

Q & A: Karl Marlantes on Vietnam, Leadership, and the Lessons America Still Hasn't Learned

Description

Editor's Note: This article is presented in a question-and-answer format, with the Irregular Warfare Initiative interviewing [Karl Marlantes](#). This piece has been edited for clarity and readability, as spoken language differs from how text is read on the page. Marlantes served as a Marine Infantry officer in Vietnam where he was awarded the Navy Cross, a Bronze Star, two Purple Hearts, and 10 Air Medals. He is a graduate of Yale University, was a Rhodes Scholar, and has a master's degree from Oxford University. He is the author of four books including [Matterhorn: A Novel of the Vietnam War](#), [What It Is Like to Go to War](#), [Deep River](#), and [Cold Victory](#). Marlantes was also a contributor to the 10-part [The Vietnam War](#) documentary produced by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick.

IWI: We think one of the best [reviews](#) of your novel *Matterhorn* was by NPR book critic Michael Schaub, who wrote,

“There’s never been a Vietnam war novel as stark, powerful, and brutal as *Matterhorn*, and it’s the rare kind of masterpiece that enriches not just American literature but American history as well.”

April 2025 marked the fifty-year anniversary of the end of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. That war has been a reference point for the wars in both Afghanistan and Iraq, an analogy that is brought up every time the U.S. military is potentially deployed overseas. Why do you think that Vietnam still seems to loom so large in America’s collective psyche?

Marlantes:

“There’s a host of reasons, and one of them is that we got involved [in the war even though we shouldn’t have]. We’ve learned nothing. Our war in Afghanistan was so similar to Vietnam. We know nothing about the culture. We don’t speak the language. We stand out like sore thumbs. They blend into their environment. Iraq was virtually the same.”

Another thing that resonates, and, I hate to say it, [is the fact that] we lost. It was the first time America lost, and I think weâ??re still trying to swallow that. The images of [Marines hauling people off the roof](#) [of the American Embassy] by helicopter still resonate with people, and then we repeated it in Afghanistan.

It was also the first time that we lost our naivet  as a nation. I was a junior at Yale when the Gulf of Tonkin Incident happened. I was from this little logging town in Oregon, and I was a little bit naive. Weâ??re talking about it, and a couple of my friends said, â??well the Presidentâ??s just lying.â?• And I remember just sputteringâ? â??thatâ??s impossible that the President would ever lie to the American people,â?• and they broke out laughing. That was the first time that it hit me, and I think it was the first time it hit America that these people can lie. That was a big change. It changed our culture and made us distrust institutions. That still resonates.

And another thing: thereâ??s no closure to it. [In] World War II, we won, and, then we did the Marshall Plan, and we got everybody back on their feet. [With] Vietnam, we just left and itâ??s still hanging there. Iâ??m involved with a group called [Peace Trees Vietnam](#), and weâ??re cleaning up unexploded ordnance in Quang Tri Province. Thereâ??s a [lot] of it, and I was personally responsible for a lot of it. We found one field, and it was about an acre. There were 103 pieces of unexploded ordnance in it, and this farmer was trying to farm there. I mean, it was a war, and I hit them with everything I had. But I still feel like America hasnâ??t quite come to terms with it like it did with the Europeans, and the Japanese [after World War II].â?•

IWI: Your book *Matterhorn* has appeared on numerous reading lists, including the Commandant of the Marine Corps Professional Reading List, and the Chief of Naval Operations Professional Reading Program. Why do you think the book resonates with military leaders?

Marlantes:

â??Iâ??m chuckling because every one of those guys has been a junior officer. And I think [the book helps them] relate back to when they were new and trying to get their feet on the ground as junior officers, particularly Marine and Army infantry. The other thing is that the military is still dealing with [some of the same problems] like careerism.

I also get emails and letters from people in the Dutch army and the British army, and they always say that nothing changes. The military is run by people, and people donâ??t change. Or if they do, itâ??s really slow. I mean, you can read the *Odyssey* or the *Iliad*, and they still resonate [because they were dealing with the same things].â?•

IWI: Are there other books either about Vietnam about military culture or the military experience in general that you would recommend to military leaders, academics, or policymakers?

