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What I Wish I Knew Then: Tom Modly

By Steve Cohen

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Thomas Modly is the former under secretary and acting secretary of the Navy during Donald Trump's first administration. His recently published book "Vectors: Heroes, Villains, and Heartbreak on the Bridge of the U.S. Navy," was an Amazon No. 1 bestseller, and unlike other memoirs from former Trump Administration cabinet members, does not indulge in politics.

Rather, it focused on maritime policy and the leadership and management lessons he learned during his tenure. It is a remarkably candid and thoughtful book—made all the more salient because Secretary Modly was enmeshed in one of the most high-profile and controversial incidents of the COVID-19 pandemic: his decision to relieve the commanding officer of the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt during the early days of the crisis. While barely touching on the law, per se, Tom's insights are relevant to anyone dealing with important issues suffused with fear, confusion, and incomplete information.

A graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, Modly also holds an MA from Georgetown University and an MBA from Harvard. Prior to serving as Under and then Acting Secretary, he was a managing director at PwC, a successful entrepreneur, Deputy Under Secretary of Defense in the George W. Bush Administration, and, as an active-duty Navy officer, a helicopter pilot and assistant professor of political science at the U.S. Air Force Academy.

Courtesy photo

Thomas Modly, former acting secretary of the U.S. Navy.

Stormy Seas

Just before he took up his position as the No. 2 person in the Department of the Navy, tragedy struck—not once but twice, as two different Navy guided missile destroyers were involved in collisions with merchant vessels. The accidents involving the USS Fitzgerald and the USS John S.

McCain left 17 sailors dead, and were the result of a combination of crews being overtaxed, overtired, undertrained, and operating with nonstandard or nonworking equipment up on the ships' bridges. Tom explained that the then-secretary Richard Spencer did a very non-Navy thing by recognizing that the Navy leadership's own internal review might not be "self-reflective enough to determine the root causes of the incidents or to make the right series of recommendations." Finding ways to get at the root causes of issues was something I would hear repeatedly from Tom as he emphasized the criticality of looking below the surface of issues to ensure you "weren't just seeing what you *wanted* to see".

Tom describes being in a meeting early on in his tenure with the other Service Secretaries and being chaired by Secretary of Defense James Mattis. The head of legislative affairs was briefing the group about the possible outcome of a special election in Alabama that could shift the Senate seat from Republican to Democrat for the first time in 20 years. Secretary Mattis interrupted, slapped the table, and said, "And nobody at this table cares. You are here to defend the nation."

Tom explained that that clear, unambiguous message set the tone for him—and for him to communicate to his entire team: "The expectation was that we would be focused on the mission of the department: the safety of the nation and the people we ask to defend it. We were there to defend the nation, not a party or a person. The nation. Our nation."

Operating Themes

The challenges the Navy faced then—many of which the sea services continue to face today—range from too few ships to do the many and varied jobs the nation expects of the Navy; inadequate funding to build more ships and provide the training to ensure readiness; and management, financial, and educational systems that are antiquated in comparison to the civilian world. The Under Secretary is, by law, the chief management officer of the Navy. Consequently, Tom decided he had to make clear to everyone in the organization what their priorities and operating principles were.

"I made clear that the main themes would be agility and accountability. I had been thinking about what was important to defense organizations, which needed to adapt to an uncertain future characterized by both more capable and unpredictable adversaries; and less predictable (and mostly shrinking) defense budgets. I identified five 'agile' qualities: (1) velocity: the ability to react and respond rapidly; (2) visibility: the ability to have transparency of information across the enterprise; (3) adaptability: the ability to be flexible, adjust, and change as circumstances require; (4) collaboration: the ability to work and cooperate across organizational boundaries; and (5) innovation: the ability to experiment, try, fail, and iterate continuously.

Soon after Tom took over his responsibilities in the Department of the Navy—and watched the organization in action—he added three more qualities to the list: "Humility: the ability to operate and lead free of pride or arrogance; trust: the ability to believe in the character and truth of people at all levels of the organization; and skepticism: the ability to question, with respect, conventional wisdom and long-held beliefs."

