprising of a set of developable skills that can be learned and improved over time as opposed to being defined by specific traits, thus explaining the basis for Army doctrine that asserts leadership is a learned skill.³⁴ Updated in the early 1990s, the modern skills approach to leadership describes leadership as encompassing five main components, of which I will focus on individual attributes and competencies as these components will provide the most relevant frameworks for our discussion of Fredendall.³⁵

³⁴ Katz, Robert. “Skills for an Effective Administrator.” *Harvard Business Review* 33, no. 1 (1955).

“MS201, Lesson 10: Assessing Your Own Leadership.” United States Army Cadet Command, March 31, 2022.

³⁵ Mumford, Michael D, Stephen J Zaccaro, Francis D Harding, T. Owen Jacobs, and Edwin A Fleishman. “Leadership Skills for a Changing World: Solving Complex Social Problems.” *The Leadership Quarterly* 11, no. 1

In battle, Fredendall proved to be a timid leader, choosing to lead from a command post miles behind the frontlines out of excessive concern for personal safety despite Army doctrine at the time establishing that generals should lead from the front alongside their soldiers.³⁶ In doing so, Fredendall demonstrated a lack of risk-taking and confidence necessary to be a successful Army leader as defined a present day standards by the U.S. Army Cadet Command.³⁷ In addition to his individual attributes making him unsuited for high-level combat command, Fredendall proved to be a tactically inept commander, lacking the requisite competencies necessary to succeed in leading soldiers. As opposed to communicating clearly and succinctly as expected of military leaders, Fredendall communicated with his subordinates in a confusing style, incorporating his own slang that defied traditional Army doctrine which ultimately perplexed not only his subordinates when they attempted to carry out his commands, but also himself when asked to clarify his commands.³⁸ Through his failures in leadership, Fredendall was ultimately relieved of combat command, returned to stateside service, and tasked with training soldiers for battle while having ironically demonstrated his own ineptitude on the battlefield.

Ivc. Patton as a Case of Skills Approach to Leadership

With Fredendall relegated to stateside service, Patton assumed command of the II Corps in his place, inheriting the difficult task of reinvigorating a demoralized but now battle-tested II Corps. Transforming the II Corps into a highly effective fighting force, Patton's success can be explained through a skills approach analysis of leadership, of which I will focus on competencies as this component will provide the most relevant framework for our discussion of Patton.³⁹

(March 1, 2000). 23. The five components include: competencies, individual attributes, career experiences, environmental influences, and leadership outcomes.

³⁶ Ambrose, Stephen. *The Supreme Commander: The War Years of Dwight D. Eisenhower*. Anchor, 2012. 167.

³⁷ "MS201, Lesson 10: Assessing Your Own Leadership."

³⁸ Atkinson, *An Army at Dawn: The War in North Africa, 1942 - 1943*. 304. "MS201, Lesson 6: Adaptive Leadership; Leaders in History."

³⁹ Mumford, Michael D, Stephen J Zaccaro, Francis D Harding, T. Owen Jacobs, and Edwin A Fleishman. "Leadership Skills for a Changing World: Solving Complex Social Problems." *The Leadership Quarterly* 11, no. 1

In conjunction with his strong motivation and personality, Patton's strong competencies – involving problem-solving skills and knowledge – contribute to his effectiveness as a leader that is worthy of study for aspiring and current Army leaders. Recognizing the organizational and morale issues imposed by Fredendall's leadership practices, Patton implemented a sweeping array of changes to address these problems. For instance, in stark contrast to Fredendall's detached and laissez-faire leadership style, Patton instead chose to lead his soldiers from the front and implemented a rigorous training schedule to mold his soldiers into an effective fighting force,⁴⁰ providing present-day Army leaders with strong evidence supporting the importance of establishing high standards and leading from the front which is consistent with present-day Army doctrine.⁴¹ To inform his problem-solving skills, Patton also consistently practiced continuing education by reading books on classics in military history such as Sun Tzu's *Art of War* as well as novel topics in military tactics such as the burgeoning doctrine of motorized warfare. Consequently, Patton's intense study and early adoption of motorized warfare in his aggressive tactics enabled his forces to practice a highly successful style of warfare similar to that of Germany's blitzkrieg, thus reminding Army leaders of the importance of innovation in doctrine and tactics to ensure the military's success.⁴²

Of course, Patton's praiseworthy leadership performance from a skills approach does not make him an infallible leader, especially with regards to his performance with social judgment and social skills, which encompass attributes such as empathy and an ability to work

(March 1, 2000). 23. The five components include: competencies, individual attributes, career experiences, environmental influences, and leadership outcomes.

