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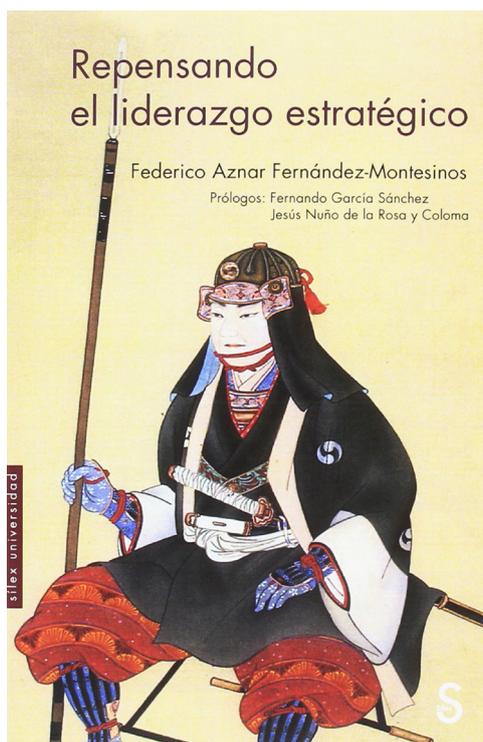
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BOOK REVIEW

Repensando el liderazgo estratégico (Rethinking strategic leadership), Federico Aznar Fernández-Montesinos, Madrid: editorial Silex Universidad, 2018. 436 pag.

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Leadership and strategy. Both refer to general and widely used concepts in both the military and business organisation. The study of leadership has always interested historians and social scientists. Max Weber's work, one of the foundations on which modern social science is built, and based on rigorous historiographical studies, is a magnificent example of this. Even before that, the subject had been comprehensively addressed in the treatises on prudence made popular by distinguished writers and philosophers such as Machiavelli and Spain's own Baltasar Gracián, to mention a few. And in the present day, business consultants and trainers focus intensely on the topic. Meanwhile, in the military, the exercise of command has led to the discovery of true natural leaders and the development of the military's own patterns of leadership. Indeed, nowadays, well-known military leaders, such as U.S. Generals Petraeus and McChrystal (again, to cite just two examples) have extended their military career beyond retirement and devote themselves to writing and giving lectures and courses to share their experiences as leaders and their theories on what leadership means to them and what it is or should be.

It is well known that the language and study of strategy originated in the military. The first known reflections on the subject came from military professionals and academics, and strategic terminology and doctrine then spread to other areas, including politics. This has given rise, for example, to a comprehensive body of literature in relation to the study of business management which, in turn, has spread to other areas and uses. Finally, there have been numerous attempts to put into practice, and to identify and explain in theoretical terms, a form of leadership where thoughts and actions are driven by strategy. And this brings us to the subject of the book we are about to review: *Repensando el liderazgo estratégico* (Rethinking strategic leadership), written by Federico Aznar Fernández-Montesinos and published by Silex. The author, a naval officer with many years of teaching experience who completed his military training with studies in political science and culture, aptly describes himself with the words "military" and "humanist". And, indeed, while not exactly in vogue, it is precisely the approach that characterises his work, a point that we will return to later on.

The explicit objectives of the book appear to be essentially two: firstly, to "provide a framework for reflection" on the chosen subject (strategic leadership) and, secondly, to combine the experience and knowledge gained from military doctrine and practices with academic studies on business leadership, all with the goal of transferring knowledge from one field to the other. Several passages of the book give clues as to the two underlying motivations that inspired these objectives. In Federico Aznar's opinion, the leadership models and theories formulated by professionals in the military and civilian worlds have developed independently (which, to an extent, is perfectly understandable). Consequently, there is an impression that their contributions are only relevant and applicable to the specific field for which they were developed, a conclusion that the author rejects, pointing out that "the military world is intertwined with the civilian world. (And,) therefore, it makes sense to transfer the lessons learned in the military sphere to the civilian one through two-way interaction, particularly in aspects such as leadership". And, as the author states earlier in the book: "The military area has a lot to offer, especially in our country, where there is still reticence towards

knowledge from this source”. Having said that, Aznar believes that the opposite is also true, pointing out that the extensive collection of writings on strategic leadership stemming from studies on business management in recent years has not been sufficiently exploited by military professionals, especially in Spain, where cooperation with civilian society is still low. In addition, there is a more serious problem to contend with, and this is the second fundamental motivation underlying a book that aims to be useful for civilian managers and military commanders alike: and that is the author’s assumption, which we fully agree with, that “both the armed forces and the business world” (to which we would also like to add professional politics) “are dominated by a tactical culture”. In other words, the world we live in and our leaders seem to be lacking a true strategic culture, with the many prejudices this may entail: presentism and an inability to anticipate problems, opportunities and threats. In short, disorientation and lack of control over the medium- and long-term effects of our own and others’ actions.

