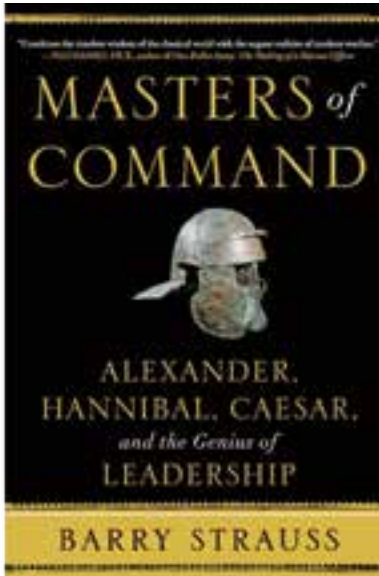


Book Review



Barry Strauss, *Masters of Command: Alexander, Hannibal, Caesar, and the Genius of Leadership*, (New York: Simon & Schuster), 2012, 320 pages.

By **Jeria Kua**

INTRODUCTION

What do Alexander the Great, Hannibal Barca and Julius Caesar have in common? All were gifted battlefield commanders, skilled warriors and above all, exceptional leaders of men. Their legendary campaigns shaped the course of history indelibly, earning them the reputation of the ancient world's three greatest military commanders and duly attracting much scholarship on their illustrious careers. However, what Barry Strauss, Professor of History and Classics at Cornell University, has done differently in *Masters of Command: Alexander, Hannibal, Caesar and the Genius of Leadership* is to craft a concise and lucid comparative assessment of how the three generals waged, sustained and ended their famous wars of conquest. From their successes and failures in both the military and political spheres,

Strauss distils the important lessons of leadership and strategic thinking still relevant to the modern context, both on and off the battlefield.

STRUCTURE AND STYLE OF WRITING

Strauss' treatment of the three figures is largely chronological, beginning with the build-up to their wars and ending with their deaths and legacies. He organises his book into five main chapters, each mirroring his 'five stage model of warfare.' In *attack*, he uncovers each commander's motivations for launching his campaign, with a common denominator of them being better off fighting than choosing to maintain the status quo. Guided by an overarching military and political strategy, all dealt a deadly first strike on the opposing army.¹ However, all faced *resistance*—an enemy

counterattack that caused the invaders to stumble, pause and regroup. Through a combination of inspirational leadership and tactical errors made by their opponents, all three protagonists successfully rallied their armies and emerged victorious in a *clash*—a decisive battle that left them supreme and ready to *close the net* and finish the enemy off. Where all three fell short however was in *knowing when to stop*—the ability to end their conquests at the right time and in a way that would best allow them to consolidate their wartime gains.² None of them was therefore able to achieve his ultimate goal.

Strauss' style of writing also helps to enrich and enliven his analysis. He often begins his chapters *in medias res*, plunging readers into the thick of action and creating an atmosphere of suspense and excitement right from the start, truly making this book a page-turner. Although a plethora of battles is covered—unsurprising given the vast scale of all three wars—Strauss adroitly weaves them into the grand narrative, while the inclusion of maps, lively anecdotes and use of vivid language brings them to life and prevents his treatment of the three figures from turning dull.

Filtering between each protagonist with consummate ease and clarity, he is able to maintain the flow of the narrative despite dealing with their campaigns separately.

THE TEN QUALITIES OF SUCCESSFUL COMMANDERS

Strauss' main goal in *Masters of Command* is, in essence, to extract the common characteristics displayed by Alexander, Hannibal and Caesar in their military careers, which he uses as a framework to compare, contrast and rate the three generals' performance as commanders at the end of each 'stage of war.' He narrows them down to ten particular qualities, ranging from ambition to leadership to even 'divine providence.' Finally, at the end of the book, he assesses their achievements holistically and crowns one of them as the 'greatest commander of ancient history.' Through learning from the great commanders' keys to success, Strauss seeks to offer both lessons and warnings "for leaders in many walks of life, from the war room to the boardroom."³

Firstly, all three commanders were hugely ambitious, combining the ability to dream big with a passionate, even overzealous drive to achieve them. Unlike Hannibal

and Caesar, Alexander's war was fundamentally a war of aggression as he was in no immediate threat from Persia. He sought nothing but the complete conquest of the Persian Empire, even when signing a truce with King Darius III to end the war in 332 B.C. would have been more strategic. Hannibal was raised "(believing) in national greatness through war and empire," and sought to avenge Carthage's humiliation by Rome during the First Punic War.⁴ Instead of choosing the safer option of defending what he already had, he decided to scare Rome into submission through conquest.⁵ Not born into royalty, Caesar longed to be the "first man in Rome."⁶ Gradually climbing the military ladder, he secured his place amongst history's finest generals by first conquering Gaul and later all of Rome during the civil war. Even that was not enough—he planned to defeat the Parthian empire, a feat he might have achieved if not for his death. Indeed, for the three commanders, a desire for greatness itself seemed to breed further success.