Marlantes:

â??The first one that comes to mind is Tim Oâ??Brienâ??s [The Things They Carried](#), but I actually think his [Going after Cacciato](#) is the better book. I know Tim and heâ??s a great writer.

I remember once bitching to him and I said: â??Tim, every eighth grader in America buys *The Things They Carried*. No one buys my book.â?• He looked at me and said, â??Karl, thereâ??s not an English teacher in the world that would assign a book that thick.â?•

James Jones wrote [a trilogy](#) with *From Here to Eternity*, *The Thin Red Line*, and *Whistle*.

I think that I was [also] influenced a lot by the First World War poets: Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, Robert Graves, [and] Isaac Rosenberg. Theyâ??re important because they were the first writers that broke through this â??war is gloryâ?• sort of stuff, and, â??*Dulce et decorum est pro patria more*.â?• [Latin for â??It is sweet and fitting to die for oneâ??s country.â??]

No. Itâ??s not. It just isnâ??t.

Another writer that people donâ??t think about is J.D. Salinger. He wrote a couple of short stories that are really, really good war stories. One is about a veteran that comes back, [A Perfect Day for Banana Fish](#).

The other one is [For Esme With Love and Squalor](#). In this short story, the protagonist carries a watch that this little girl gave him, and itâ??s a perfect little watch. Her father was killed earlier in the war. This guy was in England met Esme [the little girl who gave him the watch] before his unit invaded France. And as the story goes on, that watch gets increasingly damaged. By the end of the war, itâ??s really damaged. [It is a metaphor for] Salingerâ??s own journey. He saw a lot of combat.

I think a lot of people overlook these two short stories [by J.D. Salinger].

[Another one is] the [Sword of Honor](#) series by Evelyn Waugh. Itâ??s hilariousâ??it pokes fun at stuff, but it also really gets to the nitty gritty.

[Then thereâ??s] [War and Peace](#) by Leo Tolstoy. Tolstoy was a soldier, and he can write about it really well. Thereâ??s a whole lot of other stuff in that novel, of course.

[*All Quiet on the Western Front*](#) by Erich Maria Remarque is another classic that should be read.

Norman Mailer wrote a great novel, [*The Naked and the Dead*](#). It's well constructed and good.

[There's also] [*The Good Soldier Svejk*](#) by a Czech author named Jaroslav Hasek.

Then you have the great historians: AJP Taylor, Liddell Hart, John Keegan, Hew Strachan, Max Hastings, Anthony Beevor. These guys are great writers.

I think that it's really important that our military leaders, noncommissioned officers, and [commissioned] officers read those histories because it gives an overview and some insight into how we get into these wars. I think we also have to pull back and ask *how do we get into these messes?* The great historians [are the ones] who have really good insight on it.â•

IWI: What are some of the relevant lessons of Vietnam, and what are some of the things that people misunderstand about the war and the generation that fought it?

Marlantes:

â•I think a relevant lesson that we have never learned is that if there's something going on inside a country, don't poke your nose into the hornets' nest. There are many ways to solve problems [without going to war].

We end up getting involved in civil wars, and that's just not something that we should do. We should get involved if we have serious national interests at stake â•if it seriously threatens us or if there's a clear violation of international laws.

[For example], what the Russians are doing in Ukraine is an absolutely clear violation of international law. I don't think we should send troops to Ukraine, but we should be supporting them way more than we are now. The Russians certainly believe they are at war with us. We should have just flooded Ukraine with weapons and just given them everything we had from the start. Then the war would be over. But we delayed.

We can't export democracy. I think that's a lesson that we should learn from Vietnam and we haven't. I love and admire Colin Powell, but I believe that when he was Secretary of State and they had to write the constitution for the new Iraqi government, and Powell said something like, â•Well, why is that a problem? It'd take a week.â•â•Yeah. Okay, Colin. We spent two hundred and fifty years [building our democracy], and we're still fighting about constitutional stuff today. So, who are we to be talking about other people's democracies? We need to focus on our own.

