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# Interview with John R. Galvin

JOHN R. GALVIN SERVED AS NATO SUPREME ALLIED COMMANDER, EUROPE, AND COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF U.S. ARMY, NAVY AND AIR FORCES IN EUROPE DURING THE FIVE YEARS LEADING TO THE END OF THE COLD WAR. HE SERVED AS U.S. STATE DEPARTMENT ENVOY WITH THE RANK OF AMBASSADOR TO ASSIST WITH THE NEGOTIATIONS IN BOSNIA. HE IS ALSO THE AUTHOR OF NUMEROUS WRITINGS ON STRATEGY, TACTICS, HISTORY AND LEADERSHIP, AS WELL AS *The Minute Man*, *Air Assault* and *Three Men of Boston*. GALVIN COMPLETED HIS FIFTH AND FINAL YEAR AS DEAN OF THE FLETCHER SCHOOL OF LAW AND DIPLOMACY IN MAY OF 2000. HE SPOKE WITH THE EDITORS OF *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* BEFORE HIS DEPARTURE.

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**FORUM:** Dean Galvin, for the past five years you have taught a course entitled “Leadership and Management” at the Fletcher School. Could you explain your approach and discuss how technological advancements have changed the skills necessary for leadership?

**GALVIN:** The course is about understanding oneself. I make the point that there are all kinds of leaders in this world, and the ratio of good ones to bad ones doesn’t change very much. Almost everybody has had experience of a bad leader or a bad boss. I think that is something to be addressed. The most common fault is that the boss doesn’t understand that he or she is a bad boss, because there is not much introspection, self-analysis or desire for feedback. There is no sense of team. All of that is something that seems unknown to the boss. You should try to do a lot of things that amount to self-study as reflected in one’s own thoughts... journal writing... as reflected in other people. As you start to understand other people you are really trying to understand yourself; when you study communication, you are actually studying yourself. Half of communication is listening; lots of people don’t listen very much.

I do not teach leadership in a “historical way” focusing on the great leaders of the past. Nor do I use the “traits way”—Ten Commandments, Boy Scout Oath, the List of Maxims of Leadership. I prefer not to do that, because you may memorize all those lists, but still turn out to be the same person you always were.

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So, this is how I teach: I say don't get off the train in life. Keep developing. Most of your education is self-education, even if you go to lots and lots of schools. Self-education, self-development, self-creation; in the end it is you and I who build ourselves, create ourselves, make ourselves what we are today. This is something that we need to understand in all of its depth and its ramifications.

In terms of a leader today versus a leader in the past, one thing is essential to being a leader; you have to know the context in which you work. You have to know your job. There have been many surveys asking people what they truly desire in a leader, and what comes through all the time is that they want someone who knows the job. Most people would even take a bad leader who knows the job rather than a good leader who doesn't understand what is going on. I don't think that knowing the job gets harder once the technology changes; it might get easier.

If you look at leadership in terms of responsibility, once you become responsible for people—and this occurs at an early age for most of us—that sense doesn't change much at all. You can be responsible for five people or for 500 people; it is the same weight, the same sense of need to be responsive to the mission, to the business itself, to the welfare of the people.

**FORUM:** You seem to imply that the two things implicit in the definition of leadership are making sure the people for whom you are responsible are taken care of and happy, while also accomplishing a goal.

**GALVIN:** I think that is a good definition of leadership. I asked Colin Powell one day what his definition of leadership was and he said, "Working to get something done with a lot of different personalities and trying to keep most of the folks happy." And I think that contains most of it, if not all of it.

**FORUM:** In these times of rapidly evolving technologies do the essential qualities of leadership remain the same?

**GALVIN:** I think so. I still say that knowledge of your job and knowledge of yourself is what you really need. It can be a simple thing. You can make it as complex as you want it. You can say that there are officially designated leaders and there are informal leaders. Gandhi was an informal leader; he had to build his own team. Others are given a bureaucratic or organizational leadership position, and many times this is a mixed bag. You lead because you are designated the leader, but you also lead because people believe in you as a leader. It can work both ways, and it almost always does. You named two types, a revolutionary leader and a leader within a structure; they both have formal and informal aspects of leadership.

