Armed Forces officers are the appointed leaders of the uniformed component of an executive department of government. They are viewed as professionals, contingent upon their demonstrated abilities to deliver competent, reliable, discretionary service of a unique and necessary kind. Because they serve in a hierarchy of rank and authority, all Armed Forces officers are simultaneously leaders and followers, bound by their oath and commission to loyal subordination as well as effective direction of others. They are called upon by overlapping demands to display a number of virtues, some inherent in the terms of their commissions; some reflecting values adopted for all members by their respective departments to ensure faithful reliable service; still others of the sort commonly found in all skilled professions to guarantee the excellence and continued relevance of the discretionary service on which are based the claims for authority to practice their unique skills. The Armed Forces officer is expected to synthesize all these virtues into a harmonious whole, and to practice their application self-consciously, until they become second nature.

The first chapter addressed the expectations expressed in the commission for virtues of patriotism, valor, fidelity, and abilities; the nature and requirements of the constitutional oath; and the admonition for disciplined service explicit in both the commission and oath of office. These are the basis of entry into commissioned service, and they are supplemented and undergirded by other expectations and requirements of service. Among the first the new officer will confront are Service values, promulgated in each case under the authority of the respective Service secretary.
Service Core Values and Military Virtues: A Shared Ethic and Ethos

S.L.A. Marshall attributed the commissioning of the first edition of *The Armed Forces Officer* to the conviction of George C. Marshall “that American military officers, of whatever Service, should share common ground ethically and morally.” Each of the U.S. Services has a set of institutional core values that aim to describe and define what it means to be a Soldier, a Marine, a Sailor, an Airman, or a Coastguardsman. In the aggregate, they might be said to illustrate George Marshall’s conviction.

Each Service expects its members both to exhibit these virtues and to demand them from members who may become lax in their performance. This is what is meant by corporateness in a profession or *esprit de corps* in a military unit. S.L.A. Marshall wrote: “The man who feels the greatest affection for the service in which he bears arms will work most loyally to make his own unit know a rightful pride in its own worth.” He argued that the Marine Corps was most faithful to this principle.

The point is not that these virtues or qualities are absent in the civilian world, but rather that they take on a new and profound meaning in the profession of arms. General John Hackett wrote that the military virtues such as courage, fortitude, and loyalty are functionally indispensable for officers, “not just because they are morally

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Selfless Service
- Honor
- Integrity
- Personal
- Courage
desirable in themselves, but because they contribute to military efficiency.” Officers recognize a set of reciprocal expectations binding each to those with whom they serve. Officership, the practice of being professional officers and leaders, requires an internalization and self-conscious understanding of a personal obligation to the ethos of the profession and to all those who depend upon the quality of their individual service. Substantive similarities among Service values are obvious; apparent differences can for the most part be understood in terms of traditions and outlooks specific to the individual Services.

Service core values are an integral, indeed central part of initial military training in all five Services. They feature prominently in each Service’s presentation of itself to its membership and the public. They represent institutional goals to which all members are expected to aspire in their personal and professional conduct. When internalized and reflected in one’s habitual behavior, values become virtues.

A virtue is a “persisting, reliable and characteristic” feature that produces a disposition in an individual to behave in a certain desirable way. Once a virtue is ingrained in a person, he or she should act naturally in accordance with the value it represents. Knowledge of values is not enough. It is the will to act in accordance with them that transforms a value into a virtue. The profession of arms demands constant self-awareness, self-reflection, and self-criticism of the times and places where better, more virtuous choices should have been made.

For Aristotle, developing a virtue is a matter of habituation: “Moral goodness . . . is the result of habit.” Most drill instructors would not think of themselves as disciples of Aristotle, but in reality they are. It is through repetitive actions that one acquires a virtue. A recruit becomes obedient by obeying the drill instructor, on things large and things small, over and over and over again. An officer becomes virtuous by disciplined and reflective effort to live up to the imperatives of the oath and the commission, the expectations of the Nation, and the obligations of the officer’s service to the Nation.