Sharp Mind, Soft Elbows

Tom explained that there were four functional challenges he planned to take on as under secretary: financial audit, business systems modernization, digital strategy, and overall business reform. And while he planned to hire four "superstars" with the functional expertise to drive change in those areas, he also wanted people who "knew how to influence others through 'soft power'—in other words, people who knew how to exert influence through the use of persuasion and collaboration, rather than coercion. Without that quality, I was certain that organizational resistance to our efforts would stiffen and eventually be stymied."

Coincident with that management and leadership style was an initiative that Tom had been thinking about for some time: enhancing the opportunities for, quality of, and respect for education—throughout the broad naval enterprise. The motto of the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis is *Ex Scientia Tridens*: through knowledge, sea power. Yet, sadly, the Navy —and its then uniformed leadership—didn't see any urgent need to bring any substantive reform to the Navy's educational systems. (The Marine Corps, surprisingly, did.) Tom convened a blue-chip panel of retired senior officers and civilians who put together a comprehensive plan which became known as "Education for Seapower" (E4S). It was thoughtful and innovative. Yet, in the end it was completely thwarted by senior Navy leadership. In the wake of Tom's departure in 2020 many of the elements of the E4S strategy were dismantled or deprioritized.

Sadly, Tom explains, E4S was derailed by one of the "villains" he cites in his book: arrogance. Uniquely, Tom cites 19 villains in "Vectors" none of which are actual people, but rather human and organizational characteristics that stand in the way of good decision making and meaningful change. With respect to arrogance as the main villain standing in the way of the E4S efforts, he writes, "Success, power, and scale often breed the debilitating effects of arrogance. The symptoms are a lack of consideration for those less powerful, and a lack of openness to new ideas. Arrogance keeps leaders 'inside the lines' and promotes the delusion that what was successful in the past will continue to be successful in the future."

When I asked Tom about the best and worst bosses he had ever worked for, he hesitated a bit about the worst boss, and then said, "Your first responsibility is to protect your people. A toxic boss affects everyone. Your job is to be a buffer—shield your team from the dysfunction. Your first obligation is to them and the mission so you have to keep doing your work, and if it becomes untenable, search for an honorable way out." He recalled one particularly insecure supervisor who often made highly unrealistic and irrational demands. "I was patient for a long time, but finally I had to be candid and say, 'You're asking for something impossible. You won't have this in 24 hours. Eventually, I found a way to move on."

Tom had no hesitation identifying and talking about his best boss: former Secretary of the Navy and later Deputy Secretary of Defense Gordon England. He remembers England's understanding of how to get things done in large bureaucracies where rank and hierarchy are paramount. One lesson he learned about the power of perception in such enterprises was when England told him, "Get on my calendar two

or three times a week. Everyone sees my calendar, and if your name is on it, they'll know you have my full authority." The tactic worked, giving Tom and his colleagues instant credibility. "Gordon challenged ideas with probing questions, but always but he always did so respectfully. That blend of trust, empowerment, and mentorship embodied true leadership."

Values as the Anchor

"A career will inevitably test your values," Tom said. "You have to know your moral and ethical foundation, because you will run headlong into ethical issues in every job." For him, the anchor of leadership is character. "You have to know what foundation you're going to build your career on. What traits matter most to you? What principles will you never compromise?"

He urged young leaders to answer those questions early and test themselves often. "Every job will bring you face-to-face with an ethical issue, a leadership dilemma, maybe not a moral crisis, but something that forces you back to your foundation. That's why it's critical to understand it, refine it, and hold to it."