**FORUM:** Earlier you made a distinction between a bad leader and a good leader, where a bad leader knows the business and good leader who doesn't. Could you talk about the difference between good and bad leaders and what makes someone a bad leader?

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**GALVIN:** Well, the word management comes into this. Most people who write, teach or talk about leadership have distinctive views about leadership versus management. My own approach to this is that you really can't be a good leader without being a good manager. A good leader is a person who has a vision, can plan and can inspire. A manager is someone who understands how to take care of the details. Some say, "A manager tells you how to do things right and a leader tells you how to do the right things." Or others have used this analogy: "A manager is someone who can hold us on a steady compass course as we cut through the jungle and stay organized. A leader tells us whether we are in the right jungle."

People try to make these differentiations, but I think it is probably pretty clear what tasks are primarily management and what are primarily leadership. There is also quite an overlap. But to say, "we don't need a manager, we need a leader" is probably not the best way to put the whole question. We need a manager-leader. We need a leader who can have vision and who can also understand what it is going to cost logistically and so forth. He or she must understand how to modify the approach to that vision in order not to wipe out the organization in some kind of starry-eyed vision that can't be accomplished with the resources at hand.

**FORUM:** Can you give us an example of someone who has reflected leadership-management well?

**GALVIN:** I like John Kotter's approach to this at Harvard, and I use his book in my class. It is called *Force for Change*. He says you need both. There are not too many people in the books that I have read who say it as well, unfortunately, because you want to work hard to be both. You don't want to think that there is something hierarchical about it, that you would prefer to be seen always as a good leader while the managers are somewhere down below – the faceless types who just like to watch their watches and make sure the traffic lights work. That is not it. We shouldn't think that it is somehow a lesser or unworthy thing for a leader. That would definitely be hurtful, and some leaders do feel that way.

**FORUM:** Is there any particular individual who effectively combines both leadership and management skills?

**GALVIN:** You know I try not to identify examples of particular people. Although I think that is a good thing for each of us to do – to read biographies and to observe people we know, seek mentors, study people and listen to people who are leaders. But, as in anything else, you get only a partial view that way. Look how little we understand of ourselves, let alone somebody else – that person's techniques, motivations and general attitude toward life. I am not one for case studies. Too many times I have seen people who were the subject of case studies say, "That wasn't it at all. That wasn't the way it happened." I think that case studies need to be handled with care, as fiction, not fact. Fiction is wonderfully helpful in leadership. As you know, I use Virginia Woolf in my course as well as Walt

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Whitman, Joseph Conrad and several other poets and authors of fiction and personalities taken out of fiction. I think these are just as good as the so-called actual people. When I pick up a book titled, *George Washington's Leadership*, I wonder how well do we know George Washington, or, indeed, anybody else. I prefer to push this back to you and me: How can we be leaders? Even if I tell you a story about my own leadership, something that actually occurred somewhere, others who were involved might read it and say it is all wrong. So, this is why I prefer not to try to take an individual person as an example.

**FORUM:** If one works in a bureaucracy and has follow rules, versus being Genghis Khan on the open steppe trying to organize tribes of horsemen, one definitely faces different expectations. Are there different management and leadership skills?

**GALVIN:** In other words, is leadership situational? Well, this is one approach to leadership. You can say leadership is a transaction: you do this, and I will pay you; you do something else, and I will punish you. Or is it transformational, inspirational and psychological? All of these have their validity, in a sense. Certainly you must adapt your leadership to the given situation. In fact, you change your leadership all day long, every day.

