



Western Way of War:

EPISODE 48: GENERAL MARTIN DEMPSEY: FAILURES OF IMAGINATION

Moderator: Professor Peter Roberts (questions in Bold)

Respondent: General Martin Dempsey (responses in Regular text).

Listen here: <https://rusi.org/multimedia/general-martin-dempsey-failures-imagination>

Unedited Transcript

Moderator: Welcome to the Western Way of War. This is a weekly podcast that tries to understand the issues around how to fight and succeed against adversaries in the 2020s. I'm Peter Roberts, Director of Military Sciences at the Royal United Services Institute on Whitehall. Every week, I talk to a guest about the western way of war. Has it been successful, is it fit for task today, and how might it need to adapt in the future. The podcast is only possible because of the kind sponsorship of the good people at Raytheon UK, a subsidiary of Raytheon Technology, a British company that creates jobs in England, Wales, and Scotland, contributing over \$700 million to the UK economy. Now, I'm pretty excited about my guest today. General Martin Dempsey was the eighteenth Chairman of the Joint Chiefs when I met in. I was taken to a hotel in London along with four other people for a private audience where Marty instructed us to, and I quote, 'Go at it.' The idea that the most powerful and accomplished military individual in the world wanted an intellectual challenge to make him stronger, to test himself, to sharpen his wits, to ensure he was not suffering from hubris, was incredibly refreshing. We've done it for other chiefs around the world since then, but few have tackled us with such wit, verve and guile. We had an hour scheduled for the discussions and he, and we, were enjoying it so much, we got another twenty minutes on top. At the end of that day, General Dempsey said one thing that really nailed it for me. 'Never stop challenging. We, as military leaders, need it. We're too often told that we're right, we make good decisions, we're funny, even that we sing and dance well. Someone needs to keep us in check.' He's a long-term friend of RUSI, having spoken at the RUSI Land Warfare Conference as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs on the need for passionate curiosity and having delivered the annual Kermit Roosevelt Lecture as Chief of Staff of the US Army in 2010.

The title of that lecture, Failures of Imagination, was typically full of humour and self-examination. He's a man who is as at home quoting Marshall Mathers as he is Thomas Aquinas. Both of those RUSI speeches are still available on the RUSI YouTube channel and they're worth tagging and watching because they continue to have enduring relevance. One of the threads that runs throughout those speeches, his remarks and actions, is about leader development. The campaign of learning is as much alive today in the US military as it was a decade ago. If only more states and militaries would show such commitment to people. As one to expect, he's commanded at every level, in every operation, across every continent, and in every circumstance. He's an armour specialist by background of command, but it's in higher command that we saw the real impacts being made. By 2008, he was serving as the acting commander of CENTCOM. In July 2008, Martin was elevated to four-star full general, and, later that year, he became commander of the US army's training and doctrine command. In April 2011, he was sworn in as the 37th US Army Chief of Staff, the highest-ranking officer in the US military. Just one month later though, he was nominated by President Barack Obama to replace Mike Mullen as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and he was confirmed by the Senate in August, officially taking up post in September. As Chairman, Martin Dempsey became known for a, perhaps, cautious approach to the deployment of troops and earned him both support and criticism. During his tenure, major challenges included the Russian annexation of Crimea, the Arab Spring, and the

rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Levant. He also faced budget cuts to the military and saw the political drive in many allied states to increase the peace dividend, even when militaries had been significantly cut back.

In his term as Chairman, Europe had changed from one of peace and prosperity to, well, something else. Some started to recognise the ability of China that it just couldn't simply peacefully rise. By 2015, it was no surprise that General Dempsey was named as one of the 100 most influential leaders in the world by Time magazine. He's been inducted into the Irish-American Hall of Fame and has received the Ellis Island Medal of Honor. In 2016, he was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II. The language he uses when you go back and read his speeches and watch his presentations endures today. The lessons he pushed for remain relevant, and not because we haven't progressed. As militaries, we have, but what Marty Dempsey saw as needing constant refinement and investment was the truism of all militaries. People might be essential, but they also progress, move on, leave, die, or retire. His mantra of pushing people beyond their intellectual comfort zone in order to grow remains a mantra we should all live by today. Marty pushed for instilling chaos in every exercise, of growing people, of mentoring leaders, and of building a more resilient, whole military force, and that includes industry as well. So, given his breadth of experience, geographical, cultural, intellectual and temporal, I'm intrigued as to what he'll make of our first question. General Martin Dempsey, what does the western way of war mean to you?

