

An Ethic without Heroes

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Almost 70 years ago, Rear Adm Albert Gleaves raised a toast to the Navy's traditions. "Certainly, it is our duty to keep these traditions alive," he said, "and to pass them on untarnished to those who come after us." If Admiral Gleaves were alive today, it is likely he would be concerned with polishing some tarnished traditions. During the past two years, revelations of sexual harassment and other misconduct have brought discredit to the Navy and the reputation of its officers. As a result, professional ethics is—now more than ever—an important factor in the education of an officer. Long after Tailhook becomes a footnote in the history books, our response to it will be having a profound effect on the practice of leadership.

For a naval officer, ethics is not academic; it is a discipline applied to everyday decision making. It is a source of inspiration, encouraging us to remain faithful to it when the temptation to compromise is great. We rely on our leaders to make wise choices in difficult moments. For an officer, then, devotion to the professional ethic must be equal to his or her devotion to subordinates, because to fail one is to fail them both.

Like the professional ethic of many old institutions, ours has developed over the years and is rich in tradition. In 1992, however, the Navy adopted an official set of core values and introduced it into the fleet. For the first time in its history, the Navy codified the qualities it finds most desirable in its personnel and in its leaders: courage, honor, and commitment. Indeed, these are timeless virtues, but what is missing, and what this philosophy will need if it is to accomplish lasting good, is tradition—heroes and a history of its own.

"Fortune," said Winston Churchill, "is rightly malignant to those who break with the customs of the past." What began in Las Vegas two years ago has been called a watershed by military and civilian leaders. But watershed is a dangerous word. It places most of our history and tradition on the wrong side of a time line dominated by a single tragic event, and it reinforces the viewpoint of skeptics that ethics is a political expediency in the wake of a scandal. It deprives us of what the past has to offer.

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For more than two centuries, officers have been expected to treat others with dignity and respect because they defend and represent a society based on an assumption of individual worth. The crises that plague the Navy are not the results of a flawed standard of conduct, but rather they are the work of a few officers who failed to keep faith with a 200-year-old ethic—either by their own actions or by tacit approval of the actions of others. Only an ethic steeped in history provides the means to put these failures in perspective.

The characters and lives of our great leaders dwarf the indiscretions of lesser men. It was, for example, George Washington's reputation for fairness that established him as the preeminent military officer in America even before the Revolution. Historians agree that he gained not merely the obedience, but the respect of the troops he led:

He had it because of his actions, not because he was an officer, nor even because his was a deferential society in which men looked up to their social and economic betters. . . . Today, officers are entitled to respect because they are officers. Even so, there are varying degrees of regard, determined by the manner in which superior officers conduct themselves. In contrast, the view in Washington's time was somewhat the reverse: the man by his character and performance gave dignity to the office; the office was less likely to give luster to the man. . . . Washington implicitly acknowledged the conditions for respect when he cautioned his juniors to "remember that it is the actions and not the commission that make the officer—and that there is more expected of him than the title."¹

This is still true, but not simply because the Navy has adopted a set of abstract words to define an officer's character. Rather, it is true because our history spotlights leaders—from George Washington and John Paul Jones to Vice Adm James Stockdale—who have set the example and the standard for us, by their actions as well as their words. They provide us with a sense of history, which will help us "avoid the self-indulgent error of seeing [ourselves] in a predicament so unprecedented, so unique, as to justify . . . making an exception to law, custom, or morality in favor of [ourselves]."²

"To sustain a culture," says Ernest Boyer, president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, "you need points of common memory, tradition, and experience. If we don't have those, it's impossible to intellectually and socially engage with one another."³ The service is a culture unto itself—a reflection of the society from which it draws its people, but with its own unique ethic. To sustain that culture, we must draw on our unique memories, traditions, and experiences—our history.

It is paradoxical that our solution to what the core values instructor guide calls the fragmented experience of American youth⁴ is as devoid of heroes and spirit as that experience itself. Educators partly blame the lack of role models for declining student performance and a dearth of values—yet our adopted ethic makes no reference to men and women who have been such models.

Our earliest leaders—General Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison among them—believed the qualities most desirable in citizens of the republic would flourish only if there were examples to emulate. They purposely and methodically created such examples.⁵ In a nation without a long-established military or political aristocracy, example became the means by which new leaders were developed.

By weaving history into our ethic we put life into it. “Seldom do [soldiers] fight for causes or abstract values,” writes Col Anthony E. Hartle, “though they will fight for a strong leader whom they know well.”⁶ We must ensure that the values we fight for are not abstract.

