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AMBITION AND CAREERISM

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Presented at the
Joint Services Conference on Professional Ethics (JSCOPE)
National Defense University
12-13 January 1989

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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Aristotle confesses that the Greeks do not have a word for "ambition" except in the perjorative sense. He writes briefly on the subject in the fourth book of his Nichomachean Ethics. The philosopher is less interested in constructing ethical theory from the standpoint of "right" versus "wrong" than he is in analyzing the idea of the virtues or excellences that pertain to human character. We should strive, he says, to perfect our character by acquiring those virtues, for we are not born with them but are rather by nature fitted to receive them through habit and education. In contrast to the intellectual virtues such as wisdom and devotion to science, Aristotle talks of the moral virtues in terms of a mean or balance between two extremes, both of which are vices--one of excess, the other of defect. Thus in his leading example courage, especially military courage, the mean lies between two extremes, cowardice and rashness. Just where the mean lies in the moral virtues, he says, must be determined by reason.

In classifying the virtues, Aristotle arrives in due course to ambition.¹ About the word Philodoxía (the same word in modern Greek means "ambition") an aura of disapproval hangs much as it still clings to our word "ambition" or "ambitious." Shakespeare's Anthony says to the Romans:

The noble Brutus
Hath told you Caesar was ambitious:
If it were so, it was a grievous fault,²
And grievously hath Caesar answered it.

For "ambition" in the honorable sense, Aristotle uses the term "the Nameless Virtue" - it is indeed a virtue and has to do with seeking and attaining deserved honor. The excess of that which makes for this excellence leads us to grasp at honors of which we are not worthy and at the expense of others. The defect of it we find in the poor-spirited man, the small-minded man who stands in contrast to Aristotle's ideal, the magnanimous or great-souled man. It is his analysis of the concept of the magnanimous man that leads Aristotle to the subject of ambition. The great-souled man seeks honor at the hands of those worthy to confer it; the vainglorious man goes after honors and position he does not deserve, while the poor-spirited man does not seek honor because he has a small opinion of himself. The poor-spirited man has no get-up-and-go as Russell Baker's mother would say, she who constantly reminded him when he was a small boy, he tells us in his autobiography, that it is his duty to "make something of himself."³ Aristotle admired men who "made something of themselves" and would be puzzled at any military officer worth his salt today who would not want to be a general or an admiral, who would not work hard and well to attain that rank, accepting the honors as well as the responsibilities that go with it.

In U.S. military circles today, the question has been revived: what is the difference between an honorable, useful drive to advance in one's career, and, by contrast, that bad thing called "Careerism." Back in 1978 in the era of U.S. post-Vietnam syndrome, the book titled Crisis in Command by Gabriel and Savage,⁴ caused an excited stir in the Pentagon. The book's authors

charged the armed services with ethical deterioration and identified "careerism" as one of the causes of effects of that decline. Prominent among factors alleged to have led to the development of this vice was rapid rotation in the Army during the Vietnam conflict, six-month tours so that allegedly an officer could include combat service in his record. Such officers, it was claimed, were seeking preferment and advancement in the wrong way.

Today we see the Vietnam era drifting into history, but once again the charge of "careerism" in the U.S. officer corps has raised its head, this time in particular by two chiefs of service in the armed forces. In the Spring of 1988, General Alfred M. Gray, Marine Corps Commandant, and General Larry B. Welch, Air Force Chief of Staff, expressed concern with "careerism" in their services. According to Richard Halloran's report in The New York Times (25 April, 1988), headed "Military Careers: Air Force and Marines Battle "'Ticket-Punchers'", the term "ticket-punchers" is firmly tied to "careerism."⁵ General Gray is quoted as saying repeatedly that he is "determined to stamp out careerism in the Marine Corps." General Welch made his position clear in an article in the journal Airman (April, 1986) stating that many of his officers had become more concerned with attending schools, taking on additional duties and persuading generals to endorse their annual evaluation reports.⁶ "Job performance," said General Welch, "seemed less and less the measure of success." According to General Welch, the new Air Force evaluation system is designed to remove guess work and put the most important, even the sole emphasis on the officer's performance on his assigned job, on the

tour he is doing now, not the tour he is aiming for on completion of his or her present assignment. At a post-lecture photo session 5 December, 1988 at the Naval War College, General Welch reiterated his support of this position. "You're asking the wrong question," he said, "if you're asking what plans for advancement these young officers should make as they look down the road to their next tour. Their focus should be on top performance now and not on determining what set of future positions or career steps will ensure success."