Lean Down, Not Just In

"Managing up is overrated," Tom said. "It's your responsibility as a leader to go down to the lowest levels of the organization to find out what's really going on." For Tom, that belief is even more true today in part because failing to abide by it, in part, led to his resignation as acting secretary. It was March 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic was just beginning to spread. I recalled to Tom how little we actually knew about the disease, how to control it, or even how to treat it. I shared with him my recollection of riding my bike up the Hudson River Greenway bike path, seeing the Navy hospital ship USNS Comfort docked at the cruise liner pier ready to take the overflow of patents that were expected; and then riding downtown on a completely deserted Broadway.

That same day, Capt. Brett Crozier of the nuclear aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt, one of the Navy's most powerful warships, sent an email to a number of more senior officers expressing his concerns about the safety of his 5,000-person crew and implying that the Navy was not doing enough to help solve the crisis.

About 50 sailors were infected with coronavirus. The email was not sent to his chain of command and was sent via a Gmail account that was not secure. And not surprisingly, it was soon leaked to the media. This created a political and media firestorm, which only compounded criticism of the Trump Administration's handling of the COVID-19 crisis in those early days.

Earlier in the same day Crozier sent his letter, Tom offered to go to Guam to visit the ship and crew to ensure they were getting all the assistance they needed to manage the crisis. The captain asked Tom not to visit as he thought it might be a distraction to the effort. Tom agreed, but he regrets that decision. Crozier's understandable concerns for his crew ran head-on into national security issues; and what the Navy was actually trying to do to isolate and test the crew for the virus, and protect them from its impact. He also intentionally did not discuss the letter with his immediate boss, the carrier strike group commander, before sending it.

Tom was immediately concerned that he didn't have enough or the right information; filtered reports were not enough. In a direct phone call with Crozier, Tom asked his about the now infamous email which had triggered a national controversy. The captain responded to Tom's

questions, “I thought it was time to send up a signal flare.” When asked why he did not discuss it first with the carrier strike group commander, he said that he knew in advance that the admiral would have directly ordered him not to send it. He decided otherwise.

Tom discussed the conversation with the Navy’s top officers, and the most senior admiral, the Chief of Naval Operations, thought it appropriate to suspend Crozier and conduct a formal investigation. Tom opposed the idea of suspending Crozier: “It would feed the “Captain Crozier as martyr” persona that was already percolating in the media and had the potential to further divide the crew from the rest of the Navy as they waited for their popular captain to be released form suspension.” After more dithering by senior officers, none of whom followed Tom’s directives to reach out to the captain directly to get to ground truth, Tom decided that he had lost confidence in Crozier and that he wanted a “steadier hand” in charge of the ship during this crisis. He decided to relieve him of command himself in order to spare the senior uniform officers from taking actions in an environment that had turned deeply political

Firing the commanding officer would be controversial and cause a media storm. And it was becoming terribly partisan. After relieving the captain, Tom flew to Guam, but instead of meeting with the crew in person—as he wanted to—he was advised by his security detail and the medical team not to walk around the ship. Instead, he spoke to the crew from the quarterdeck behind an M5 mask and over the ship’s intercom system. Some of his words were unartful, but others spoke seriously and compassionately about their obligations to each other and to the mission of the ship. The media and the Democrats in Congress chose to focus on the unartful comments, but Tom admits some of those comments were an “unforced error.” Tom now believes he should have gone to Guam earlier—despite Capt. Crozier not wanting him to visit. “Being there in person would have calmed people down and helped us find solutions sooner.” He also reflected on the importance of “unmasking” as a leader—both literally and figuratively. “There are the physical masks, and then there are the masks of rank and privilege. In a crisis, you need to drop all that, walk the deck-plates, and let people tell you what’s really happening.”

Convinced that rozier’s actions had set a bad precedent, he made the decision himself to relieve him. “If it went south, I knew I would take the heat. Leaders must own the hardest calls, even if it costs them their job.”

Regardless of what you may think of that decision, Tom’s book offers unique insights into his frame of mind at the time, and why he chose the path he did. Without pointing fingers, or impugning anyone’s character, Tom provides an honest and self-critical window in “Vectors” into the challenges of leading in the tumultuous and unpredictable times in which we are all living today—and will be into the future.

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