As stated in the previous chapter, an ethos is more about who you are than it is about what you do. Who you are determines what you do and do not do. The Honor Concept of the Brigade of Midshipmen at the U.S. Naval Academy aptly reflects this basic principle:
- Midshipmen are persons of integrity: They stand for that which is right.
- They tell the truth and ensure that the truth is known. *They do not lie.*
- They embrace fairness in all actions. They ensure that work submitted as their own is their own, and that assistance received from any source is authorized and properly documented. *They do not cheat.*
- They respect the property of others and ensure that others are able to benefit from the use of their own property. *They do not steal.*

The text begins with who Midshipmen are—persons of integrity—and it goes on to describe what they do and what they do not do because they are persons of integrity.

In the U.S. Marine Corps, the admonitory phrase “Marines don’t do that,” spoken by one Marine to another, recalls the common standard and is an outward reflection of an inner virtue. It is premised on a common respect for the reputation of the Corps and a shared will to demand that all members uphold its ideals. Marines don’t do that because they are Marines.

Like the Service values, there are overlapping lists of the critical military virtues. General Hackett spoke of the military life demanding human qualities of “fortitude, integrity, self-restraint, personal loyalty to other persons, and the surrender of the advantage of the individual to a common good.” In a 2014 Veterans Day speech at Georgetown University, Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster, USA, listed the virtues of honor, duty, courage, and loyalty as the basis of a “warrior ethos,” binding members of the profession of arms into a self-conscious community. Paraphrasing Professor Christopher Coker, he stated the warrior ethos “permits servicemen and women to see themselves as part of a community that sustains itself through ‘sacred trust’ and [serves as] a covenant that binds us to one another and to the society we serve.”

The word *covenant* is important. Coker distinguishes between covenants and contracts, writing of the former: “First, they are not limited to specific conditions and circumstances; secondly, they tend to be open-ended and long-lasting; and, thirdly, they rarely involve individual advantage.” Contracts depend on enforceability. “Moral covenants
are different. We adhere to rules because of conscience. We obey the
dictates of our hearts. We don't wish to dishonour ourselves in the eyes
of our moral equals—our friends—and thereby dishonour the unit, the
flag or the great tradition.”

Marines don't do that! One is reminded of
the covenants between God and man.

Chapter 2 described four characteristics common to all profes-
sions: expertise, responsibility, corporateness, and a shared ethic and
ethos. These are all woven through the U.S. profession of arms. The
Service core values themselves constitute much of a shared professional
ethic. Adherence to the oath and commission and the obligation to
deliver reliable, effective, honorable, and efficient service require an
expertise guaranteed only by individual dedication to life-long practice
and learning. Responsibility as an expectation of right action also is
inherent in both the oath and commission. It will be addressed more
fully later, in chapters focused on leadership and command. For now,
it may be said simply that the virtue of responsibility, as a desideratum
of professional service, involves clarity of motivation. It demands that
officers develop the courage to act—to decide, to direct, to follow
through—and to accept accountability for the consequences of the
outcomes of their decisions and actions. Responsibility involves rec-
cognition of an institutional anticipation of right conduct by officers
under all circumstances.

Finally, corporateness involves acknowledgement of the shared
responsibility to maintain and display mutual respect for fellow mem-
bers of the profession, regardless of rank or Service or specialty, ethnic
origin or gender. It involves no less than granting others recognition of
kinship and presumption of good intention, unless there is evidence to
the contrary. Corporateness requires individual insistence on mainte-
nance of high standards by all members, and adds an obligation for the
individual to participate in corporate or institutional learning by shar-
ing his or her own experiences and insights, taking part in professional
discourse to explore new problems or find new solutions to older ones
under new conditions, and observing continuously what others do and
learning from their experiences. All these are reflected in the military
life, in aspiration if not entirely full achievement.

What is significant, then, about the characteristics of a profession,
is how much they are reflected within traditional military virtues and
way of life, an already existing ethic and ethos. Recognition of military service as a profession is achieved, not by the Armed Forces endeavoring to become something other than what they are, so much as by their members living up to the traditional and inherent virtues of military service as they long have been, not because they strive to be recognized as something different, but to live up to their very nature.

