

Authentic Leadership

An interview with General James N. Mattis, USMC(Ret) & Francis J. “Bing” West

by Col Chris Woodbridge, USMC(Ret)

In May, Random House Publishing announced a 3 September release date for *Call Sign Chaos: Learning to Lead* by Gen James N. Mattis, USMC(Ret), the former Secretary of Defense, co-authored by Francis J. “Bing” West. Following the announcement, the editors of the Marine Corps Gazette and Leatherneck Magazine had the opportunity to interview the General and Mr. West regarding the book, its origins, and its central ideas as well as their personal experiences as Marines.

General James N. Mattis has commanded Marines at all levels, from a rifle platoon to a MEF. In 1991, he commanded 1st Bn, 7th Marines, one of the assault battalions of Task Force Ripper in Operation DESERT STORM. After the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, he commanded Task Force 58, the first expeditionary brigade into Afghanistan; and in 2003, he commanded 1st Marine Division in the initial attack and subsequent stability operations in Iraq. As a joint force commander, he commanded U.S. Joint Forces Command, NATO’s Supreme Allied Command for Transformation, and U.S. Central Command. General Mattis retired from the Marine Corps in 2013 and served as the 26th Secretary of Defense from January 2017 to December 2018.

Francis J. “Bing” West served as a Marine Infantry Officer in the Vietnam War, commanding a mortar platoon in 2d Bn, 9th Marines. Later, he served with a Combined Action Platoon that fought for 485 days defending a remote village. He was also a member of a Force Reconnaissance team that initiated Operation STINGRAY—the small unit combined arms attacks behind North Vietnamese lines. Mr. West served as the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs in President

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>Author’s Note: Gazette readers can access Col Mary Reinwald’s companion interview with General Mattis and Mr. West in this month’s Leatherneck Magazine at www.mca-marines.org/leatherneck.



Gen Mattis talking with Marines in Baghdad. (Photo by LCpl Brian L Lewis.)

Ronald Reagan’s administration. Since 2003, he has made sixteen trips to Iraq and six trips into Afghanistan. He has authored ten books, including *The Village*; *The March Up: Taking Baghdad* with the U.S. Marines (with retired Marine MajGen Ray “E-Tool” Smith); *No True Glory: A Frontline Account of the Battle of Fallujah*; *The Strongest Tribe: War, Politics, and the Endgame in Iraq*; and *Into the Fire: A Firsthand Account of the Most Extraordinary Battle in the Afghan War*.



Francis J. “Bing” West. (Photo by Gage Skidmore.)

To Pass Down the Lessons Learned
When did this book project start? What was the seminal thought and motivation behind it?

Mr. West: This book has been in the works for about five years now. General Mattis and I first began discussing this in 2013. My perspective was that the General, throughout his entire career in the Middle East, had been at the point of all the attacks, amid all the chaos in all the wars we were in, and—through this book—his

memoir could serve as a focal lens for many people to understand what has happened with U.S. and allied forces in the region over the last twenty years.

Gen Mattis: When we started on it, the catalyst was that several of my mentors—both senior mentors, very senior people in government—and also young officers had been asking me a lot of questions as I was leaving the Marine Corps, and I thought about how much I had learned from professional reading and experience. I benefited from all the reading I had done—that initially I was required to do by commanders who had insisted I read—and I’ve been fortunate to have been kept in the Marines for so many years. I had some lessons I’ve learned along the way that I decided I could pass on . . . in the same spirit that I’ve benefited from.

How long have you known each other, and have you collaborated on anything in the past?

Gen Mattis: Bing West was with us as an embedded journalist in 1st Marine Division during the “march up” to Baghdad in 2003, but I definitely knew him by reputation well before then. It seems like most Marines of my era have read *The Village*, which is Bing’s classic study of counterinsurgency warfare at the small unit level. That book was actually my introduction to Bing. After we came home from Iraq in 2003, he wrote the book *The March Up* very quickly, about the attack and removal of Saddam Hussein’s regime. Then, as we prepared to go back into Al Anbar Province in 2004, I called him in for his experience with the Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam, knowing that this would be absolutely the closest parallel for what we wanted to do in Iraq. We had to prepare Marines for working with the Iraqis. How do you do that? Not that there was a cookie-cutter approach to counterinsurgency, but there was a theme that I wanted to resonate in the division, and so I listened to him and had him talk to my commanders.

I knew at that point that this was someone who could take complex issues and synthesize the “so what” implications.