⁴⁰ Daniel, J Furman, ed. *21st Century Patton: Strategic Insights for the Modern Era*. Naval Institute Press, 2016. 146.

⁴¹ "MS201, Lesson 5: Fundamentals of Leadership." United States Army Cadet Command, March 31, 2022.

⁴² Nye, *The Patton Mind: The Professional Development of an Extraordinary Leader*. Patton's effective use of motorized warfare has been immortalized in popular memory through the anachronistic line "Rommel, you magnificent bastard, I read your book" in the 1970 film "Patton." Although Patton did not remark these exact words, the film reflects Patton's constant desire to learn and improve in the real world.

harmoniously with others.⁴³ While inspirational among his soldiers through his tough and motivating personality, this occasionally contributed to an aggressive inflexibility that landed Patton in trouble at times throughout his career. Most notably, during the Sicily Campaign, Patton gained significant notoriety for slapping two soldiers recovering in hospitals for post-traumatic stress disorder, thus diminishing his professional standing among the American public and his fellow generals.⁴⁴ In a modern Army that requires leaders to have a strong working relationship with their subordinates, Patton's acts of physical abuse against his subordinates serve as a cautionary lesson reminding aspiring and current officers of the importance of flexibility and empathy in leadership. Nonetheless, this shortcoming should not detract from assessments of Patton's successful leadership during the North Africa Campaign, which helped cement his reputation as one of the United States's most effective generals during the Second World War.

V. Conclusion: The Most Embarrassing Performance?

By February 23, 1943, the II Corps had successfully retaken the Kasserine Pass, placing Axis forces in a squarely defensive posture for the remainder of the North African Campaign. Yet, 80 years since this initial setback in the Allied advance across North Africa, the Battle of Kasserine Pass in the historiography of the Second World War has largely been categorized as a catastrophic defeat, with the traditional narrative solely blaming Fredendall for the failure at Kasserine Pass while praising Eisenhower and Patton for their adroit leadership and military expertise. However, upon closer reflection of the Battle of Kasserine Pass and the actions of key

⁴³ Mumford, Michael D, Stephen J Zaccaro, Francis D Harding, T. Owen Jacobs, and Edwin A Fleishman. "Leadership Skills for a Changing World: Solving Complex Social Problems." *The Leadership Quarterly* 11, no. 1 (March 1, 2000).

⁴⁴ Blumenson, Martin. *The Patton Papers: 1940-1945*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974. 328-330.

stakeholders during the North African Campaign, it is important to ask the question – is this a fair assessment of the Battle of Kasserine Pass and its major players?

Before delving into this specific question, it is important to reflect on the significance of military history's position in relation to the historical discipline at large. The sub-field of military history, arguably more so than other sub-fields of history, involves scholarship that is uniquely oriented towards gaining insight into the past with the explicit goal of deriving insights into preparing for the future. While historians such as John Lewis Gaddis would criticize this approach as being a reductive use of the historical methodology,⁴⁵ such a scholarly pursuit of military history is especially important given its ensuing potential to save lives through obtaining insights in leadership and tactics. Consequently, if we were to consider the Battle of Kasserine Pass such a catastrophic defeat, this understanding of military history thus returns us to a crucial question – what are lessons that we can learn from the North African Campaign that will enable us to prevent similar mistakes in the future? The lessons of leadership from Eisenhower, Fredendall, and Patton remind aspiring and current military leaders the importance of practicing core skills and attributes necessary for effective leadership, including an ability to inspire one's subordinates and a willingness to be flexible and adapt to the everchanging nature of war. It is because of American soldiers' willingness to learn and grow from their mistakes on the battlefield that a novice civilian army was ultimately able to defeat the well-oiled war machine of Nazi Germany.

However, military historians ultimately are able, if not obligated, to establish findings with an eye towards the future without artificially raising the stakes of the past. Like its sister sub-fields in history, military history has a similar obligation to illuminate the truth of the past

⁴⁵ Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past*.

authentically, even if it means questioning existing conceptions in the literature. Equipped with this understanding of military history, we are better equipped to reflect on the words of General Bradley and the work of following military historians who have written about Kasserine Pass and ask the question – was the Battle of Kasserine Pass indeed “the worst performance of U.S. Army troops in their whole proud history?” Ultimately, while Bradley was understandably dismayed by this defeat for the U.S. Army, his description of the Battle of Kasserine Pass is hyperbolic when the battle is examined in the context of the entire American performance during the Second World War. Indeed, when reflecting on other battles in which the United States fought during the Second World War, the magnitude of defeat in the Battle of Kasserine Pass does not appear to be as large as in other battles. To illustrate this point, I have identified two battles – the Battle of Bataan and the Battle of the Hürtgen Forest - in which the conditions of American defeat arguably constituted a higher degree of loss or embarrassment than Kasserine Pass. I selected these battles to emphasize after conducting a brief comparative analysis between them and Kasserine Pass, examining factors such as casualties and amount of territory lost.