Some might argue that history is not integral to maintaining an ethic; if it were, it should have prevented the indiscretions of the past two years. But any ethic becomes weakened if it is reduced to platitudes. At the Naval Academy, for example, John Paul Jones’s caution that an officer must be more than a “capable mariner” is still grist for memorization by midshipmen. But no parallels are drawn between his worlds and the development of an officer’s character. The words are history, and for many, history has grown irrelevant. While the qualities Jones found necessary in an officer—tact, patience, justice, firmness, and charity—are coincidentally the same qualities lacking among the offenders in all of our recent scandals, we seem to have focused little attention on them. Instead, we have rewritten them and, in the process, stripped away their eloquence and the historical significance of their author.

The question we face is whether an institution that has made history by overcoming adversity will now overcome adversity by ignoring its history. And if so, at what price? Admittedly, a doctrinaire emphasis on ethics is better than no emphasis at all. At the very least, unacceptable behavior may be eliminated. But in a profession where leaders accept responsibility for the welfare of others, merely acceptable conduct is not enough. We might eliminate demeaning behavior toward women, for example, or educate officers about racism. It would be far better, however, to produce leaders who are able to recognize injustice without having to be sensitized to each of its guises, who are able to respect the dignity of others without conscious effort.

To do this, we must first eliminate the notion of statutory ethics, translated into a policy of “get on board with our values or get out.” Laws may be a reflection of the values they uphold, but they are not a substitute for the values themselves. The Navy has a set of regulations in place to enforce its standards. Those who cannot meet the standards are now,

as they have always been, subject to punishment under the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ). Unfortunately, there is a punitive tone to the representation of our new core values. By preaching a philosophy of life as if we are administering the law, we obscure the purpose and meaning of both. As Colonel Hartle points out:

Some might suggest that these rules are part of the professional military ethic [PME]. The UCMJ, however, applies to all members of the military, not just the most obviously professional component. It is more comparable to the laws of the state in relation to other professionals, which apply to professionals and laymen alike. Nonetheless, the UCMJ defines honorable conduct in a negative sense by establishing what members of the military will not do. The PME, on the other hand, emphasizes ideals and positive aspects of conduct. Without question, the morality that shapes the PME also underlies the UCMJ, but the two guides for conduct are quite different.⁷

Once established as ideals, standards are free to become obligations, imposed not by external forces, but by personal pride. Without heroes, however, ideals are easily reduced to ideology. The second step toward reaffirming a truly effective ethic for ourselves is to ensure that it is seen as part of our history, not a deviation from it. By declaring unconscionable behavior no longer acceptable, we imply that at some time it was—and do a disservice to the countless officers before us who might otherwise serve as examples.

Character development must go hand in hand with an understanding of our history—not simply battles and dates but the trials and personal philosophies of past Navy leaders. Establishing that historical camaraderie increases the sense of obligation to the ethic, since compromise now means becoming a lesser member among greats. It provides examples, and as Admiral Stockdale wrote, the knowledge that there is no situation so unique as to warrant compromise.

Finally, a historical perspective provides a healthy dose of humility. It is humbling to remember many of those past members of the profession whose lives defined the word *character*. Certainly, humility is, to some small degree at least, a prerequisite for selflessness, and selflessness is at the heart of our profession.

The future of professional ethics in the Navy is not especially bleak, nor is it particularly bright. We have taken the first steps toward reaffirming integrity and respect for human dignity as essential qualities in our leaders. The danger is that now, satisfied with a clear policy, we will stop, and fail to put spirit into the words. Words without the power to inspire cannot provide effective guidance for an ethical way of life. Woodrow Wilson believed that no one can lead “. . . who does not act, whether it be consciously or unconsciously, under the impulse of a profound sympathy with those whom he leads—a sympathy which is insight—an insight which is of the heart rather than of the intellect.”⁸

Words and policies appeal to the intellect, but appealing to hearts—and developing them—requires developing a sense of pride and purpose that only other hearts can accomplish.

Notes

1. Don Higginbotham, *George Washington and the American Military Tradition* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1985), 16–17.
2. James B. Stockdale, “Moral Leadership,” *US Naval Institute Proceedings*, September 1980, 87.
3. “What Americans Should Know,” *U. S. News & World Report*, 28 September 1987, 86.
4. *Navy Core Values Instructor Guide*, Section G (Background Information).
5. Garry Wills, *Cincinnatus: George Washington & the Enlightenment* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1984), 111, 129.
6. Anthony E. Hartle, *Moral Issues in Military Decision Making* (Lawrence, Kans.: University Press of Kansas, 1989), 152.
7. *Ibid.*, 52.
8. Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Cycles of American History* (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), 430.