Mr. West: That’s why—when they brought it up to me—I was eager to go forward with the division.

What struck me was that, beginning with the march up when the 1st Marine Division went to Baghdad in 2003, I kept seeing General Mattis at the points of attack at one place or another. Then, when I was in Iraq later, the same thing occurred. Then, in Afghanistan, the same thing occurred. The commonality was that he was always where the action was and immediately with the troops. He just had that sense of getting along with the troops, so I knew this would be, principally, a fun book to read and to write.

Clearly, this is a book on leadership that will resonate with Marines as well as military professionals across the Joint Force and our allies. Do you think the book will add value for civilians, specifically defense policymakers, business and industry leaders, and our elected and appointed officials?

Mr. West: I’d be flabbergasted if it doesn’t have a very broad audience. In my judgment, General Mattis’ leadership style came down to two things. First, he always took care of others and always put his people first; but then second, he had this style of laying out his intent to his subordinate commanders in clear terms, explaining, “Here is what we are going to do and why.” Then he would say, “Now you know what I want you to do; I’m taking my hands off the steering wheel. I don’t believe in command and control. I believe in command and feedback. I will decentralize execution and operate off your feedback to me.” I think that’s so different than the way many business organizations are; I think they can learn an awful lot from this book in the civilian world.

Gen Mattis: In that vein, it seems to me these leadership lessons are broadly applicable and, in that regard, nothing replaces trust. Something I learned from (retired U.S. Army General) Gary Luck is that operations occur at the speed of trust—not the speed of electrons, not the speed of a tank, or rockets, or airplanes. Operations occur at the speed of trust, and you have to create an organization that rewards the right behavior; then you

have to delegate decision-making authority to the lowest capable level. It is up to you, as a leader, to make followers at the lower levels as capable as possible. Once you are running on trust, initiative, and aggressiveness, it doesn’t matter whether you’re in business [or] marketing, or whether you’re playing football or you’re the coach on the battlefield. You need to have the discipline that permits initiative and aggressive execution; and that does take a higher level of self-discipline and unit discipline—to allow you to harness the entire organization. Everybody owns the mission, and everybody knows how important they are, right down to the youngest Sailor and Marine. This is broadly applicable, and I’ve never thought that what I was doing was so unique. It was what the Marine Corps taught me to do and what Vietnam veterans taught me to do. I was reminded time after time of the power of clear intent, discipline, and initiative. For example, in Iraq, a funeral procession goes down the street, and a Marine patrol on the street stops and takes their helmets off as a sign of respect. I never taught them to take their helmets off. They knew to take their helmets off because they were there not as an occupying or dominating force. They were there trying to give the Iraqi people a fresh start. When you have that level of initiative going on, a hundred things are happening that you don’t control, but they’re exactly what you need to carry out that clearly articulated aim.

General Mattis, having served as a leader at every level, from an infantry platoon to the Cabinet, what level proved the most impactful, the most challenging, and which did you enjoy the most?

Gen Mattis: Well there’s no doubt in my mind the most enjoyable job is to be an Infantry Platoon Commander where the physical toughness and the mental abilities are on full display to your troops.

There’s no hiding; there’s no one between you and your crew. They see you in the mud with them. They see you make the decision to call for fire, or a medevac, or on a hump in the hills, or doing as many pull ups as they can do—plus one. That’s just the most enjoyable [job] that you’ll ever have.

I think most impactful would probably have been commanding 1st Marine Division. Those 23,000 Sailors and Marines were very confident after going through all the rehearsals and drills and walking through the sand tables as hundreds of people [were] watching as we explain[ed] what we're going to do. The unity of purpose in the Division at that time was probably the most impactful, but I would also say that I was learning lessons my entire career about how to lead in a very dynamic situation. You actually have an impact everywhere.

Leader Development and Preparing for War

General Mattis, you have been a strong proponent of professional reading as part of self-education throughout your career. Looking at the challenge of preparing Marines and the Marine Corps for "major power conflict," what book or books are "required reading" for Marine leaders?

Gen Mattis: I think all Marines should read E.B. Sledge's *With the Old Breed*, [as well as] *For Corps and Country*, Gail B. Shisler's book on the life of General O.P. Smith, the Commanding General of 1st Marine Division when they fought their way out of being surrounded at the Chosin Reservoir. I would recommend those two books because they will remind everybody that we're not going to ask any more of our troops in the future than Marines have proven capable of delivering in the past. We need to know that we will not be asked to do anything more than most veterans in the past.

