



The Armed Forces Officer

“The choice of a line of work,” states Professor William Lee Miller, “can be one of the foremost ‘moral’ choices one makes.” It is, Miller continues, “a choice about what it is worthwhile to spend one’s life doing.”¹ The decision to undertake a military career of whatever duration, to accept an officer’s commission, and to take the officer’s oath is particularly weighty. It requires no less than commitment of one’s life to the service of others. In exchange, such service carries with it the benefits and burdens of life as a public official in the world’s most successful democracy and membership in an ancient and honorable calling—the profession of arms. Speaking of his own commission, George Washington wrote to a British opponent:

*I cannot conceive of any more honorable [source of officer’s rank], than that which flows from the uncorrupted Choice of a brave and free People—The purest Source & original Fountain of all Power.*²

As an American Armed Forces officer, one accepts responsibility both for faithful execution of the office, to include a life of continuous study and application, and for the maintenance of an exemplary personal life. This responsibility is owed to the Nation, fellow Armed Forces officers, all those who wear and have worn the Nation’s uniform in any grade or capacity, as well as those who will come hereafter. The responsibility implies a dual obligation—to protect the Constitution and to pass on to others unsullied the honor of being an Armed Forces officer.

George Marshall was right: There is a common ground, ethically and morally binding all American military officers, of whatever service, to their particular branch and their fellow Armed Forces officers. This common ground originates with the common constitutional oath and commission. Indeed, it is the basis of the true professional *jointness* of the commissioned leaders of all the Armed Forces. Logically, it would be as true to say that all officers are commissioned into the Armed Forces of the United States, with service in a particular department, as it is to continue to follow the traditional form of commissioning them into the separate departments and binding them by a common oath and commission. In that sense, all officers are joint officers who happen to be on the rolls of their particular service. It is the common moral obligation that unites the separate service cultures into one fabric—*E pluribus unum*.

An officer of the Armed Forces of the United States must be a warrior, a leader of character, an unwavering defender of the Constitution, a servant of the Nation, and an exemplar and champion of its ideals.

Fighting, and leading those who do, is the unique role of Armed Forces officers. It is the warrior spirit that sustains men and women in times of danger, hardship, and discouragement, and that gives leaders the confidence and purpose to rally troops for one more effort when their will seems to be waning. According to Field Marshal Sir William Slim:

*When you're in command and things have gone wrong there always comes a pause when your men stop and—they look at you. They don't say anything—they just look at you. It's rather an awful moment for the commander because then he knows that their courage is ebbing, their will is fading, and he's got to pull up out of himself the courage and the will power that will stiffen them again and make them go on.*³

Slim was reflecting on his role as an Army commander during the march out of Burma in War II, but the phenomenon applies even more surely to the platoon commander, division chief, or flight leader in the midst of battle. The warrior ethos is George Washington, who almost single-handedly sustained the Revolution by maintaining the will of

the Continental army through his indomitable example in leading the attacks at Trenton and Princeton in the depths of the winter of 1776. It is Ulysses Grant at Fort Donelson, his line broken and troops driven back, riding to the front and telling his soldiers, "Fill your cartridge-boxes quick, and get into the line; the enemy is trying to escape, and he must not be permitted to do so."⁴ It is Captain Guy V. Henry, lying wounded at the battle of the Rosebud during the Great Sioux War of 1876, telling a friend, "It is nothing. For this are we soldiers."⁵ It is Admiral Chester Nimitz, ordering Admiral Raymond Spruance to be governed by the principle of calculated risk before the Battle of Midway, then sending him into battle against a superior Japanese fleet.⁶ It is the indomitable spirit of Admiral James Stockdale, continuing to resist the Nation's enemies in spite of injury, captivity, and torture. Warriors will always have The Code of Conduct as their guide and standard: "*I am an American, fighting in the forces which guard my country and our way of life. I am prepared to give my life in their defense.*"

American warriors, of course, are not simply expected to win. They are expected to win constrained by the values cherished by the American people. The application of national values has changed over time, depending, among other things, on the nature of the war and the value of its objective to the American people. At a minimum, the American Armed Forces are expected to fight according to the principles of "Just War" enshrined in international conventions to which the Nation is a party. Violation of these rules, however inconvenient or dangerous those rules might be to one's self or one's unit, is contrary to U.S. law and indicative of a failure of professional discipline as well as of professional morality. This expectation of honorable arms is increasingly important as the actions of even the most junior troops become immediately visible to the world in an era of instantaneous communications. When the Armed Forces are functioning properly, everyone can expect that such violations will be prosecuted energetically.

Officers are expected to be leaders of character in peace as well as in war. Officers are creatures of the law, acting under authority of the President as constitutional Commander in Chief, according to the laws and regulations laid down by Congress. Because they are public figures entrusted with the means of war and authority over the lives of fellow citizens, officers' conduct must conform *at all times* to the

highest standards of respect, honor, duty, service, integrity, excellence, courage, commitment, and loyalty. To do less undermines the credit of one's service, as well as the professional standing of the corps of American Armed Forces officers as public trustees of the Nation's welfare and security.

The Armed Forces officer, as a leader of character, is responsible not just for his or her own actions, but for protecting subordinates from the dehumanization that naturally follows descent into the maelstrom of war. The officer must stand above the chaos and travail and guard his or her people's humanity when it is most sorely tried. To do that, an officer must be very secure in the values the Nation and its armed services stand for and revere, in accordance with the special trust and confidence the President and the Nation have reposed in every officer's patriotism, valor, fidelity, and abilities.