Let's take the simplest case. Either we are in crisis or not. If we are in a crisis situation, I am one kind of a leader. In that condition, I am an authoritarian leader. If the building is on fire, I wouldn't say, "Why don't we sit down and consider what we will do now. Does anyone have a suggestion?" That would be in a developmental situation. In this case, I would say, "WE HAVE TO GO OUT THE WINDOW NOT THE DOOR. SO, LET'S GO!" I must make that decision and implement it, and if anyone objects I must try to shut them up and get them out the window. This is the reality of a crisis.

Yet, all day long you vary up and down the scale – the top of the scale is crisis and the bottom is...vacation, I guess, where nothing much is going on. Your leadership changes along this scale. I've even seen times when people try to decompress by going on vacation. For example, I had a friend that ran a resort for VIPs. He said that very often the VIP would come in and really enjoy the first or second day. Then the VIP would blow up about some kind of problem. Or get very angry and say something like, "THERE'S RUST IN THE BATHTUB!" According to my friend, this person could not live without the tension of his or her everyday job. It was almost like getting a fix.

So, yes, I do think that leadership varies in the type of job. If you are leading an organization, let's say a delivery organization like UPS, I don't think you can change and lead a hospital, just because you were a good leader of UPS. Likewise, I am not sure I can automatically go from being a good military leader to being a good dean of The Fletcher School. I think I really need to work hard

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to make that change because those are two very different environments. In this case, the military experience is full of regulations that establish every relationship, built for crisis. In contrast, the school is built for independence, for intellectual search. Those objectives are very different. As the situation changes, your leadership needs to change.

**FORUM:** What does the label of “rogue leader” suggest? You talked a little about how there are authoritarian leaders and there are certain things that you need to do when there is a crisis situation. What, then, distinguishes a good leader in a crisis situation from a rogue leader’s actions? Why do we have this distinction? Is it merely a political label for the benefit of other countries?

**GALVIN:** When we distinguish between a good leader versus a rogue leader, we are talking about integrity, ethics and morality. Integrity itself is a very interesting word. It comes from *integras*, meaning whole or complete. In my course, I devote time to integrity and ethics. I use specific examples rather than talk in vague terms about these things.

A leader has power. ‘To lead’ means to involve yourself with action. You have to *do* something. Anytime you need to act you also need power. A leader is given or takes the power to act. Power brings responsibility. If I have power over you, I have responsibility to act toward you in ways acceptable to human existence. In other words, I have to act with integrity.

The rogue leader does not understand or care to understand this notion of responsibility and integrity. The rogue leader is liable to do something that is harmful to people. A rogue leader can be a gigantic rogue like Adolf Hitler or can be just an ordinary run-of-the-mill rogue, and we have seen plenty of those. It’s someone who steps outside the rules, outside the law, outside the human understandings. It might be hard for us to agree on precisely what are the understandings, but we tend to know when those understandings are being violated.

**FORUM:** We would also like to follow up by asking your thoughts about how power can corrupt. Is it necessary for a leader to prioritize the community being led over his or her own personal goals or objectives?

**GALVIN:** There is a certain power that people will cede to you. It is often based on the kind of situation you are in. You can’t lead people beyond the amount of power they want to give you. You can usurp that power for a period of time, but not forever unless people want to give it to you. Usually people give you power because they perceive that it is needed to accomplish whatever act must be done, and they don’t give you more than that. We give a policeman a certain amount of power; it’s pretty well understood what a policeman can and cannot do, and we have all kinds of laws to make this clear. We give a religious leader a certain amount of power, and so on. We give a political leader, we give a business leader, we give a sports leader, a coach, all a certain amount of power. The coach will say,

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“You will be in bed by ten o’clock,” and if you are not, you will be off the team. But all the power has limits, and to go beyond them leads to corruption.

**FORUM:** Our next question relates to the idea of personal and private life. How does a leader need to balance these two aspects?