For those in higher ranks, who will have to make the operational and even strategic decisions or advise the operational and strategic leaders, I would say three books. First, the *Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant*. Also *Defeat Into Victory* by Field Marshal Sir William Slim, and the last one is *Sherman: Soldier, Realist, American* by B.H. Liddell Hart. By reading and understanding those books, I think you're in a position to create options no matter what you face. In other words, you learn that you can always create options. We're not victims, even when the chips are down and even when

it's hard to come up with other actions because of the situation you face.

In addition to professional reading, what else would you recommend that military professionals do to prepare themselves for future conflict and assignments of increased responsibility? What advice would you give young Marine leaders today?

Gen Mattis: First of all, I think individual preparation is essential, and that means being at the top of your game physically, mentally, and spiritually because I think future conflict is going to be more unrelenting; there will be everything from robots [to] information operations that are demanding constant adaptation. What you would have to do is make certain that your small unit leaders are physically the toughest guys in the unit. We can't have someone who can't do the pull ups, or can't do the run in good form and still be able to fight to the end of it, or can't take a machine gun off the back of a Marine who's got the flu and carry it for a while. They have to do enough homework as fast as the situation changes, so they're able to identify it, accommodate it, integrate it, and have a mental model for responding to it. Spiritually, they have to have a reservoir of spiritual strength that will allow them to take the tragedies of combat in stride. You're going to have to delegate responsibility down because we all know we're going to lose communications, and any unit that doesn't delegate responsibility because they don't trust their troops are disciplined enough or effective enough on their own to make good decisions—those units will become basically irrelevant. So, they're going to need to have young officers who exercise initiative fully aligned with the commander's intent. You need commanders who can very clearly spell out what they need done and leave a lot of leeway for subordinates to carry it out. You're going to have to make certain that you're rewarding good behavior in peacetime, building strong initiative and aggressiveness, and that you're tolerant of mistakes but absolutely intolerant of a lack of discipline. You must coach out any kind of lack of discipline that happens during peacetime. Consider every week of peace your last week to

prepare your Sailors and Marines for combat.

Mr. West: Well, I've had the honor for the last fifteen years now of writing several books and being embedded with Navy, Air Force, Army, and Marine units throughout Afghanistan and Iraq, and I cannot express how firmly I believe that what General Mattis said is the key to the future. I have seen too many units today that really believe in keeping command and control close to the top. They even have to have PowerPoint briefings three days in a row before they take a patrol out or before they deploy a destroyer somewhere. In the next war, that isn't going to work; if they don't adapt, which is what General Mattis has been preaching—that you must have faith in your subordinates, give them the intent, and then decentralize disciplined execution—we're going to suffer battlefield defeat.

General Mattis, in your experience, what effect has information technology had on leadership? Is it harder to lead the generation that has grown up with the Internet and social media? Is there a greater requirement for clarity of language in articulating commander's intent to build that environment of trust?

Gen Mattis: I've not found it harder at all. It does put a greater emphasis on the persuasive force of personality in a commander. Can you go out in front of an 800-man unit and give your intent in very plain and clear language? Can you say clearly what you stand for and what you will absolutely not stand for? Because I find the same unit that cannot maintain a low DUI rate, no drug abuse, no sexual harassment is the same unit that cannot maintain fire discipline in a fight. You either lead a disciplined life or you do not. In the Information Age, if you're not talking constantly with your troops, expressing the clear truth, and emphasizing what it is that you stand for—if you're not rewarding initiative, and, when your people make mistakes, if you don't take responsibility for them while rewarding the behavior you want, and if you're not coaching them to achieve your objective, then the Information Age will work against you. This age definitely does not accom-

moderate the strong, silent type. With the strong, silent type, the Marines will find “truth” from listening to someone who is more vocal, or they will get their values off the Internet. Those may or may not be the truth or the values that we are comfortable with.

Mr. West: When we were publishing the book, I asked the publisher to put in both of Jim’s letters when he was leading the 1st Marine division: the letter that he sent to all the troops—all 23,000 of them—before the attack to Baghdad, and the second letter when Jim took the Division back the second time into Anbar province. Those two letters made quite clear to everyone in the Division what the commander’s intent was, and I think they are models for what any senior commander has to do to convey what he wants his troops to do. I think those two letters are classics.