Coupled with a thirst for victory was an appetite for risk—the quality of audacity. They were bold in their plans and tactful in their decisions, making calculated

risks when necessary and almost always emerged successful with the help of divine providence or luck. Despite being caught off-guard by King Darius' army during the Battle of Issus, Alexander immediately deployed his army for battle instead of retreating. He correctly gambled that his daring move would stun the enemy and scored an astonishing victory. In perhaps his most audacious move, Hannibal's army succeeded in completing one of the greatest and dangerous marches in the history of warfare by traversing the Alps on foot in winter, albeit at a massive cost. Expecting that Pompey's fleet would have its guard down, Caesar shipped his army across the Adriatic Sea from Brundisium in late autumn.⁷ Without warships, he had his men transported in unarmed merchant ships, which could have easily been annihilated by the enemy. Overflowing in self-confidence and talent, the three were assured of their assessments of their opponents, and with the benefit of fortune on their side, reaped success. Perhaps more importantly, although they loved danger, they too knew precisely when not to take risks.

However, ambition and audacity alone do not make great commanders—good judgment and a sound grasp of strategy were essential for their plans

to be successful. Alexander, Hannibal and Caesar all possessed exceptional strategic intuition on the battlefield. They remained resolute under pressure, learned from past experience and mistakes, correctly predicted their opponents' tactics and always planned ahead.⁸ With a navy that could not hope to compete with Persia's, Alexander sought to overcome this weakness by conquering the enemy's Mediterranean seaports, halting Persia's ability to launch a naval offensive and forcing it to fight a land battle to his advantage. Hannibal was flexible in his tactics and was a master of the element of surprise, making full use of terrain and geography to launch ambushes on the Romans. In the Battle of Pharsalus, Caesar not only refused to fight Pompey in the hills where he would be disadvantaged, but also rearranged his battle order to adopt a new formation when he recognised his inferiority in cavalry, ultimately scoring a decisive victory. When faced with a problem, all three exercised superior foresight and intellect, and found a solution to overcome any setback.

Infrastructure forms the backbone of any army, and being capable of managing logistics with speed and agility was the hallmark of all three commanders. Although

they usually found their army outnumbered, what they lacked in manpower was made up by superior organisation—they built up an experienced, synergistic combined-arms force unwaveringly loyal to its leader, and knew how to reorganise their forces swiftly in response to changing conditions.⁹ Alexander developed his army around his strongest asset, the famed Companion Cavalry, which proved to be the cornerstone of his success during the war. In what was considered one of the greatest land battles in history, Hannibal was able to encircle the numerically-superior Romans in Cannae by strategically organising his troops in a crescent formation, scoring a decisive victory. While Caesar's legionaries were trained in pitched battles out in the field, he adapted them to the urban setting of Alexandria to pull off a successful siege. All three knew logistics at the back of their hands and were always on their toes, adapting to the fluidity of combat with speed and skill.

All three men recognised the importance of branding, and were willing to use terror as an instrument to enhance their reputation and enforce commitment to their cause. Alexander branded himself as the liberator of the Greeks from Persian rule, promising revenge for

its invasion 150 years ago and the restoration of its former glory.¹⁰ On the battlefield, he executed most Greek mercenaries fighting for Persia and destroyed Greek cities controlled by rebels as a warning to those who refused to side with him.¹¹ As winning the support of Italian cities was crucial to his war strategy, Hannibal asserted himself to be the new Hercules, promising freedom from Roman domination.¹² In defending his name, Caesar claimed to be the protector of the Roman way of life and concept of honour. His famous massacres in Gaul compelled many Italians to surrender to him promptly, while his famous policy of clemency won the hearts of many. The three leaders thus knew how to manipulate the emotions of the common people, instilling fear and showing mercy when it was to their advantage.