**GALVIN:** I agree with the good teacher on leadership at Harvard, Ron Heifetz, who says you can’t always be out there bearing the entire burden. You need recovery time, developmental time, not in some large dose every five years; you need this every day, time to think, to get yourself organized. Sometimes it is necessary to move away from the job and all the questions and expectations and to contemplate, to relax, to be with the people you love. Most leaders find all kinds of ways to do this. They go play golf or jog or just disappear for certain times of the day. I think that’s a very constructive thing that needs to be done.

Sometimes leaders, however, concentrate so much on their responsibility that it becomes an obsession, believing that they have to work longer than anyone else does. In fact, they do have to set the example. Yet, the example might not be to work longer but to work shorter. So, I do think that a leader has to be realistic about the human need for rest and recovery and rebuilding. We also need to balance our working life and our family life, and this is one of our hardest challenges. A leader should set the example and help others to do this.

**FORUM:** You mentioned your transition from the military to the academic environment where you perform the role of a professor and Dean. What skills or experiences have you been able to transfer and what new skills have you acquired to fulfill this new role?

**GALVIN:** Really since about the time that I went to West Point as a young man, I was interested in leadership as theory as well as practice. I guess because there was a lot of teaching of leadership that went on, a lot of talk of leadership, about good management and about responsibility and other matters associated with leadership.

I’ve always tried to take notes and keep a journal. I have a very broad set of things that amount to a journal (not really a journal but 3x5 notecards). I’m never without them, practically never. I have them by my bedside so when I wake up at night I write notes. I never or rarely kept a journal in which I sat down for half-hour and wrote at the end of a long day.

However, I did write letters, especially letters to my father from the time in 1950 when I went to West Point until 1987 when he died. I wrote two letters a week on the average and he wrote two letters to me. If you count that all up it comes to about 7000 letters, which I still have. I have them arranged by month and by year, and I go back and review them and look at them and write marginal notes on them. So, I’ve had a long habit of introspection and communication with the self. In the great sense, my communication with my father was also with myself.

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I came to the conclusion early that whether military or not, every job was different. Every situation required another look at my own leadership and a reevaluation of how to conduct myself. Before I came to Fletcher, I went to see mentors who are in academic life. For example, I talked to George Muller, who was the president of Johns Hopkins for nineteen years.

As he spoke about the essential difference between a military organization and an academic organization, I realized that indeed there are essential differences. The military is entirely focused on the “mission”— if we are to work seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day because the mission requires it, then it has to be done. There’s a discipline that surrounds the word “mission.” In the academic world, however, independence is a key word. (Independent action is also important in the military. When in war, you want people to take independent action based on their understanding of your intentions, but that’s a different thing.) Independence in academic life means the right to research and teach just the way you feel you should, the way you believe is right. You should not be subject to the way someone else feels you should teach; nobody can tell you how to teach a class. These decisions you make on your own, and they are respected. That’s why you have such things as tenure, which I think is a very good idea because it increases this sense – and reality – of independence.

**FORUM:** Do you think it is also a requisite of a good leader to be a good mentor?

**GALVIN:** I have some problems with the concept of mentoring. I think it often becomes a catchword. I ask myself questions: Who gets mentored in life and why? I believe that people get mentored because they give an indication that they want to be mentored. What about people who want to be mentored but don’t give any indication? How does the mentor select the people to be mentored? What happens to those not mentored? If I have five people working for me and I decide to mentor one, how did I make that decisions and for what reason? Am I that fair to the others? If mentoring means a new responsibility to see that this person gets ahead then, I believe, this is a distortion of the word, because “mentoring” means training. Then again, some people see mentoring as helping. Now if I help Mr. X get ahead over Ms. Y, just because there is this mentor relationship, how is this different from cronyism? I think that a lot of care must be taken with this whole idea.

I believe a leader has responsibilities for the development of the team as well as getting the daily job done. A good leader can look beyond the present. A good leader is going to ask: How do we “build a bench” and ensure that we have people to do this job next year or ten years from now? How do we recruit the right people? How do we develop people? If you can’t look ahead and if you are just keeping pace with the daily routine, then your people suffer.

