

This opinion piece by PCI Vice President, Tom Plate, appeared in the South China Morning Post on Tuesday, September 24, 2019.

Opinion

If China believes the US has grown soft, its military leaders should read James ‘Mad Dog’ Mattis’ book



- Trump’s former defence secretary has co-authored a narrative that, in detailing the philosophy and capabilities of the US marines, reveals a willingness within the military establishment to take the fight to the enemy. China should take note

Tom Plate

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Illustration: Craig Stephens

A book currently taking the reading American public as if by desert storm has a strange title and pairs an odd couple of authors: US marines, now both retired. *Call Sign Chaos* is by James Mattis and his long-time colleague Bing West, and of the two, West must be the better writer because Mattis is the more famous.

Until February 28, for about two years, General Mattis was secretary of defence in the Trump administration, after decades as a star marine careerist widely known as the toughest of the tough. Not for nothing was his famous moniker “Mad Dog Mattis”. High praise in marine circles.

Mad Dog may have been too much of an individualistic militarist even for President Donald Trump, which would be interesting; and while his predecessor President Barack (“No Drama”) Obama respected him, his tendency to express exactly what he thought, whether in public or at a private meeting, would put Mad Dog in No Drama’s doghouse.

His style and reputation as a commander of troops was exemplary. But few expected that he and his pal West would put together an unputdownable narrative of marine training and doctrine that looks set to become an instant classic.

Their work, begun years ago, is relevant to Chinese readers. Those who do not need a translated edition will be astonished by the level of detail about Marine Corps operational philosophy and doctrine, and its candour about the disturbing disconnect between the hefty war capacity of the US and its declining mental capacity.

The blunt Mattis believes America’s patchwork political system is incapable of making strategically sound decisions, thus its tragic flaw of winning military battles as needed but then losing the peace when the smoke clears.

The Chinese reader will be particularly surprised to learn of the general’s unwillingness to flatly declare the infamous 1999 “accidental” bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade indisputably an accident, though Mattis himself leans towards the simplest explanation: allied incompetence – rather than a planned Nato attack.

The general’s literary tone is delightfully clear and blunt but not brutal or even bitter. On the grounds that the soldier’s profession is to serve as a subordinate of the US president, not criticise him, the general has almost nothing direct to reveal about Trump; and few plaudits about any other president save Harry S. Truman and the late George H.W. Bush.



Then defence secretary James Mattis speaks beside President Donald Trump during a briefing at the White House on October 23 last year. Mattis’ new book reveals little about Trump. Photo: AP

The latter is singled out for not permitting the first Iraq war (to reclaim Kuwait for the Kuwaitis) to balloon into a far wider bedlam, as did the second one under his son, known as “W”. As for Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden, the former vice-president under Obama, the general leaves us the sense he found him admirable and amiable but stubborn.

He remains deeply crestfallen about Obama’s failure to take Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad to task for using chemical weapons, even though this barbaric violation of international and humanitarian law had been explicitly enshrined as an uncrossable red line. “Instead,” he writes, “the President decided not to strike ... This was a shot not heard around the world.”

Mattis’ own red line: “I have seen no case where weakness promotes the chance for peace.” And so he divines a direct connection to the China-US relationship: “America’s reputation had been seriously weakened as a credible security partner. Within 36 hours, I received a phone call from a friendly Pacific-nation diplomat. ‘Well, Jim,’ he said, ‘I guess we’re on our own now with China’.”

Against the background of lengthy combat service in Asia – Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq – the general is gripped by no doubt about the China threat, despite his respect for his sometime-tutor Henry Kissinger, whose wisely nuanced views on China somehow seem to escape almost everyone in the US these days, especially along our New York-Washington echo chamber.

The problem for China, it seems, is that by standing toe-to-toe with the US, especially over the tariff war (which, I concur, is totally idiotic), President Xi Jinping’s ever-hardening image discolours the overall image of contemporary China, intended or not.



Chinese President Xi Jinping appears on a screen at an exhibition commemorating the Chinese Communist Party’s history and achievements at the National Museum in Beijing on September 20, ahead of the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China. Photo: EPA-EFE

Is a Sino-US clash indeed in our destiny? If so, then Chinese military leaders must absolutely read Mattis’ book. They need to understand that America has not “grown soft” and that if they want a fight, there are other “mad dogs” in our military well prepared to join the battle.

Details about marine training and systemic inter-service joint action receive plenty of attention, as do philosophies of troop management. Without yielding any military secrets, the book offers plenty for China to think about.

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But the book should also wake up America to the suggestion that China surely has in its ranks its own very capable “mad dogs”, that China’s young people and elder commanders will fight equally bravely for what they believe in, and that Chinese commanders, unlike some of the Taliban militarists Mattis writes about, are anything but “dumber than a bucket of rocks”.

For their part, Americans are looking for strong but sensible and coherent leadership. This is why many see in Mattis what earlier generations saw in George Patton, Douglas MacArthur and Dwight D. Eisenhower. “Only the dead have seen the last of war,” writes our current hero general.

May they all rest in peace; but cannot we find Chinese and American leaders who are willing to give the war option a long, well-deserved rest and instead work like mad dogs of peace to help the world escape apocalypse?

The prolific writer H.G. Wells, who even penned a pair of books on “recreational” war games, foresaw that China would soon rival both the United States and Europe. He left us with this thought: “Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe.”

Loyola Marymount University Clinical Professor Tom Plate’s late father was a proud US marine