According to the Halloran story, it appears that "careerism" has been less of a problem in the Navy. Sea duty is a good way of advancement in that service, and among naval officers with ambition (whether in the honorable or perjorative sense of the word) there is a feeling that going to graduate school or even to the prestigious Naval War College may get in the way of sea command and more rapid professional advancement. (We may note in passing that the present Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Crowe, moved away from submarines to study for a PhD at Princeton.)

At this point we might look back a bit at some great captains of the second World War. Had he known General Douglas MacArthur, Aristotle would have considered him a paradigm example of ambition, in the sense that MacArthur sought honors and was indeed worthy of them. What we do not know is what the philosopher would have made of Colonel MacArthur's mother writing to Secretary of War Baker in October, 1917, requesting the Secretary to make every effort to see that her son was promoted to brigadier general.⁷ But we can guess that Aristotle would also have found a place for the General

in his Poetics where Aristotle writes of the man "of great reputation" who, by some "error of judgment" (Hamartia) overreaches himself in such a way as to encompass his downfall.⁸ Not that the General fell very far; after his recall by President Truman from the Far East he faded away in a blaze of glory and honor, and that is what Aristotle's man who possesses "the nameless virtue" seeks.

General Dwight Eisenhower may not have had quite the same sense of honor due him as MacArthur had, but he had a weather eye out for career. His biographer, Stephen Ambrose, states that after his 1928 tour here at the Army War College, Fort McNair, "He (Eisenhower) wanted to choose the general staff, as service ⁱⁿ that was a major plus in an officer's career".⁹ In his excellent essay "Is Ambition Unprofessional?" (Army Magazine, July, 1988), Lloyd Matthews, a retired Army colonel and editor of Parameters, cites General George Marshall's biographer Forrest Pogue recording that "He (Marshall) was able and ambitious." His father was equally ambitious in his son's behalf, pulling all the strings he could to get the VMI ^{graduate} his lieutenant's commission.¹⁰

General Joseph Stilwell, who saw more front-line action than any other U.S. four-star general, may be considered as exhibiting the virtue of ambitiousⁿ only in a Pickwickian sense. Standing as he did at a slight angle to the universe, "Vinegar Joe" declared that "The higher a monkey climbs the tree, the more you see of his behind."¹¹ Indeed, Stilwell as a youth had no intention of going to West Point. His father had planned to send him to Yale, but changed his mind when young Joe was involved in a schoolboy prank that resulted in the inadvertent slugging of the principal of

Yonkers High School. Joe's father decided that his son needed training in discipline and made arrangements for appointment to the Military Academy. According to Barbara Tuchman, Stilwell's biographer, Dr. Stilwell conveyed the news to his athletically inclined son in a soothing way, telling him, "There is a nice place up the Hudson where you can play tennis."¹²

We Americans are a success-oriented people, have been since the days of Ben Franklin, Joseph Epstein's model of American ambition in his book titled with that virtue.¹³ Old Ben has left us all kinds of little notes, advice enlivened with humor, on how to get ahead, arrive at the top, how to make one's pile with prudent honesty, how benevolently to share the proceeds of our success with those less fortunate (and perhaps less ambitious) than ourselves, keeping a decent share of the profit for our personal benefit, for, after all, we owe it to ourselves. The opposite of success is failure, and we U.S. Americans have short patience with failure. That is one reason why the trauma of Vietnam hit us where it hurts. We failed. But we are not supposed to fail! Navy fighter pilot Jim Stockdale, hermetically transformed by more than seven years confinement in Hanoi, half of them in solitary and under torture, emerged from captivity declaring among other things that the American officer must learn how to deal with failure as well as success.

On careerism, I asked a number of officers at the Naval War College how they construed the term. Many prefaced their remarks with "Service before Self." One officer said careerism means climbing to the top by stepping on the faces of others. A second

saw nothing wrong with being ambitious and concerned with one's career in military service; after all, isn't it a matter of doing the best for yourself that you can without injury to other? Still another admitted that he could not define "careerism" but, like the eminent jurist on pornography, he knew it when he saw it. Others mentioned "ticket-punching" and when asked to clarify the meaning of that well-worn phrase said that it was trying to get those assignments reputed to be the fastest tracks to advancement and promotion. Still another said that careerism was making sure of your visibility, seeing to it that high-ranking superiors notice you in such a way that when the promotion board meets and your name comes up, someone will remember you favorably. Others spoke in terms of deep drafts, screening for major commands, aiming for executive officer on cruiser or carrier, getting a squadron command. A few spoke of the Washington tour as a necessary call on the Wizard of Oz without which it was impossible to follow the yellow brick road back to advancement and ensured promotion. More than one officer spoke of what seemed 180 degree turns in the matter of helping advancement along. An Air Force officer, having listened to his Chief of Staff talk about the new evaluation forms which would place primary emphasis on doing outstanding work on current assignment, recalled that when he entered the service a dozen or so years before, officers were encouraged to "fill the square" by completing advanced education in the civilian as well as in the military sector. "I personally received," said this officer, "a letter from a general officer, urging me to obtain a master's degree in order to remain