Character and Character Development

Discussion of virtues leads naturally to discussion of character and character development, which is the manifestation of the ethic and ethos of the profession of arms. In 1941, General George Marshall told the first graduates of the Army Officer Candidate School that what would enable them to lead men in battle was less their tactical and technical competence, both of which were necessary, or their reputation for courage, but the “previous reputation you have established for fairness, for that high-minded patriotic purpose, that quality of unswerving determination to carry through any military task assigned to you.”

Character consists of the set of ingrained virtues, a complex of value-laden dispositions to act reliably, in a particular way, based on one’s understanding of the circumstances. James Davidson Hunter of the University of Virginia captures the essence of character succinctly:

What, then, can be said about this thing we call character? The most basic element of character is moral discipline. Its most essential feature is the inner capacity for restraint—an ability to inhibit oneself in one’s passions, desires, and habits within the boundaries of a moral order. Moral discipline, in many respects, is the capacity to say “no”; its function, to inhibit and constrain personal appetites on behalf of a greater good. The idea of a greater good points to a second element, moral attachment. Character, in short, is defined not just negatively but positively as well. It reflects the affirmation of our commitments to a larger community, the embrace of an ideal that attracts us, draws us, animates us, inspires us.
Though he makes no reference here to the military, Hunter in effect points to the link between the character of an individual military member and the ethos of the profession of arms.

There are no “time outs” from exemplary character for officers. As General Marshall told the Officer Candidate School graduates:

Never for an instant can you divest yourselves of the fact that you are officers. On the athletic field, at the club, in civilian clothes, or even at home on leave, the fact that you are a commissioned officer in the Army imposes a constant obligation to higher standards than might ordinarily seem normal or necessary for your personal guidance. A small dereliction becomes conspicuous, at times notorious, purely by reason of the fact that the individual concerned is a commissioned officer.  

Ultimately, it is faithfulness to self-understanding that is the basis of an officer’s individual integrity and sense of duty—the determination to be, in the words of General Douglas MacArthur, “What you ought to be. What you can be. What you must be.” How do institutional values come to be reflected in individual virtues? They do so, borrowing an old line, in the way an aspiring musician gets to Carnegie Hall: by “practice, practice, practice.” Effective, reliable, honorable, and efficient service is the officer’s obligation to and the expectation of the Nation. Effective service is produced by repetitive training to standard. Exercise of the virtues is intended to produce behavioral habits that result in moral-ethical reliability, guaranteeing honorable and efficient service.

Character development involves training the will as well as the intellect. It is no accident that the U.S. Service academies have long invested considerable time, talent, and resources in character development programs as key elements in their overall effort to form young civilians into future military officers who will be men and women of character. More than the other uniformed Services, the Marine Corps grounds its institution explicitly on the character transformation it produces through intensive indoctrination of officer and enlisted aspirants. In the foreword to Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 6-11, Leading Marines, General Carl Mundy called character transformation
“the education of the heart and of the mind.” As the manual itself relates, “Self-image is at the heart of the Marine Corps—a complex set of ideals, beliefs, and standards that define our Corps. Our selfless dedication to and elevation of the institution over self is uncommon elsewhere.”

Contemporary practitioners of character development generally focus their efforts on children and young adults and not on mature men and women whose character has been formed years before and for whom it is often too late to form or develop their character anew. Mature adults can be reminded of the values, qualities, characteristics, and virtues that constitute individual or institutional norms or expectations, but whether they choose to act in accordance with the tenets of character, or contrary to them, remains a function of free will—and disposition. As one distinguished retired senior officer stated about his peers who commit various offenses, “They know it is wrong, but they do it anyway.” Their weakness is one of will, not understanding. Only focused individual effort, reflection, self-assessment, and a conscious effort to do better will lead formed adults to modify their behavior.

Moral-ethical reliability is vital, because, as General John Vessey—a first sergeant at Anzio in World War II who rose to be Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the 1980s—put it bluntly in the 1984 commencement address at the Naval War College:

There will not be any tribunal to judge your actions at the height of battle; there are only the hopes of the citizenry who are relying upon your integrity and skill. They may well criticize you later amid the relative calm of victory or defeat. But there is a critical moment in crisis or battle when those you lead and the citizens of the nation can only trust that you are doing what is right. And you develop that concept through integrity.