Gen Mattis: I think the most important point is that you use very clear, unadorned language. I sometimes go to antiquity for it, like the Physician’s Hippocratic Oath, “First, do no harm.” You’ll remember, I used to tell the troops that if taking a shot at a terrorist across a crowded marketplace takes a chance of killing a woman or child, then don’t take the shot. Hunt him down and kill him another day, but don’t do something that you can’t live with personally or that’s just going to create more enemies. Similarly, I’ve talked about the most important six inches on the battlefield being between your ears—engage your brain before your weapon. And, of course, “no better friend, no worse enemy.” I think that you must clearly convey what you want and—as much as possible—do it face-to-face with your crew to emphasize it personally so they know.

Who have been some of your mentors throughout your career?

Gen Mattis: Over the years, there’s just been a host of them, and a lot are NCOs. Gunnery Sergeant Collier at OCS—yes, I still remember the lessons he’d given us. Of course, my first platoon sergeants, Corporal Wayne Johnson and Corporal Ramirez. My first staff sergeant platoon sergeant SSgt Remy LeBrun. Then, of course, it goes up to people like then-Captain Andy

Finlayson, then-Lieutenant Colonel Carl Mundy, and Major Dick Camp, and on up to generals like General Luck, General Zinni, General Libutti, General Fulford—all of whom I served under. Eventually, some of them were teaching me how to deal with foreign heads of state, but all along the way, I was very fortunate to have mentors of all ranks, from lance corporal and corporal all the way up to four-star generals and former Secretaries of State George Shultz and Henry Kissinger, and former Speaker of the House of Representatives Newt Gingrich, who has a strong historical background. Basically, I went from one great mentor who would lead by example to another.

General Mattis, without intending to, you have developed an enormous “fan base.” Some would call it a cult of personality—especially among the active and veteran military communities. What effect will the central message of this book have on that group?

Gen Mattis: I hope it shows people that the mentors who raised me wanted someone who is ethical and who is honest, someone who—when confronted by the enemy—was both cunning and implacable. I’ve actually always had pretty modest expectations in the Marine Corps. I think that, in my first year or so, I thought that I could be a pretty good captain if I worked hard at it.

Without false modesty, I really have always considered myself a pretty average Marine. Now, Marines are high-performing people, so that’s not a really low evaluation of myself. I tried to stay at the top of my game physically, and I took responsibility for my own learning, and I worked to ensure I was never at a loss when I ran into the enemy. I remember looking down from a P-3 as we were getting ready to move against Kandahar, and as we were circling that night, I could see very clearly, from the hundreds of books I’d read over the years, that the Taliban senior leaders were dumber than a bucket of rocks; I could see what they were trying to do. So, I took advantage of that, and—thanks to the Marines for coaching me, and thanks to the reading lists developed at Quantico, and thanks to

doing my homework—I knew exactly how I was going to nail them. I didn’t care how brave their boys were. I didn’t care how many artillery guns or rockets they had. I would do my best to keep the casualty rates as low as possible, but I knew that we were going to destroy them. These were the opening battles after 9/11, and I think that that’s the message I want to bring across. The Marines aren’t victims. We can always find a solution. We can always move against the enemy and do it smartly, and there are a lot of books out there that give you the mental examples that allow you to quickly adapt and overcome any enemy situation. I hope that’s more of the message.

The message is about the Marine ethos, which I learned at OCS from Gunnery Sergeant Collier. He said, “I’m not interested in somebody who comes in and thinks he’ll give 99 percent.” He said, “I’m going to be 100 percent dissatisfied with you if you don’t give 100 percent every time. Ninety-nine percent is failure in my book for someone who’s going to be an officer in the Marine Corps.” A Marine Corps with that ethos is a very hard force to defeat on the battlefield. It is a very lethal force and feared by our enemies. I remember talking to some Iraqi prisoners that we’d taken out in the western Euphrates River Valley, and they were scared to death of close combat with Marines. They would much rather surrender than fight it out toe-to-toe, and that is worth a thousand more troops in a battle—that the enemy doesn’t have the heart for the close fight.

It’s about lethality. The Marine Corps must ensure that lethality is the metric, and it must do all it can to improve the lethality of the Marines. Whether it be personnel policies or promotion criteria or physical fitness standards or the weapons we give to troops and the tactics we use—all are measured against one standard, and that’s lethality. With that, you can really have a force in the field that the troops are proud to be part of, and [you can] feel that affection for each other, and that means they’ll never let each other down.