competitive in achieving my full potential." He added, "I followed his advice." A Marine colonel wrote a paper for me from which I will quote at some length:

If I were to be asked to list the primary negative influence in the officer corps today, I would unhesitatingly nominate "careerism" as being at the root of the problem of ethical shortfalls. In its essence, careerism can be described as the subscription by an officer to that school of thought described by Gabriel as the "entrepreneurial model." Such an officer believes he has a "job" to perform within a corporate bureaucracy, that the true measure of success is how far and how fast he can climb to what he perceives as the ladder of success. His credo is risk avoidance and promotion of self, his loyalty is entirely personal, his ethics situational. . . . If he manages to maneuver himself into a command position, he uses his subordinates to advance his career with concomitantly little understanding or appreciation of his role as leader, teacher and example to his junior officers. . . . The tragedy of the careerist is that he is self-replicating, for he drives off many of the very type of officer needed in the military services.¹⁴

Let me end this roll call of officers who helped me think through their understanding of the meaning of careerism by citing two brief opinions offered. One officer reminded his seminar that many of the junior officers on line for promotion will be judged by superiors who may themselves have come up by way of careerism and ticket-punching, whether you take these terms in their good, bad, or neutral sense. The second made the sensible remark that we should be careful not to label as "careerism" the very natural and military useful urge in an officer "to be where the action is."

In times of hot war, it is fairly well known, promotion and advancement come quickly to competent military officers many of whom in times of ~~piece~~^{peace} have been chafing under the bonds of slow promotion. In peacetime, some services have certain advantages

over others. Navy and Coast Guard operate their ships and aircraft in ways not wholly different from wartime deployment. So even in peacetime it may be hard for their officers to find time to go to good graduate schools or war colleges. Other services, or maybe all of the services, may have a problem in combating the inevitable erosion of martial spirit in an era of prolonged, though uneasy peace. "Peace" here is taken to mean the diminution of clear and present danger of superpower conflict, not the jabs and jolts the nation may expect continuously to receive over the years to come from smaller powers and their agents ill-disposed to the United States. As we look down the road to a bumpy peace that may extend over into the twenty-first century, will the problem of "Careerism" in the bad sense, grow progressively more difficult to get rid of, ⁿ liked ^A as it is by many analysts to the entrepreneurial rather than to the military ethos? In his Critique of Judgement, Kant says:

War, provided it is waged with order and due respect for the sacred rights of civilians, has something sublime about it, while too long a peace may lead to a purely commercial spirit.¹⁵

U.S. military officers would not go quite that far, yet they might admit that Kant, who had a scholar's love of peace, has a point there. One can devise just so many training programs and missile-tending exercises. To which, pessimists among critics of U.S. peacetime military have added that the present danger is not so much from the military threat represented by the U.S.S.R., but the prospect of continuing support into the 21st century a 2,000,000 personnel armed force backed by immense hardware of unbelievable sophistication, backed in turn by a 15 battle-group navy. How to

avoid, ask the pessimists,--the sagging of this gigantic apparatus under its own weight. How to escape the erosion of morale--not to speak of morals--among the personnel of ^o mighty military arm with no pellucidly clear idea of where it wants to go? How to clean house, keep a taut ship, continue the march, without ambition and careerism, in the worst sense, from becoming all but inevitable.