Leaders and Followers

While officers exist largely to exercise authority over subordinates, it is also a defining characteristic of military service in the United States that every uniformed member of the Armed Forces is responsible and accountable to a superior, normally more than one. Armed Forces
officers exist in a professional hierarchy. Professional loyalty between leaders and followers must be assumed, as must fundamental integrity.

It is in the superior's interest to create an environment in which honest communication is the norm, in which discourse is forthright, and mutual expectations for candor are clear to all. Superior officers have an interest in honest communication, because they very often depend upon the perceptions of subordinates to form their own understanding and, of course, they rely on intelligent and disciplined obedience from subordinates to achieve their goals. Intelligent obedience requires both mutual understanding and some sympathy, both of which are enhanced by dialogue between leader and follower. The superior who values the perspective of subordinates must create a space in which it is possible for subordinates to express doubt or disagreement without prejudice, and without the superior fearing a loss of authority and the intermediate distance between levels of responsibility that enables objectivity and enhances authority. Frequently, discourse can produce better-informed and more nuanced solutions. At least it can enhance mutual understanding. For the follower, forthright communication is an obligation of loyal subordination and discipline.

Subordinate officers who have the opportunity to address their superiors must be both willing and knowledgeable about how to speak truth to authority. Sometimes this carries risks. Retired Air Force General Charles Boyd told the 2006 graduating class of the Air University that he knew it was hard to oppose “strong willed bosses, even when you’re certain you are right. . . . But,” he went on, “this is the only professional—indeed ethical—course available to you. In the autumn of your years . . . you will be proudest of those times you took the risk to do the right thing and not the expedient. And you will be most ashamed to recall the times you remained silent when you should have stated your mind.”

There are some useful techniques to ease entry into a challenging dialogue. Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Peter Pace, USMC, learned early on to enter dialogue with superiors by asking questions—by seeking the commander's superior insight so as better to understand the issues. Pace also emphasizes the importance of the superior demonstrating his openness to inquiry, acknowledging a good question, and showing willingness to explain how the issues
raised appear from the boss's perspective. This takes time, and ought to be the default approach for the senior officer. Sometimes all that time allows is a simple, “you have your orders.” The subordinate should understand and accept that reality.

A key element of subordinate success is maintaining a professional demeanor that accepts as an opening premise that the superior commander is guided by good intentions, has greater experience, far wider responsibilities, as well as many sources of information not available to subordinates. That is, after all, one meaning of the corporateness in a profession—reciprocal respect among practitioners. Subordinates who challenge their superiors should be self-aware, prepared to acknowledge their understanding may be incomplete or misinformed, accept that their motivations may be misunderstood, and offer their judgments not as indictments but as an honest attempt to further the common effort. Subordinates must keep in mind that the measure of any specific mission is its contribution to the total effort, not immediate convenience or cost to their particular unit. Sometimes, when confronted with a problematic tasking, a good approach is to offer a better alternative to achieve the same or more productive result, rather than outright rejection of the superior’s immediate vision.

Central Virtues

Four basic virtues are central to the character of Armed Forces officers: discipline, courage, competence, and self-sacrifice (sometimes called selfless service).

Discipline is listed first, because the commission and oath to the Constitution call for it. The officer is admonished to obey the orders of the President and superior officers acting in accordance with the laws of the United States. The oath requires submission to and support of the division of authority and responsibility laid down in the Constitution. In the broader society today, discipline seems to be somewhat out of fashion as a limit upon freedom of action, but it is essential to the reliability of a military force.

In his General Order of January 1, 1776, General George Washington wrote:
An Army without Order, Regularity & Discipline, is no better than a Commission'd Mob. . . it is Subordination & Discipline (the Life and Soul of an Army) which next under providence, is to make us formidable to our enemies, honorable in ourselves, and respected in the world; and herein is to be shown the Goodness of the Officer [emphasis added].

One hundred sixty-seven years later, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, in a letter to his son, then a cadet at West Point, wrote: “We sometimes use the term ‘soul of an army.’ That soul is nothing but discipline, and discipline is simply the certainty that every man will obey orders promptly, cheerfully and effectively.”

Obedience may sometimes allow discretion as to detail, but reliable service as a basis of mutual trust will not dispense with enthusiastic compliance. As Eisenhower also wrote, “The one thing you are going to depend upon is a certain knowledge that every soldier in your unit will do what you tell him, whether you are watching him or not.”