General Martin Dempsey: Well, Peter, before I answer that question, I would like to tell you I'm delighted back with RUSI. As you say, we have a long, and it's getting longer, history together. I do recall with great fondness the contacts I had and the challenges that we were able to grapple with together, and, you know, I like to believe that I haven't stopped grappling with those challenges. In fact, when I ask leaders here in the United States mostly now what they make of this new great power competition debate, I'm actually baiting them because I think we have less of a great power competition than, we live now in what I would describe as an intense competition for learning, a real competitive learning environment. You know, in some cases, I think we've been the measure of it, in others not. You mentioned Failures of Imagination. I think we would agree that there's been two rather significant failures of imagination recently. The first probably being the Covid-19 pandemic where you hear quite frequently people say, 'Wow. We never imagined it could get that bad.' Well, you know, my answer is maybe you should have. Then just, you know, recently, the super container ship, the Ever Given, became grounded crossways in the Suez Canal and people said, 'Well, how could that possibly happen?' Maybe it's because in the 100 years or so since the canal was built the ships have gotten three and four times longer and two to three times wider and increased dramatically in tonnage. So, I do think we're in a period, we have been, we are, and we likely will be in a period where learning is just vitally important. So, in that spirit, I knew you were going to ask me that question since that's the name of your podcast. So, I began thinking about it, and what came to mind to me immediately was that old catchphrase, 'It depends.' Here's what it depends upon. I don't know who you've had on this show. I mean, I do know several of those who you've had on.

I'm certain you've asked them the same question. To my disgrace, I haven't actually listened to hear what they have to say. So, I hope I'm not insulting someone in rendering my answer, but when I say it depends, my rationale for beginning that way is that it depends on where your particular nation finds itself in its development, in its economic standing, this is an important one, whether or not its the status quo power. One of the things that clearly defines the United States approach to your question about the western way of warfare is that, for some time now, we have been the best status quo power. It seems to me that what status quo powers seek to do is to stay the status quo power. In other words, they are very comfortable with the status quo because it happens to be to their advantage to be so, and then everybody else has to figure out how to confront, or how to address, or how to compete, or how to cooperate with a status quo power. So, that would be my first attempt at an answer. I have several other aspects to it, but I'll pause there in case you want to pull that thread.

Moderator: Yes, I do, actually, because I've never had that before. That's it's about the US being a status quo power because, in many ways, the US has been better when it's not been the status quo power. It's been more successful militarily, diplomatic, economically, when it's been doing something different. You know, it's been wanting to reshape and recast the world. That's when we remember it most as its most thriving, it's the most impressive. Generally, it was a galvanizing force during those periods and when it became a status quo power, and I'm not saying that that was in the Cold War because it certainly wasn't in the Cold War, it changed in a sense of the imagination that it was demonstrating. So, I think, you know, the last gasps, perhaps, of it being a revolutionary power (TC 00:10:00) in military terms was the advent of AirLand Battle. That really was a huge change to the western way of war and everyone just fell in line. I mean, the western way of war has become the US way of war, and it started with AirLand Battle and precision, and nuclear, but it was that idea of manoeuvre and, pretty much, you can trace almost a straight line. We might have been a bit intellectually lazy, you know, from there to shock and awe, and to Third Offset. I mean, it's a pretty straight line about technology and manoeuvre, right. I mean, there's not too many changes, but, up until that point, it was genuinely exciting, it was revolutionary, it was a movement, and we don't seem to have recaptured that in a significant way. I think, perhaps, we might have done when it came to the surge, when it came to rethinking COIN doctrine, when it came to the aftermath of the surge, we really got our heads around something that was changing then. We started to see glimpses of that brilliance coming out in military thinking, but it seems to have died away. Would you subscribe to that or do you think I'm painting the wrong picture?

General Martin Dempsey: You know, this is another case where I think we'd have to take it issue by issue meaning let's call it threat by threat or risk by risk. I do align myself with what appears to be your thinking, that, perhaps, we become a little lazy in our thinking, but, by the way, lest you think we're not alert to this, I think there's been a great deal of effort put into trying to, you know, 'rekindle' might be the right word. You know, thinking about professionalism and about the art of war, not just the science of war, and that's comforting to me. The other part of 'It depends' though, Peter, is on budget, frankly. In an interesting way, and I've had many people tell me this, they find themselves to be most creative when their resources are scarce, not when the resources are let's call them flush. Now, you're never going to hear anyone in uniform appear before Congress and say, 'You know what? I think you really ought to give us a little less money because we'll actually be smarter about it if you do that.' Honestly, that is a fact in how the military sees itself, and priorities, and balances people with technology, and modernisation with infrastructure. I think, by the way, that will probably be taken out of our hands in any case because I think the downward pressure on economies around the result that results from the post-pandemic period will probably give leaders that opportunity to show their stuff when resources are a little more scarce.