In reply, one might observe that some countries seem to run armed forces of high proficiency and morale that have not fought a war for centuries. How do they do it? Granted that Sweden and Switzerland, in size and demography, are incommensurable with the United States, might we put the question to military representatives of those countries? I asked two colonels about it, one Swedish, one Swiss. How do you maintain high morale in your military forces in a matrix of part and on-going peace? The Swedish colonel promptly named two factors--not the only ones, but the most important. First, there is the threat, the perpetual shadow cast by the great neighbor to the East. Second, the continuity between the military and civilian communities in his nation, assisted in large part by required national service from all sectors of the population. The Swiss officer, a retired colonel of reserves, a professor at the University of Zurich, stated that his country had its threats as well; that, for example, of being caught in the middle of the powers clashing in the second World War, and a similar situation represented by the Cold War which, fortunately did not break out into hot conflict. Like the Swedish officer he cited the close weave of the military into the civilian community of his country. "Switzerland does not

have an army; it is an army!"¹⁶ Every male between the ages of 18 and 45, whatever his station, is obligated to perform annual military service. Perhaps this is not the time or place to recall John Stuart Mill's conviction, expressed during his Parliament years 1866-68 that an all-volunteer force is regressive ^{attracting} attacking to its enlisted ranks the least privileged members of society. This opinion might be countered by the sobering thought that the Vietnam experience showed us that you cannot draft into military service an unwilling middle class. But the time for reconsideration of obligatory nation^{al} service may yet come for us, possibly as early as the turn of the century.

As far as the U.S. military is concerned, I believe the pessimists overestimate the threat of moral erosion from within, thought perhaps we can learn to reflect on some points raised in their jeremiads. In the enlisted ranks, the all-volunteer force is working better for us than the early troubles led us to expect. So far as this civilian observer can determine, on the basis of limited observation, the morale of the U.S. officer corps is, on the whole, high. Just as there is honorable ambition, a desired trait in an officer, so there is "good" careerism as well as the more talked-about "bad." The legitimate desire for personal advancement, as Colonel Matthews says, is a vital psychic fuel in military organizations. I would add that you cannot put a mix of high-spirited, success-oriented U.S. military officers together and expect them to trudge along quietly without interest in ambition or career. The dialectic of the situation, as philosophers would say, derives from the fact that U.S. Americans are a highly

individualistic lot (Tocqueville notices this trait not long after he landed in Newport in 1831) and it must be quite a struggle for energetic young American officers of superior quality to suppress those drives in themselves in a military context where service comes before self, community before the ^ego, represents the ideal. / ego
Dialectical tension between individual drive for advancement and requirements of service before self need not be entirely disadvantageous either to the individual officer or his or her military service. For it is the tension of opposites, as Heracleitus said thousands of years ago, that keeps the world in being, that generates the stretched string vibration of waking, not sleep, not death but life.

NOTES

1. Aristotle, Nichomachean Ethics, Book IV, Ch 4.
2. Shakespeare, Julius Caesar, Act III, ii, 82-85.
3. Russell Baker, Growing Up, N.Y., St. Martins, 1982.
4. R. A. Gabriel and Savage, Crisis in Command, N.Y., Hill & Wang, 1978.
5. New York Times, 25 April, 1938, sec. A, 18.
6. General Karry B. Welch, USAF, "Chief Concerns", Airman, 1988, 22-23.
7. William Manchester, American Caesar: Douglas MacArthur 1880-1964, Boston, Little Brown and Co., 93.
8. Aristotle, Poetics, Ch II, 13, 1953, 8-12.
9. Stephen E. Ambrose, Eisenhower: Soldier, General of the Army, President-Elect, 1890-1952, N.Y. Simon & Shuster, 1983, 87.
10. Colonel Lloyd Matthews, USA (Ret.), "Is Ambition Unprofessional?" Army Magazine, July, 1988.
11. Attributed to Stilwell in New York Times editorial "Rumsfeld's Rules of Ego", 5 Dec. 1988, A 22.
12. Barbara W. Tuchman, Stilwell and the American Experience in China, 1911-1945, N. Bantam Books, 1980, p. 13.
13. Joseph Epstein, Ambition: The Secret Passion, N.Y. E. P. Dutton, 1980.
14. Colonel Michael C. Wholley, USMC, "Careerism and Corporate Ethic," unpublished essay, Naval War College, October 1988.
15. Immanuel Kant, Critique of Judgment, II, 28. John Ladd, a noted Kant scholar, writes, ". . . if you read the surrounding passages, you will see at once that Kant is not approving of war. The attribution of sublimity to it is aesthetic, the feeling of the sublime coming under the aesthetic, like the beautiful, and not under ethics of justice (Rechtslehre). Kant repeatedly says that ethics is not a matter of feeling and so the feeling of the sublime cannot be an ethical ground. . . . But [attribution of the sublime to war] should not be taken as condoning war, morally speaking, any more than the feeling of awe before a hurricane means that one thinks it a good thing. For he (Kant) thinks that war is a violation of human rights, the right to live in peace (liberty). Letter to the author, 22 Dec., 1988.
16. See John A. McPhee, La place de la concorde suidde, N.Y. Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1984.