In South Africa, we didn't like apartheid. But we didn't send the Marines to South Africa. Instead, we boycotted South Africa; we didn't play rugby with them. We put the pressure on them morally. There are many ways you can put pressure on people without sending our kids to war. We reach for the military button all the time, and it's ineffective, especially in those situations.

I believe in the Powell Doctrine, you need to have a clear military objective. Then, you go in with overwhelming force. Something has to be really at stake for the United States. And you need to have an exit plan. •

IWI: Before this interview, we talked some about Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and the lack of reintegration plans for Vietnam veterans. In your second book, *What It Is Like to Go to War*, you have a chapter about homecoming, which reminded us of Sebastian Junger's book [*Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging*](#), and the lack of community focus on the individual in modern society. What are your thoughts about how we could improve kind of mutual understanding between the military and American society at large?

Marlantes:

For starters, I think we should have national service. And I don't think everybody should go into the military. I've got five kids and three of them I wouldn't want anywhere near the Marine Corps. But two of them would be okay. They could teach people how to read in the urban schools, or they could help clear trails in the Forest Service. They could help screen people at airports for Homeland Security. There are all kinds of things.

I lost my first marriage mostly because I went crazy with post-traumatic stress, and we didn't know. We'd never heard of it, and we didn't know what hit us.

Veterans have to get back into the community, and it's hard for two reasons. One is that Americans don't know how to talk to veterans. They say 'I don't wanna talk to him about that. I mean, it might upset him. It might set him off, and this would be terrible.' •

We need to tell people how to talk to a veteran about his war experience. Don't start off with, 'Have you killed anybody?' • Start off with, 'Was it hot?' or 'What did you eat for breakfast?' • Questions like that. And believe me, the veterans will start to spill their stories real fast. They want to talk about their experiences, but they don't get the opportunity.

But veterans also have a part in this 'namely [they have] a big chip on their shoulders. [In their heads, they are thinking:] 'You have no idea what I went through.' It's a way of saying 'I'm superior to you because of my difficult, even horrid experience.' • That's no way to get

back into community. Imagine if all the women felt the same way when talking to men about childbirth.â•

IWI: You wrote the forward to [*Storm of Steel*](#) by Ernst JÃ¼nger, which is considered one of the classics of World War I literature. In your preface, you put the authorâ€™s experiences into context, especially the idea of him as a natural warrior. And you talk at length about what it means to be a warrior in *What It Is Like to Go to War*. Do you think modern war has changed what it means to be a warrior?

Marlantes:

â•No. But, I have to tell you why. Whatâ€™s changed is technology, and itâ€™s a lot easier to be a warrior today. I mean, Iâ€™m so happy I didnâ€™t have to kill somebody with a sword or be hacked up with a sword.

What does a warrior do? What is a warrior personality? A warrior must be willing to risk their life to defend their side, and they do have to choose a side. Itâ€™s like â•Iâ€™m an American, and these are my people, and I will fight anybody whoâ€™s not one of this group.â• Thatâ€™s a warrior attitude, and theyâ€™re willing to inflict violence.

The police get this all mixed up all the time. I mean, you see these guys running around in combat gear, and it's childish cosplay. Police are willing to inflict violence, and they certainly take some risks. Theyâ€™re not nearly the same risks as an infantry soldier, but they are taking risks. But they *cannot* choose sides. They have to be on the side of the law. So even though they do something similar, theyâ€™re not warriors because theyâ€™re not choosing a side and defending that side with everything theyâ€™ve got.

And now you have modern warfare. Letâ€™s take some woman on a cruiser firing a tomahawk. Well, she certainly puts her life at riskâ•not as much as an infantry soldierâ•but she does. She certainly is willing to inflict violence on the enemy. And sheâ€™s on the side of America. I would say that sheâ€™s a warrior just the same as somebody in the *Odyssey*, but modern technology makes it easier.