Moderator: It's interesting thinking about those budget ideas because it feels, on the European side, as if we're forever, not in dire straights, but in a constrained budget environment where we don't have the luxury. The difficulty is keeping up with the US. That's not just in terms of buying power, but it's in terms of technological advancement. I mean, the leaps that have been made, you know, since 2001, but particularly since about 2007, I guess, we had massive leaps in adopting technology and adapting to ways of working that we are struggling in Europe to keep up with. We get on board the ISR platform and you're already jumping ahead generations from us. It's a real problem for allies to keep up. So, but we still, in many ways, I don't think, are thinking our way out of this. Interestingly, I would recognise absolutely what you say perhaps in our adversaries. So, for example, I think Iran and the IRGC, in particular, have been very good thinking, genuinely very good at military thinking in very disruptive, innovative new ways that have bypassed all our strengths. They've done a really good fear examination of the way the west fights and they've come up with an alternative approach, and that has discombobulated us. You know, it's thrown us out of a room in many ways and we should be at this moment of rethinking, but we seem to be failing to do that, and just forever going down this route of technology will save us. So, I would recognise that, but, unfortunately, I recognise it more in our adversaries than ourselves, unless you're saying we need to reduce budgets further to make us think even harder?

General Martin Dempsey: No. If I were to suggest that, I might retain my knighthood, but I'd probably lose my four-star rank in the retired roles. No, I don't think that's the answer either, but I think we've got to be forced to make the tough choices that come with competing demands on our economic power. So, just to continue on about 'It depends.' I mean, one thing, in terms of the American way of war or western way of war, but the American way of war in particular, is that we've always believed strongly that we are only as strong as the alliances that we can build and sustain. I say always. There have been hiccups, you know, there's been a few years of hiccups here recently in that regard, but since roughly the post-Korean war, our entire strategic approach to national security has been to build an intricate, capable, credible, reliable series of allies and partners. Notwithstanding the fact that your allies can't always keep up with you because, again, there's a disparity in our ability to invest, but I still think that the investment in alliances is most valuable because of the knowledge you gain. What I mean by that is, you know, let's just take country X in our alliance architecture or ecosystem, and that ally may not be able to contribute as much as we'd like in terms of financial support to the alliance, but goodness gracious, there's human capital contributions and knowledge. You know, One of the reasons we think we deal with the world a little better than some of our adversaries is that we actually take the time to learn from the rest of the world. You know, not always as well as we could or should, but I think we are genuinely interested in knowing about the Pacific from those who live there. I often point out when people say, 'What's the greatest strength of America's military?' I always tell them it's really not about the technology, it is about the people, and, more importantly, it's about the ability of the people to be this, kind of, global web of ambassadors, but also of sensors, if you will.

A global web of sensors who are, you know, if we are smart enough to listen to it, to listen to that web of sensors, we then can recognise the ways in which the world is changing. By the way, you know, you mentioned the cleverness, if you will, of the Iranian approach. I would also have to say that I think the Russian approach has been clever. Insidious is another way to describe it, but clever in that my former counterpart, Valery Gerasimov, wrote a doctrine in, I think it was 2012, either just before he succeeded Makorov as their chief of defence or just after, in which he laid out this doctrine of winning from a position of weakness and vulnerability. Everybody said, 'Well, that's never going to happen.' I don't mean everybody, but there were plenty of people saying, 'You know, that's just not practical,' and, you know, lo and behold, we have surrogates and proxies and all of the things that the Russians have been able to use with effectiveness in eastern Europe and across from the Baltics. You know, but back to the larger point, America, in particular, is not going to solve what many of us have described as their five most significant security challenges, which are Russia, China, Iran, North Korea and terrorism, and setting aside for a moment the technology that itself can put us at risk, but we're not going to solve the potential for being confrontational with those five adversaries, unless we do it with allies. I mean, there's no country in the world that could possibly have the wherewithal and the bandwidth to do that. So, back to the American way of war is, and I certainly hope will continue to be, through allies and partners.

Moderator: But it's got to be pretty difficult. I mean, one of the problems is listening, as you said then, to this really diverse web that is across the world. How do you peck out those individual voices? I mean, and then you multiply that because you've got allies who are knocking on your door going, 'Mr Chairman. We'd really like to have a word because we think X is important'. How do you just sift that into your diary as chairman? How do you make sense of all that?