In the case of the Battle of Bataan, a battle which featured many similarities to Kasserine Pass as American forces fought from a primarily defensive position against a numerically lesser adversary at the beginning of the war, American defeat resulted in the largest surrender in American military history with 76,000 soldiers surrendering, dwarfing the approximately 5,000 casualties that resulted from Kasserine Pass.⁴⁶ Furthermore, American defeat at the Battle of Bataan helped accelerate the Japanese conquest of the Philippines, resulting in the single largest

⁴⁶ Judge, Sean M. “The Pacific War, 1941–45.” “Who Has the Puck?” Air University Press, 2009. 58. Ambrose, *The Supreme Commander: The War Years of Dwight D. Eisenhower*. 174. In the Battle of Bataan, a force of 75,000 Japanese soldiers defeated 120,000 American and Filipino defenders.

loss of American territory and nationals during the Second World War.⁴⁷ In the case of the Battle of the Hürtgen Forest, an arguably even more embarrassing defeat given that a larger and better-equipped American force incurred more casualties than their German adversaries while failing to break their position, American defeat prolonged the war on the Western Front which led to even more ensuing casualties.⁴⁸ Indeed, approximately 33,000 American casualties occurred during this battle including 9,000 as a result of friendly fire, dwarfing the number of casualties at Kasserine Pass. Thus, when considering the magnitude of loss that resulted from the Battle of Kasserine Pass in the context of these defeats during the Second World War, it is difficult to consider the former the “worst performance of U.S. Army troops.” If anything, the magnitude of knowledge gained because of Kasserine Pass was invaluable and likely outweighed the number of casualties, teaching American forces valuable lessons in tactics, organizational structure, and leadership.

Perhaps it would be a controversial statement to conclude this analysis of Kasserine Pass with the unorthodox assessment that Kasserine Pass was not only necessary for Allied victory during the Second World War, but that it could also be classified as a minor victory given the amount that American forces learned from the battle and the fact American forces retook the Kasserine Pass only a few days after German forces captured it. Indeed, if the metric for defeat is the mere loss of territory and poor tactical performance, then perhaps historians should consider the Battle of the Bulge a major defeat for Allied forces, given its larger magnitude of territorial losses and casualties before Allied forces recaptured the territory lost. Of course, historians do

⁴⁷ Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines. “Facts and Figures About the Philippines, January 23, 1942 | GOVPH,” January 23, 1942. As an American territory, Filipinos were classified as American nationals. The population of the Philippines in 1942 was approximately 16 million – the largest of the United States’s territories.

⁴⁸ Zabecki, David. *World War II in Europe: An Encyclopedia Military History of the United States*. Routledge, 2015. 1537.

not consider the Battle of the Bulge in this manner, and this example should help illustrate the need for military historians to provide more academic scrutiny on the Battle of Kasserine Pass and its key but often overlooked actors. For instance, soldiers and strategists would be well served if historians provided more attention to analyzing General Fredendall's troubled leadership during the Second World War as a means of illuminating the traits that aspiring leaders, whether within or outside the military, should avoid in their leadership.⁴⁹ Furthermore, the historical literature on key figures such as Eisenhower and Patton could be provided more complexity through scholarship examining their shortcomings during the North African Campaign.

Ultimately, when analyzing the Battle of Kasserine Pass beyond the scope of the battle itself, comparing it to other battles during the Second World War in which there were greater losses, and considering the gains obtained through this battle, Kasserine Pass arguably served as the best training ground in which the American army could grow up. In a small battle, we learned how to fight a war. Through a baptism by fire, American forces learned how to save a world from tyranny, and how to educate future military leaders to do so similarly should the need ever arise again.

⁴⁹ I have identified this comparative lack of academic scholarship that examines Fredendall's leadership during WWII compared to those of his more illustrious peers such as General Eisenhower by analyzing the number of articles in which Fredendall and Eisenhower appear in academic articles on the database JSTOR. In the case of Fredendall, the use of the search queries "Lloyd Fredendall AND Fredendall AND Second World War" results in only 58 results; in the case of Eisenhower, the use of the search queries "Dwight Eisenhower AND Eisenhower AND Second World War" result in 19,082 results.

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