And I think that people need to understand that when they say â•Iâ€™m a warrior.â• No. What they really mean to say is â•Iâ€™m toughâ• or â•Iâ€™ve gone through hard stuff.â• And thatâ€™s confusing because a lot of people go through hard stuff. But theyâ€™re not warriors because theyâ€™re not choosing sides and not willing to inflict violence.â•

IWI: A lot of *Matterhorn* could be read as studies in small unit leadership, both positive and negative. In *What it is like to Go to War*, you wrote a section on atrocity and what happens when

small-unit leadership breaks down. How can good leadership provide a bulwark against this?

Marlantes:

“What we have to understand about getting 18 or 19-year-old Americans to kill people is that you have to get them to believe that [their enemies are] not human. [People say] ‘You’re dehumanizing people.’ Absolutely. Because those young soldiers or Marines won’t pull the trigger if it’s a human. But if it’s a ‘Gook’ or a ‘Haji’ or a ‘Towel-head,’ then you can pull the trigger because you’re actually just killing an animal. I use the word pseudo-speciation to describe this dehumanization of the enemy. In other words, we make up a fake species. The famous line from the My Lai massacre is ‘We were just shooting vermin.’ Well, that’s classic pseudo-speciation.

Small unit leaders need to understand that this is because of how they’ve been trained in boot camp. The small unit leader and the brass have to understand that it’s a system that allows you in combat to pull the trigger. As soon as the firefight’s over, you’ve got to step in right away and say, ‘We just killed people. These are people.’

As soon as the fight is over, if you lose people, you have to have a ceremony. You can’t just not think about what you’ve done. You have to stop the pseudo-speciation.

[Once in Vietnam] we’d been in five or six days of continuous fighting. And one morning, I was checking the lines, and I saw a couple of kids with ears in their helmets. And I went up to them. I said, ‘Look. I know that they killed your friends. You’ve got to understand that this is an atrocity, and you can’t do this. So, you’re gonna go down and find those bodies you cut the ears off of,’ because they were still laying down below us in on the hillside and then you’re gonna bury them.

Now this wasn’t a trivial task because we were still taking some sniper fire, but I didn’t care. I went down with them. And they started digging the holes to bury the people that they had mutilated, and they both broke down crying because suddenly it hit them, that they actually did this to a human being.

And there’s no way that those atrocities would’ve continued after that moment. So, I think doing things like that—burying the enemy, is very important. Small unit leaders can do this kind of stuff. In fact, they’re the only ones who can because they’re the ones that are actually in the fight at the time.

[After the fighting is over] the small unit leader has to step in immediately and say, "Okay. We're over. It's no longer a 'Towel head.' It's a kid. It's bad luck that he ran into us, but he's a kid." And I think that'll stop it. Junior officers can push back against that kind of stuff. As soon as the fighting's over, you pull them out of pseudo speciation. It's a protective mechanism that allows us to kill other people. So it's good. We want it, but we don't want it all the time.

Senior officers also have a part in this. They set the tone. If you ask your soldiers to prove body count by collecting ears, or make it permissible to torture and humiliate prisoners, as we did at Abu Ghraib, or put out memos from the Justice Department saying torture is okay, you're going to get atrocities.

And if you get a[n unlawful] sort of order like that, you've gotta get the gang together and walk into the office or whatever and just say "We're not gonna do this. This is an illegal order." The main thing is [to address it] right there on the spot."

IWI: Changing gears for our last question. You recently visited Ukraine. What lessons or impressions did you take away from the conflict there that you can share with IWI's readership?

Marlantes:

"I was around the front at Kharkiv with a drone unit called the Achilles Regiment. It is unbelievable how war has changed. I read things about the war, but until you go there, [you don't realize how much has changed in warfare].

For starters: the battalion headquarters. This battalion headquarters was probably spread out over two kilometers, and it was in movable trailers because if they had put it in one place, the Russians would have hit them, and that'd be the end of them.

Another thing that's different is I was talking to a woman who was a medic. And she said that the most dangerous part of her job was after they picked the guy up, trying to get him back to a hospital because there's at least ten miles where you're under the surveillance of drones. So, the front line is just the end of the surveillance zone. You're probably better off in your hole [on the front line], than some medic trying to get in a car and drive a wounded person back through the surveillance zone.