General Martin Dempsey: It was actually the thing I enjoyed most. Now, that's not to say, Peter, that in the hallowed halls of the North Atlantic Council on occasion I didn't roll my eyes wondering what in the world we were going to do with that diatribe that we'd just heard. On the other hand, one of the most fascinating experiences to me was later in my chairmanship. By that time, incidentally, we had built really strong personal relationships with the other chiefs of defence in NATO, who, by the way, most often stay far longer than we do. You know, we rotate out pretty regularly. They (TC 00:20:00) can have chiefs of defence in place for some time. The challenge was the North Atlantic Council, the political side of NATO, although it was time

to do so, they didn't have much of an appetite for publishing a new strategic concept because I think they knew, this is post-2014, which was a pretty important year as you described it when a lot of different things occurred. Anyway, the North Atlantic Council, the political arm of NATO, was not interested in the controversy that would come when the countries of NATO would all articulate their priorities and we would, lo and behold, discover they were different. The military side of NATO, the military committee, were actually eager to have that conversation, in some ways because they couldn't have it in their political systems. Knud Bartels was Chairman of the Military Committee in those days and he was really a very skilful moderator, if you will, of the council. I had some very close friends, I'm not going to start naming names because if I leave one out then I'm going to be persona non grata in that country, but, anyway, what we discovered rather quickly was that if you were the Chief of Defence from a Baltic country or an eastern European country, your strategic concept was, 'How do we prevent Russia from doing what it just did to Ukraine'? If you were in southern Europe, notably Italy and Greece, somewhat Turkey, Spain and Portugal, it was, 'How do I deal with this influx of migrants from the Middle East and North Africa which are destabilising us'?

Then, if you were, let me call them, back to my point about 'It depends', the status quo countries, which, notably, were France, and Germany and Great Britain, in general, they were pretty much trying to figure out how they could preserve their position in the status quo. Honestly, they didn't want to come down on one side of that decision or another, except to say everybody was against terrorism, but, you know, terrorism is the easy answer to any of those strategic questions. In any case, the thinking that came out of those sessions was actually really helpful in my time to help us decide how to, kind of, rebalance ourselves. Now, did we accomplish it to the extent that I would have liked to? The answer to that is clearly no, but you've heard me say in other sessions time is also a factor in any decision. You know, sometimes time can work against you in terms of economic downturns or in turns of political cycles. You know, the hardest thing to navigate through, frankly, is political transition in terms of having a long-term strategy, but that's not to say we can't do it. That's not to say we didn't do it. It's to say you've got to keep doing it.

Moderator: Yes. Time is one of them things, when we talk to people in this podcast, that often gets confused because people focus on the right now. There's this mantra that lots of people use, particularly people who have positions right now, sort of, the conceit of the present. Everything is changing now faster than it changed ever before, and yet what you describe that you were talking about from 2008 thought to 2015, that sort of era, they're still the things we talk about today, right. We talk about the Russian annexation of Crimea. We still talk about Syria. We talk about problems with Israel and the West Bank. We talk about Isis, Isil, we talk about terrorism, we talk about Iran and North Korea, nothing has really changed that much. This idea that life has changed so much, so rapidly that it's unrecognisable is just not true and there's something reassuring about the realisation that these problems are enduring in many ways, that we know we're not going to cure them within the span of one decade, that they might become generational. I guess, what's disappointing is we don't acknowledge that. That, every time a new leader comes in, that we think, 'Oh my goodness. Let's reinvent the wheel and let's find a solution to Libya, or Syria, or wherever it is.' That we don't find that, that must be a frustration when you're in high office as well, right? Is that the new person coming in always wants to solve something completely new in a completely new way?

General Martin Dempsey: Yes, I've noticed that myself on occasion. Peter, you know what though, I never allow myself to despair in the face of reality, you know. You know what they say. Our democratic systems and the western way of war is built on the foundation that we are all democracies, and with democracy comes friction. I mean, it's intended to create friction. One of the things I had a challenge convincing my generation of peers and junior leaders was, you know, the system is going to generate friction. It is. You know, it's just purpose-built to generate friction. Different branches of government and different cabinet levels competing for the budget, and federal rights and state rights. I mean, the entire system is built to generate friction and I'd tell them our job is to produce positive, production friction. You can't always do that in monumental ways, but you can always make some difference in the way people get along, people