Perhaps the most important quality of a great commander is decisive, inspirational leadership—which all three generals certainly possessed in no small amount. Alexander did his best to keep Macedonian casualties low and rewards high, from pay to loot.¹³ Sensitive to the mood of his troops, he always gave them adequate rest before major battles and provided reassurance when they lacked confidence, such as during the eclipse before the Battle of

Gaugamela which they perceived to be an ill omen. Although his army was an assortment of different races, nationalities and languages ranging from the Celts to the Africans, Hannibal succeeded in keeping his army together for 15 years of constant fighting in enemy territory.¹⁴ He never suffered a single mutiny, a testament to his exceptional leadership. For Caesar, even near the brink of defeat, he maintained the unity of his army and managed to withstand the near-starvation conditions of Dyrrachium in 48 B.C. and the gruelling long march that ensued.¹⁵ On another occasion, he stopped a mutiny with a single word.¹⁶ Sharing the same risks in battle as their men, the three generals led by example and knew how to connect with their men on a personal level. In return, they earned their soldiers' confidence, obedience and respect.

THE FAULTS IN OUR STARS

While the three commanders remain in the annals of history as prodigies of warfare, they were not without their shortcomings. Indeed, we have as much to learn from their failures as their successes.

Alexander performed exceedingly well at 'closing the net,' but did not understand when to stop. Drunk with success following his victory over

Persia, he failed to consolidate his empire but instead pursued a number of unnecessary wars in the east, with little to no strategic value. Exhausted and homesick, his men mutinied and forced his return.¹⁷ Furthermore, as king, Alexander failed to govern his territory or plan for a successor. As a result, his empire disintegrated upon his death and was carved up among his former generals. Unlike Alexander and Caesar, Hannibal's phenomenal victories on the battlefield, especially at Cannae, did not translate into success of his overall war strategy. He failed to deal a finishing blow on Rome, and instead gave time for his enemy to regroup and prepare a counterattack. The war dragged on beyond what he could handle, and wore down his men both physically and mentally. His defeat at the Battle of Zama dealt a finishing blow to his war of conquest. Much like Alexander, Caesar's successes left him a war addict and a victim of his own vanity. Although he made inroads in governing Rome, he was frustrated by politics and chose to escape reality by planning new wars elsewhere. Falling prey to delusions of omnipotence and invincibility, he failed to recognise the hostility brewing around him, and in his arrogance, dismissed his bodyguards.¹⁸ He was thus left vulnerable to assassination by their former enemies.

From their examples, Strauss emphasises the importance of following up on victories in order to achieve overall mission success. He points out, “A victor’s biggest mistake after winning a great battle is to expect success to fall into his lap. On the contrary, since necessity is the mother of invention, the vanquished are likely to be more ingenious than ever, and perhaps more dangerous.”¹⁹ In the end, overestimating themselves and underestimating their enemies led to the downfall of the three leaders.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Strauss has succeeded in elucidating the universal and timeless qualities of leadership from the examples of the true masters of command of ancient military history—Alexander, Hannibal, and Caesar. All were supreme battlefield tacticians, possessing both immense ambition and the willingness to take risks to succeed. Good judgement allowed them to adapt to change promptly. They all understood the importance of speed and logistics, and used fear as a means to enhance their reputation and legitimise their wars. They led inspirationally and earned the genuine respect of their men. Lastly, they were blessed with good fortune.

Although Strauss’ admiration of the three figures is apparent, he maintains a balanced analysis throughout the book. All great heroes have flaws, and our protagonists are no exception. Hannibal was the worst of the three at long-term thinking, failing to capitalise on his decisive victory at Cannae to quash Rome. Alexander was so preoccupied with waging wars that he neglected governing his empire, which collapsed upon his death. Caesar was similarly prone to escapism, while his hubris ultimately proved to be his hamartia, leading to his death on the Ides of March. Caesar, however, came closest to combining military leadership with political statesmanship. Strauss duly crowns him as the greatest commander of antiquity.

However, the book might not suit everyone’s tastes. The comparative nature of the analysis means that certain battles had to be truncated and some details glossed over to avoid distracting the reader from the main narrative. While evaluating the military careers of all three figures is by itself no mean feat, those desiring a more thorough analysis will have to look elsewhere.

Nevertheless, despite being a slim volume of 320 pages, *Masters of Command* is an excellent primer on three of the greatest generals in history and ought to be on the reading lists of both military history buffs and the casual reader. 🌐

ENDNOTES

1. Strauss, Barry, *Masters of Command: Alexander, Hannibal, Caesar, and the Genius of Leadership*, (New York: Simon & Schuster), 15.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*, 5.
4. *Ibid.*, 25.
5. *Ibid.*, 26.
6. *Ibid.*, 27.
7. *Ibid.*, 98.
8. *Ibid.*, 7.
9. *Ibid.*, 11.
10. *Ibid.*, 13.
11. *Ibid.*, 12.
12. *Ibid.*, 13.
13. *Ibid.*, 238.
14. *Ibid.*, 241.
15. *Ibid.*, 247.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*, 240.
18. *Ibid.*, 247.
19. *Ibid.*, 188-189.