And, you can't organize for a breakthrough or even a tactical operation like we used to because we can't group people together. Until we can figure out some way of regaining air superiority, and that means we have to come up with some way of putting a tent over our infantry operations, [drones are going to be a problem].

The Ukrainians are really good at swift adaptation, and weâ??re horrible at it. So whatâ??s the difference?

[I met] this battalion commander, a lieutenant colonel. I think he had almost a million dollars allocated to him, so that if he needed something changed on a drone, he could contact an entrepreneur, tell him what the problem was, give him the money, and get it solved. Theyâ??re turning around problems like that in a week. The improved drone is combat tested the next day and if itâ??s found lacking, that gets fixed immediately.

Unfortunately, the Russians are adapting fast too. But if we have to make a change in a weapon in the U.S. military, you have to write it up, and then you have to let it out for bid, and then you have to give it to the colonel that gives it to the general, and then the assistant undersecretary of [so on and so forth].

Weâ??re hopeless at quick innovation, and, the Ukrainians have figured out how to do it fast. If we give a lieutenant responsibility for the lives of 42 infantrymen, we could certainly give him a million dollars. He doesnâ??t need to go to Raytheon. He can go to some guy whoâ??s got a garage. Can you imagine that happening in America? I donâ??t think so because weâ??re just mired in our own bureaucracy.

The Ukrainians were cynical about American help. One guy said, â??I learned a whole new American expression.â?? Oh, I said, â??whatâ??s that?â?? â?? *Weâ??re working on it*,â?? he replied. And I went, â??Yeah. I understand.â?? Because they need things like artillery shells and we tell them, â??Weâ??re working on it.â??

Theyâ??re exhausted. I mean, theyâ??ve been fighting for nearly four years now, and theyâ??re tired. Their force is also older; they donâ??t have young kids. The young kids can volunteer, but they donâ??t draft them. I think theyâ??re drafting at age 25 and above. [This is true. In April 2024 it was lowered from 27.] Our best frontline combat soldiers are 19-year-olds. People ask, â??Why is that?â?? I said, â??Well, they can go without water. They can go without food.â?? But, most importantly, they donâ??t have any frontal cortices developed yet. So, if you tell them to take the hill, they donâ??t think to ask you, they just go for it.

You never want 19-year-olds in special operations, and you certainly never want them to be police. You need to be in your mid-thirties before you develop that kind of judgment. But can you imagine a platoon of 35-year-olds? â??Okay. We gotta take the hill.â?? â??Oh, wait, lieutenant. Why donâ??t we call the Air Force? Why canâ??t we just bomb them for a couple of days?â??

I think the Ukrainians are missing a big piece there, but theyâ??ve got their reasons. You know, they want the future in the hands of these kids.

I think that theyâ??re going to win. Theyâ??re incredible fighters. Theyâ??re exhausted, but theyâ??re not gonna quit. I have no doubt Ukraine is going to win if it takes them ten years or if the Russians take over, then thereâ??ll be an insurgency in Ukraine for twenty years. They are going to win this war. And I think with what theyâ??re doing now, finally hitting their oil infrastructure, which we should have done two years ago.

And youâ??re never going to convince them to give up their land because, if you ask them to give up land, youâ??re asking them to give up Ukrainians, and they are not going to do it. Itâ??s estimated, but impossible to verify, that there are around 100,000 children [\[estimates vary\]](#) in Russia that they have to get back. I mean, what are you thinking asking them to give up land? Youâ??re going to get them to make a bargain? No. They got to whup the Russians, and I think we got to help them.â?•

The views expressed in this interview do not reflect the official position of the Irregular Warfare Initiative, Princeton Universityâ??s Empirical Studies of Conflict Project, the Modern War Institute at West Point, or the United States Government.

Main Image: U.S. Marines near Mutterâ??s Ridge during fighting in northern South Vietnam, February 1969. Photo courtesy of Karl Marlantesâ??s personal collection.

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Date Created

2026/01/08