Courage, of course, is the obvious virtue for the warrior. The Armed Forces officer requires the courage to dare, the courage to endure, the courage to keep one’s head in the midst of chaos and uncertainty, “when everyone around is losing theirs.” The officer requires the courage to decide and act. Physical courage is a sine qua non for the officer, as war is a dangerous business. But equally important is moral courage. This is the courage to speak truth to authority, and the courage to act and then to be accountable—the courage to order another Soldier, or a lot of other Soldiers, Marines, Sailors, Airmen, or Coastguardsmen, to take some action that will cost some, sometimes many of them, their lives.

Competence in the necessary skills of whatever position held is the virtue that, with discipline, makes the Armed Forces a reliable instrument providing security to the Nation and leads to successful accomplishment of missions assigned. It reflects the expertise that is the basis of the officer’s claim for professional status and the grant of authority for discretionary application of the Armed Forces officer’s unique skills. An incompetent force is a threat to the Nation’s security. An incapable officer, even one with an otherwise matchless character, is a threat to the Nation and to the force in which he or she serves.
To ensure a competent force, Armed Forces officers have the dual responsibility of training those under their authority so they are prepared on the day of battle, and engaging in continuous personal learning by study and reflection so they themselves are fit to command when that day arrives. In the American Civil War, Union Brigadier General C.F. Smith, an old regular, summed up his philosophy for Lew Wallace, a Union general and later the author of *Ben Hur*, when Wallace asked his advice about a proffered promotion:

> Battle is the ultimate to which the whole life’s labor of an officer should be directed. He may live to the age of retirement without seeing a battle; still, he must always be getting ready for it exactly as if he knew the hour of the day it is to break upon him. And then, whether it come late or early, he must be willing to fight—he must fight.  

To be considered professionals, officers must be expert in their job. They must continually extend their technical and applicatory knowledge and the skills upon which their authority in their organization and value to the Service rest. In the early days of the Army School of Advanced Military Studies, students immersed in the Howard and Paret translation of *On War* and a hundred other books, received two important pieces of advice at the end of their year of study. Brigadier General Huba Wass de Czege, the founding director, told them that the first thing they needed to do when they got to their unit was to qualify as “expert” with their weapon and “max” the PT (physical training) test. General Barry McCaffrey, one of his generation’s most distinguished combat officers, told the graduates coming to his command that when he called them to the operations map in his tactical operations center, it was not for a discussion of Clausewitz. He expected the graduates to be experts in their practical business—to be competent in the discretionary application of the profession's specialized knowledge.

Finally, there is *self-sacrifice*, or selfless service. Self-sacrifice is a measure of commitment to a cause as opposed to a simple search for martyrdom. In 1980, Herman Wouk delivered his second Spruance Lecture at the Naval War College, titled “Sadness and Hope: Some Thoughts on Modern Warfare.” He offered reflections on Israeli Colonel Jonathan Netanyahu, commander of the Israeli raid on Entebbe, who
was the only Israeli fatality in that operation, and Commander Walter Williams, a U.S. Navy officer Wouk had met on an earlier trip to the college. Williams, a pilot, had been killed at sea in a training accident. Wouk reflected on the apparent futility of Williams’s death compared to Netanyahu’s, pointing out that Williams had survived numerous combat missions over Vietnam. Speaking of Williams, Wouk asked, “What did he achieve with this accidental death in routine operations?” He answered:

*I’ll tell you what he did—he served. He was there. This man of the highest excellence submerged himself, his life, in this big destructive machine which is our solace and our protection, knowing full well that whether he flew combat missions or routine operations he was at risk. He gave up all the high-priced opportunities in this rich country . . . and he served.*

Notes

2. Ibid., 164–165.


15 Carl E. Mundy, Jr., Commandant of the Marine Corps, January 3, 1995, foreword, in Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 6-11.

16 Ibid., 22.

17 See, for example, the work of the Character Education Partnership at <www.character.org>; or the Character Counts program of the Josephson Institute at <http://charactercounts.org/home/index.html>.


24 Ibid.

25 From the poem “If,” with apologies to Rudyard Kipling.