The content of Federico Aznar’s book is comprehensive. He begins by examining the relationship between strategic leadership and the different decision-making levels within military organisations which, by analogy, can be equated with those of companies and corporations. He then goes on to look at the characteristics or skills of leaders, the specific attributes that should define leadership, and strategic leadership in particular; the author defines this at the end of the book as a process aimed at creating the desired situation, determining the means to achieve it and managing the implementation of these means. There are two chapters devoted to the ethical dimensions of the issue and their relationship with organisational change, team leadership and learning dynamics. Aznar then proceeds to analyse the factors relating to one of the most important aspects of strategic leadership: decision-making. He also addresses the relationship between military culture and strategic leadership, and its institutional dimension. Finally, the book closes with a series of conclusions, which are in fact only partial conclusions, given that readers are invited to openly reflect on the subject and the author avoids making overly forceful statements. Aznar’s book is based on a comprehensive critical bibliography, with more than sufficient, perhaps even excessive references to studies, articles, books and lectures by other writers, both contemporary and classical, and, in this regard, the work is a true display of erudition, not feigned (as is all too often the case), but genuine. And, moreover, it is a well-written book with a clear and flowing style, in which the writer demonstrates his skill in creating sharp, even beautiful syntactic constructions and analogies. This is undoubtedly the fortunate consequence of a humanistic approach which is evident from the outset and runs through the book from start to finish.

Any work of literature should be judged, first and foremost, *vis-à-vis* the objectives it aims to fulfil. And on this point, we have to say that Aznar’s book does indeed fulfil the promise announced in the book’s title: to rethink the subject of strategic leadership. Similarly, his combined knowledge of the military and civilian worlds, as mentioned previously, is more than evident. However, whether this will result in the desired transfer of knowledge between the two areas does not ultimately depend on the author, but rather that the book is read, studied and applied by the people with

the responsibility and capacity to make this happen. We can say, however, that Aznar has essentially accomplished what he set out to do. Because *Repensando el liderazgo estratégico* is a useful book for both business and military leaders, especially because of the wealth of information and concepts it offers. We must stress, however, that it is not a quick guide or textbook, but, and this is worth repeating, a theoretical text to be digested slowly, not devoured in one sitting. Quite the opposite, therefore, to the many books published year after year on the subject of leadership, including the self-help style books that make the best-seller list. In other words, if you are looking for quick and easy solutions, you'd better read something else. But if you are looking for ideas, this book is the one for you.

Just as Federico Aznar likes to quote the classics to support and illustrate his ideas, I recall here a well-known quotation from another military man and writer – Pliny the Elder – who Cervantes quoted in *Don Quixote*: “There is no book so bad...that it does not have something good in it.” While this does not accurately describe Aznar’s work, because it is a good book, it can be inverted to infer that there is no book so good that it does not have something bad or, to be less drastic, does not have some shortcoming or limitation. And Aznar’s book, like those of most authors, is no exception to this rule. And while none of these take from the value of the book, we believe it has at least two shortcomings: the first relates to the content and the second to the methodology. As mentioned earlier, the content of Aznar’s book is comprehensive. And we cannot reproach him for being exhaustive because, with the wealth of information available to us today, no book can be otherwise. However, we can question the type of references he uses to support his work. For readers who have no specialist military training, the extensive military bibliography Aznar uses is another of the book’s strengths. This bibliography is essential, although not only in relation to strategic thinking. However, when it comes to references to civilian material, mainly on the subject of leadership, the author fails to capitalise on the wealth of empirical knowledge developed in the field of academics, particularly in areas such as social and organisational psychology. We were surprised, for instance, to find no reference whatsoever to the studies on leadership and culture conducted by the Globe Project, possibly the most powerful and comprehensive empirical research project in the world, conducted over a period of more than twenty years, with samples from 62 countries and data collected on more than 17,000 research subjects to date (the study is still underway).

The other limitation we encounter with Aznar’s book is minor and concerns the method, or the way he chose to express and illustrate the multitude of ideas he offers and discusses. As was the case with his two previous and otherwise excellent books (*Entender la guerra en el siglo XXI* and *La ecuación de la guerra*), Aznar quotes other authors extensively. Many of these quotations are of excellent literary quality, and none of them are inappropriate, quite the contrary. But, even so, they seem excessive. It is almost impossible to find a paragraph that does not include one or more excerpts from other works, and this display of erudition has two consequences: the first is that the text is longer than necessary, although in many cases the length is offset by the illustrative value of the quotation or reference; the second is that the opinions of other writers tend to disorientate the reader as regards the opinion of the author himself.

If Aznar had no opinion of his own, we might be thankful for such an approach, but this is not the case. Federico Aznar has plenty of ideas of his own; some daring, even defiant, and all worthy of examination and discussion.

However, despite the aforementioned shortcomings, *Repensando el liderazgo estratégico* is a timely, extremely useful and well-written book: a major contribution to the development of theoretical studies on strategic thinking in Spain and, moreover, it provides a very convenient opportunity to capitalise on the intellectual values of the military tradition outside of their original context.

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