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**FORUM:** The military has obvious structures for development, which may be quite different from other areas where you work as a leader now. Is it difficult, given your transition, to keep that particular aspect of leadership in mind?

**GALVIN:** In this case, there is really no transition. I do the same things. I have to think about every single faculty member. Is that person going to get tenure? Is that person developing along in the three requisite areas of research, teaching and serving? I have to think of this in terms of staff members. Are we bringing people along so they can move up within the organization? Also, one of the obvious reasons I teach the leadership course is that I am interested in the development of students. By the way, I am also interested in my own development.

**FORUM:** Since Fletcher is a multicultural environment, could you make a comment about leading people from different cultural backgrounds?

**GALVIN:** It is a very difficult and interesting question to really decide how much culture affects leadership in a given situation. Even people within their own cultures find it hard to describe how their culture might be different from someone else's. Some of the most provocative moments that we have in my course occur when we try to talk about cultural differences. There will always be somebody, or many maybe, who insist that that there is not really a difference, that it is perhaps an idiosyncratic aspect of an individual personality or a small group of people, but it is not a cultural difference. Others will say that indeed it is a cultural difference. Even the simplest things are arguable in this context. I think we have to look for a starting point when we talk about cross-cultural leadership and management. The starting point probably includes things like respect, courtesy, listening and communication. Again, I return to the point that it is very difficult to know something about another culture without knowing a lot about oneself.

One of the things we require at Fletcher is that students have fluency in a language that is not their own native language. Knowledge of another language is almost a sure sign that you are interested in other cultures. A lot of cultural questions come down to priorities: you either come to an understanding, or you work around a lack of understanding or an unwillingness to give way, because the culture is so ingrained. You learn to live with the difference, and you think of constructive ways to work around any such lack of consensus.

**FORUM:** Can you relate the historical event that has had the greatest impact on your philosophy toward leadership and also perhaps on your career? Maybe these are two separate events.

**GALVIN:** Well, those things are really personal, but I'll try to answer. First of all, you are faced with difficulty and trial early in your life. Perhaps the way to look at the heartrending experience is to say, "Well, at least from what has happened, there are things that I have gained, that I have learned."

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In my own case, my mother died very early. She was thirty-three and I was nine, the oldest of four children. My father was a bricklayer. The household broke up; I went to live with a series of other people. At a very early age I learned a lot about what you do and how you get along when you don't have any power and other people have all the power. It makes you a good negotiator. It makes you a good listener; you don't get the chance to do much else. And it makes you a good student of people—who they really are and what they want, and how they try to get it. It makes you understand why questions like integrity are so important.

What I have tried to do is figure out my own definition of leadership, which is to act in such a way that others just don't want to let you down. Then you will truly be a leader, and they will do anything that you ask. Now how do you get to the point that people will do anything that you want them to do? It can only be if they think a *lot* of you; they not only have respect for you but a kind of affection making them unwilling to disappoint you. They want to live up to what you stand for. Wouldn't that be nice if people (you can see that I get emotional about this...) thought that you stood for what they really value. Wouldn't it? The reason I find it hard to talk about this is that it gets pretty close to the essence of what I think I am. It gets pretty close to my heart. And it has a lot to do with why I try to teach leadership at all.

I don't say that's the way that everybody always felt about me. By no means. But that was my aim. I don't believe I ever actually achieved that, but that's what I'd like to achieve and what I'll always keep on trying to do. And I do go back all those years, to those moments of tremendous loss. So then, how after that do you find fulfillment? Where does it come from? I think it comes from acting or serving in such a way that you bring about, or come as close as you can, to that kind of relationship with the people over whom you have some responsibility – parental responsibility, responsibility of official business, responsibility of leadership – that they believe in you.

**FORUM:** The things that people really value are so abstract, though. It is a difficult communication problem. The things that you stand for are very difficult to express, particular values or concepts. If you're talking about the thing we really value is "getting over that bridge," it's easy to communicate, but that's not at all what we're talking about in the context of real goals of a leader.

