

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**George E. Reed.** *Tarnished, Toxic Leadership in the U.S. Military.* Lincoln: Potomac Books, 2015. 216 pp. \$26.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-61234-723-3.

**Reviewed by** Anne-Marie Contreras (Air University, Air War College)

**Published on** H-War (March, 2017)

**Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

Despite a myriad of available military leadership books, there has been little effort to examine the scope and nature of poor leadership within the military. George E. Reed, author of *Tarnished, Toxic Leadership in the U.S. Military*, combines his twenty-seven years of experience in the US Army with a mass of research to provide such a study. I have served in the US Air Force for over nineteen years and found something to relate to on every page of Reed's book. Toxic leadership is not just a phenomenon that occurs in the military. If you have never had a toxic boss, consider yourself lucky. For the rest of us, *Tarnished* is a notable book that can put negative leadership into perspective.

What are some of the words to describe a toxic leader? Throughout his book, Reed uses such words as "abusive," "callous," "bully," "uncivil," "disrespectful," "inflated self-worth," "self-centered," "hostile," and "narcissistic" to paint the picture of a toxic leader. Although there is no universally accepted definition of toxic leadership among scholars, Reed describes a toxic leader as someone who engages in numerous destructive behaviors and who exhibits certain dysfunctional personal characteristics (p. 11). We learn that it is not a single behavior that marks a supervisor as toxic but a pattern of behavior over time that merits the label. Throughout his book, Reed offers tests to diagnose toxicity in the work environment and advice on how to counter toxic leaders.

His research is fascinating. For example, the estimated rate of psychopathy in the general population is estimated at approximately 1 percent. However, the percentage of psychopaths in corporations is almost 4 percent (p. 23). There are no studies for the percentage of

psychopaths in the military. Can we deduce that the number of psychopaths in the military may be closer to that of corporations with the overabundance of high-performing, driven, Type-A personalities in the service?

Although Reed notes that no two toxic leaders are ever alike, he goes beyond diagnosis and offers suggestions for survival. Empathy, time management, and letting the boss take credit for your ideas are some of the easiest solutions. I was initially annoyed with his advice of tiptoeing around an issue or kissing the boss's butt; however, I realized that without even knowing it, I have used these techniques with some leadership with whom I have dealt.

Reed's book strays from the focus of toxic leadership in two areas. Although these topics would have been better addressed in another venue, I found them both noteworthy. The first additional topic Reed looks into is toxic co-workers—how to identify them and how to deal with them. Further research would have been useful on this subject, especially if it included toxic troops/subordinates. Anyone in the military or corporate America has had to deal with a subordinate who oozed toxicity. It would be rewarding to know how to appropriately deal with them.

The second topic, worthy of its own book, is sexual misconduct. Within the military, to preserve good order and discipline, relationships are prohibited between enlisted/officer and supervisor/subordinate. Reed describes sexual misconduct on a scale with consensual but prohibited sexual contact on one end and rape on the other. Basing his analysis on correspondence, discussions, focus groups, surveys, interviews, and empirical research,

Reed asserts that system dynamics and military culture contribute to the problem of sexual misconduct to include masculine norms and ideals, sex scandals, cultural changes, and deployment dynamics. He points out that there has been little policy change outside of periods of crisis response. Additionally, within the sexual assault prevention and response (SAPR) program is a gaping hole where there should be follow-up with those who have been assaulted.

In his conclusion, Reed reminds us that "toxic lead-

ership is prevalent where it is tolerated" and offers "permission granted" to those in search of authorization to address a toxic leadership issue (p. 167). He also notes that not every leader who angers others is toxic. In the US Air Force, we say flexibility is the key to air power. Reed also reminds us that flexibility is the key to successful leadership "one who meets the needs of followers AND the situation AND the organization. Knowing the difference between when to smile and when to yell is definitely an art.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

**Citation:** Anne-Marie Contreras. Review of Reed, George E., *Tarnished, Toxic Leadership in the U.S. Military*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. March, 2017.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=48972>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.