understand, you know, people compromise. I'm not sure where along the way 'compromise' became a dirty word, but it's a shame that it has because in the absence of compromise, we all become ideologues and you know, we engage in what someone once called the dialogue of the deaf, I'm afraid (ph 25.59). But, to your point, I think that the way we tried to navigate that was to acknowledge the friction, embrace the challenge. I'm talking about me and my counterparts, both at home and abroad. We also recognise that people will say, 'We've got to persevere.' That's good. I like perseverance, it's a very positive trait, but the definition of persevere just can't be survive. If we're going to persevere, we've also got to accomplish something on the other end of it. Let's take the pandemic. Everybody says, 'Oh, I can't wait to get back to normal,' and I say, 'Really?' If that's the best we can do, we've wasted two years. You know, we really ought to be thinking about a new normal that is a better normal, at least marginally better than it was before, so we're not going to do this again in three, or four, or five years. So, I got it. Let's persevere through Covid-19, you know, rip our masks off in celebration and raise a pint, but if you haven't accomplished anything then you didn't persevere, you just survived. That's kind of the way national security is, Peter, to be honest with you.

Moderator: It is a constant challenge, but, surely, there is, occasionally, a sense of frustration where you listen to people talk about-, I mean, I listen to people talk about great power competition now and they talk about how they would potentially, you know, and contest, and potentially what would happen if they got into a conflict. They're rehearsing arguments which we had when I joined the navy back in the late '80s, early '90s, you know. In fact, we were more advanced in our thinking back then about what we now call great power competition, about potential conflicts at that scale than we are now. I do find it a little frustrating that we have reverted so far intellectually, it seems, when there was no reason to. We have this corporate knowledge, it just seems that we are happier in discarding military experience and wisdom faster than we can acquire it. Would you agree to that, or am I being despondent and pessimistic?

General Martin Dempsey: No, no. Feel free to be despondent when it comes to the potential for a great power conflict, but what I would suggest on the periphery of that is that, when we had the Soviet Union as our threat, and an existential threat, we were able to marshal the strategic thinking, and you mentioned AirLand Battle, which was a military operational answer to the advantages that the Soviet Union had in terms of numbers. We also though had-, I remember listening with fascination to people whose expertise was in the theory of deterrents. How do we deter this conflict so that we don't have to use AirLand Battle? And, by the way, AirLand Battle was part of the deterrent strategy. We had to demonstrate to the Soviet Union that if they did choose to attack, we could survive based on the fact that we had this operational concept. So, we've lost a lot of the ability to think about deterrent as an end. Strategy as ends, ways, and means. I think deterrents is an end and I say that because, in my conversations with President Obama through the years, and, by the way, even President Bush before when I was at CENTCON, you know, we always had a little difficult time defining risk. It's just a hard concept to grasp. So, I had some success in those years by describing risk to the two presidents I served as probability and consequences. They would always say to me, 'Well, what do you mean by that?' I'd say, 'Well, let's just take a couple of different (TC 00:30:00) threats. The threat that Russia poses to world stability and to the United States, in particular. The probability of a conflict? Pretty low, really. The consequences if we get it wrong? Really high.' Let's go all the way to terrorism now. Terrorism. Probability, really high. In fact, almost 100%. What's the consequence? Well, you know, unless you're at the point of attack or unless you decide the way you live your life because of it, the consequence, and I know this is controversial to suggest it, but the consequences are relatively low relative to the consequences of getting it wrong with Russia.

That's the start point of thinking about deterrents, and I think that it would help, and I'm hopeful that it is helping, balance, if you will, the priorities. You're never going to get the priorities as blatantly stated as we would like them to be, but we can, I think, in our conversations among political and military leaders, understand that we've got five instruments of national power, not one, and that the clever use of those can build in a deterrent strategy that then allows you to feel as though you're not going to have to do the things that you may yet have to do if you don't have a deterrent strategy.

Moderator: Martin Dempsey, a complete and utter pleasure. We've got to leave it there, we've run out of time, but that was genuinely a brilliant conversation. I could have hung onto that and kept you going for hours. I wouldn't want to let it go, but we have to pull stumps there. You can find our show on all major podcasting platforms, including iTunes and Spotify. Your downloads now place us in the top 3% of nearly 2 million podcast shows globally, and more and more of our listeners seem to go back and dig into previous episodes. Why not? You can hear about some outstanding case studies of what we're up against with the western way of war. This show is produced by Peppi Väänänen (ph 32.05) and Kieron Yates and is sponsored by Raytheon UK. We've been lining up some pretty amazing guests over the next set of episodes that will take us through to the summer. We've got a few spots left, so I'm turning this over to you. What do you want on the show? Shoot me or Peppi an email and let's see who you want to have an episode of their own. Now, I can't promise that your suggested guest will agree to come on the show, but we can only try. Thanks for listening.