**GALVIN:** No, because what we are talking about there might be mostly a management issue, which is important, too. It can be all I just described, but if I'm not a good manager people will do what I tell them to do, but we'll all go down the wrong road. That has to figure in here, too. But in essence, people don't do things because you've ordered them around, not even in the military.

From this come sayings like, "Don't ever ask anyone to do anything you wouldn't be willing to do yourself." You have to do this in a gentle way, in an

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exemplary way. You work with people by showing them who you are and by trying, of course, to be the person you really want to be. It does no good to show them who you are if you aren't who you'd like to be. All of us, to some degree, are not what we want to be. Often, we want ourselves to be more.

I wouldn't want to try to put a message across to a leadership class that one must reach perfection, because then how could they go ahead and do it? You can't be perfect. Everyone gets angry. I got angry with someone this morning, and I'm regretting it now. I didn't get too angry, but I got angry enough that the person knows it. It was over an issue that I really shouldn't have gotten so angry about. Every day is like that for you and me. We end the day or have moments in the day when we have regrets, and we keep on trying. You're always learning your leadership; it is always developing.

**FORUM:** The final question ties back to the beginning. From what you just described, it sounds like your leadership developed gradually and on a very personal basis. It seems difficult to teach leadership because it is a process of personal growth. What exactly do students take from your leadership class?

**GALVIN:** I'm fond of a statement that General Andy Goodpaster told me Ike Eisenhower had said. Andy worked for Ike in the White House. He said that one time someone said to Ike, "I don't think that leadership can be taught, and I don't think that leadership can be learned." And Ike said, "Well, I think it can be improved." I kind of like that.

I always start my leadership class by drawing a delta symbol on the board, a symbol for change. We have only thirty hours together as a class. I don't know what any of us can expect to learn in thirty hours, but I know *something* can be learned. How much really depends on a lot of things, but I would be happy if everyone came out of the thirty hours a better leader. I don't care how much. No one will ever know. I'm just looking for improvement, and for the simplicities of leadership, not the complexities. The simplicities are hard enough to understand: Who am I? Who are all these other people? What do I really think of people?

Very often a bad leader is a person who does not have too much faith in people, and thinks people need punishments and threats. A transactional leader says, "Pay 'em more, they'll work harder." There's a lot of that. Some people will tell you to work fifteen hours a day, but will promise to pay you well. That's a transaction. That's a kind of leadership that has something to do with how you feel about people. I have one very simple page in my syllabus saying these are the concepts that you need to learn: self and others, communication, teamwork and change. Things are changing all the time, but some people think things are static. If you think things are static, you really don't understand life around you. Many people are very traditional; they cling to the old ways and feel more comfortable. Contrarily, others believe that we got where we are through change and change and change.

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**FORUM:** Something you just said reminded me of two historical anecdotes. One was the autobiography of the Dalai Lama of Tibet who believes personally that he was reincarnated from the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, but the book for a western audience leaves open the possible interpretation that he became for many people a very good leader simply by being told at the age of six that that's what he needed to become. He was given special schooling and training and had certain experiences which prepared him for his role. Also, Henri de Saint-Simon, the French Utopian, was awakened every morning by a servant saying "Wake up, my lord, you have great things to accomplish today!" Then of course he did. What are your thoughts on this?

**GALVIN:** I don't want to say anything about a religious figure; I think that's a very personal approach that everybody has to life, and it deserves a lot of respect. So I'll leave the Dalai Lama out and speak about Saint-Simon.

I think influence can be brought to bear on any human being. You are the way you are not because anybody programmed you, but as a result of millions of influences: your parents, schools, friends, the whole world. I don't think you can tie a particular way of thinking to some very specific influence like waking up in the morning with a slogan. I don't care if you do it every morning forever. If you wake up a penguin every morning and say "You can fly!" it won't do you a bit of good. ■