The core of the Armed Forces officer's oath is to support and defend the Constitution, while bearing to it true faith and allegiance. Support and defense of the Constitution require, first of all, personal subordination to the civil officials established by the Constitution and the Congress to hold ultimate command on behalf of the American people. By their oaths, Armed Forces officers are co-opted for the duration of their commission to support and execute, even at the risk of their lives, the legal decisions of their civilian leaders, even when they believe they are ill-founded or ill-advised. When General Matthew Ridgway became Army Chief of Staff, he listed three primary responsibilities of the military professional:

First, to give his honest, fearless, objective, professional military opinion of what he needs to do the job the nation gives him. Second, if what he is given is less than the minimum he regards as essential, to give his superiors an honest, fearless, objective opinion of the consequences of these shortages as he sees them from the military viewpoint. Third and finally, he has the duty, whatever be the final decision, to do the utmost with whatever he is furnished.⁷

Service to the Nation implies sustained preparation to deliver reliable and effective service on the day of battle. Armed Forces officers

must continuously assess their technical skills, and those of their subordinates, and upgrade both by training, study, and practice. Officers must be imaginative, adaptive, and able to respond quickly to new circumstances and threats. They must be self-confident enough in their own skills and abilities to assume responsibility for taking action, even when out of sight and the immediate control of superiors. They must be self-aware, self-reflective, and self-critical. The American people entrust their sons and daughters to officers' care. For all of these reasons, competence in every aspect of the profession of arms is a moral obligation.

Finally, Armed Forces officers are expected to reflect the Nation's ideals in all that they do. Sadly, the conduct of military professionals will not always be up to standard. Every member of the profession of arms has an obligation to do something to address perceived failures, by questioning, by encouraging, and in egregious cases, by being willing to act. "If you see something, say something," or even better, *do something*. Putting on blinders to the misconduct of others, or being passive in the face of violations by others, is a failure to fulfill a solemn obligation to the institution, to the profession, to this ancient and honorable calling. Every officer is responsible for his or her own conduct. Beyond that, every officer is responsible for ensuring that the standards of the profession are upheld, practiced, and enforced by all its members, whether junior, peer, or senior. The higher the rank, the greater is that obligation.

Every officer must have a moral compass, and periodically recalibrate it to ensure that it is still pointing to true ethical north. The standard is always what is good for the Nation, not what is good in the short term for the profession or the particular armed Service. Narrow loyalty to the latter can lead to individual and collective deceptions that, in the end, are corrosive of the honor of the profession and all its members. What is good for America is always good for the Armed Forces.

Armed Forces officers carry on an enduring tradition of citizen service to the Nation. Their conduct must honor the ideals and principles enshrined in the Declaration of Independence: *that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness*. The officer's demonstrated character, marked by integrity, courage,

capability, and commitment, must be such that he or she is worthy of following into harm's way. The officer as a public figure must model values of a higher standard than those often celebrated in the popular culture, and they must do so without succumbing to the conceit of believing they are better than their masters, the American people:

*Only when the military articulates and lives up to its highest values can it retain the nobility of the profession of arms. Only when it retains a proper sense of its role in American democratic life does it retain the trust and respect [George C.] Marshall spoke of. Only a military that daily lives out its values and feels its connection to the citizens is a military that engenders the respect and loyalty of the nation and keeps it from being feared.*⁸

Every American Armed Forces officer has entered an ancient and honorable calling, a life of discipline, hardship, and danger. It is, therefore, a heroic life.⁹ At the end of an officer's service, no matter how short or long, the reward will be the satisfaction of knowing that character, competence, and leadership made a difference in his or her own life, the lives of troops led, and the lives of fellow citizens.

Notes

¹ William Lee Miller, *Lincoln's Virtues* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 92.

² George Washington to Thomas Gage, August 19, 1775, in George Washington, *George Washington: Writings*, ed. John H. Rhodehamel (New York: Library of America, 1997), 182.

³ Field Marshal Sir William Slim, "Higher Command in War," 1952 Kermit Roosevelt Lecture, audio tape, Combined Arms Research Library, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS.

⁴ Quoted in J.F.C. Fuller, *The Generalship of Ulysses S. Grant* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), 88.

⁵ John F. Finerty, *Warpath and Bivouac* (Chicago: M.A. Donohue & Co., 1890), 130.

⁶ Thomas B. Buell, *The Quiet Warrior: A Biography of Admiral Raymond A. Spruance* (Boston: Little Brown, 1974), 123-124.

⁷ Matthew Ridgway, *Soldier: The Memoirs of Matthew B. Ridgway as Told to Harold H. Martin* (New York: Harper, 1956), 346.

⁸ Martin L. Cook, "Moral Foundations of Military Service," *Parameters* 30, no. 1 (Spring 2000), 117-129, available at <<http://carlisle-www.army.mil/usawc/Parameters/00spring/cook.htm>>.

⁹ Jules J. Toner, S.J., quoted in Chris Lowney, *Heroic Leadership: Best Practices From a 450-year-old Company that Changed the World* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2003), 49. What was written about a religious order applies equally well to the profession of arms: “one who truly lives under obedience is fully disposed to execute instantly and unhesitatingly whatever is enjoined him [or her], no matter whether it be very hard to do.”