

THE CHARACTER OF READINESS

Address by Secretary of the Navy John Dalton

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I am very honored to deliver the opening address to the 16th Joint Services Conference on Professional Ethics.

I normally begin all my speeches with a joke, but I don't consider character and ethics to be laughing matters. However, I will point out the irony that when I read the first draft of this speech to my staff, my lawyer^¾the Navy Department's General Counsel^¾was the most enthusiastic in making comments and suggestions to strengthen the speech. This prompted another staff member to joke that the last place to find a lawyer would be at a conference on ethics. So, if there are any lawyers in the audience I wish you would raise your hand now so I can confirm or refute that comment.

In recent years, no one has had more cause or opportunity to think harder or longer about character and professional ethics than the Secretary of the Navy.

That is why I am here today. I have had to think deeply about this subject. I am not a scholar of ethics. I am not a chaplain or clergyman. Although I am active in my church and hold dear to my faith, I do not pretend to be an expert on moral philosophy. I am, instead, a man who was trained in the Naval tradition, had the honor of serving as a naval officer on both active duty and in the reserves, and chose a career in business. Later in life, I became involved in government, and I now have the great fortune to have fulfilled a dream when I was appointed by President Clinton to serve as the Secretary of the Navy.

I know it is great fortune to serve as Secretary of the Navy, because I know the heart of the Naval Service^¾wherein lies the character and ethics that have been our traditional values.

I am here today because I believe that the ideas you are examining and JSCOPE's existence as a professional seminar are vitally important for the individual well being of the members of our Armed Services and for the overall **readiness** of all military forces.

The question of military character and ethics is not an abstract topic for discussion. It is a **readiness issue**. It is a readiness issue because without ethical leadership in our Armed Forces, there can be no trust by subordinates in the orders of their superiors. There can be none of the special *esprit* or bonding that we consider essential to the teamwork required for combat. And there would be little confidence by the American people in the rightness of our actions. Without trust and confidence, there cannot be an effective military for America.

This is not a belief that came to me upon my appointment as Secretary. Rather, it is something I learned while a midshipman at the Naval Academy over thirty-three years ago, struggling to learn the principles of military and naval leadership. It is a belief that I have retained throughout life, along with a number of effective ideas about leadership that have served me in good stead^¾ both in the military and civilian world.

I view the ethics of moral behavior as one of the cornerstones of military leadership. The trust required for effective leadership requires a standard of behavior and the development of personal character that are in some aspects unique, but, ultimately, in keeping with the **highest** moral code of society, not the average, not the common denominator, but the highest.

This is particularly true in wartime. After all, lives are constantly at stake. Freedom is in jeopardy. Trust in leadership is crucial. Concern for subordinates is not simply a quality of life issue; it is a question of life and death.

But strange as it seems, character and ethical behavior seem much more the rule than the exception in war time. In fact, it seems to me that character becomes an issue more often in times of peace than of war. These are times when dilemmas generated by competition for advancement and loyalty to shipmates seem more often to occur.

I am deeply concerned about recent events that seem to demonstrate an erosion of the character and ethics of our military service. I am also troubled by a similar erosion of values throughout society, but my personal charge is to lead the Naval Services. During my tenure as Secretary of the Navy, it is my intention to work towards reaffirming our traditional emphasis on the moral foundations of Service in the Navy and the Marine Corps.

Before I go on to discuss with you what I see and what I intend to do about it, I would like to tell you of a dialog from a book I recently encountered that points to a relatively small, yet poignant ethical dilemma that occurred in one naval officer's career; a small matter, perhaps but one that says something about the character that is critical for our readiness. The book is entitled *The Heart of A Man*, and it is a diary of a naval aviator, Lt Frank Elkins, who fought in Vietnam. Admittedly, the incident takes place in a time of war yet it is about an administrative detail that could occur in peacetime^¾ or any time.

Frank records a situation revolving around the justification for a Distinguished Flying Cross during a mission over the North. During the mission, one of the Naval aviators had put a bullpup missile directly on a bridge that had withstood many strikes. In previous attacks, the Vietnamese had fiercely defended the area with anti-aircraft fire^¾ but not this time.

When he was questioned about what happened, the aviator reported he encountered no resistance. But to be assured of the Distinguished Flying Cross, you needed to be in an extremely hostile environment; flak or triple "A" fired at you during a bombing run were usual pre-requisites for the award. Other squadron pilots urged the aviator to allow the investigation officer to put it down in the report; after all it usually was a heavily defended region^¾ how did he know that they were not firing at him? It was just a technical detail. It was not a big thing; a sure clincher for a well-deserved award. But the aviator firmly refused to have a false detail recorded.

In recalling the event, Frank writes: "Think about it. World War II aviators flying crates for hours over Germany, five hundred miles from home base, getting awards for really laying their lives on the line, and we [are pressured to] fictionalize to get the same award. No thanks."

A small dilemma perhaps, but real. Frank Elkins never expected anyone to read his diary, never to make much of his witness to honesty and to the integrity that is so apparent in his own character. It is a fascinating and honest book, whose last entry ends two days before

he was lost over Vietnam. It was published by his widow. Frank's remains were finally identified and returned to the United States in 1991.

What would the Distinguished Flying Cross have meant for the recipient in this account—honor at home, a sure-fire promotion? Wasn't there justification for a little fiction--after all they were flying in combat? But Frank Elkins describes how one aviator--facing possible death every day^¾said "no thanks" to an easy award.

I like to think that is a naval tradition, saying no thanks to a false award, another's honor; saying no thanks to an inappropriate behavior, a compromised exam.

I'm aware that if we look around us in society we could say that every day brings us a new revelation of some ethical transgression^¾sexual harassment and sexual abuse, racial discrimination, and flat-out lying about one's own responsibility for any wrongdoing. We read the papers and watch the news and our stomachs turn; we begin to feel as though having any ethical standards and trying to live by them is foolish. One might begin to feel, given these examples, that personal integrity is passé, and that sacrificing oneself for others is both stupid and a good way to end up in last place.

But I think that it is precisely in the moments where morality seems so thoroughly abandoned and ethical behavior so impossible that we must come together to support one another in our devotion to personal integrity and sacrifice for others. I believe that coming together to preserve those values is what makes the Armed Forces a moral profession^¾and what makes the character of a military professional.

A noted military historian, S.L.A. Marshall, once said that "The sole difference distinguishing the professional soldier from the civilian is that the professional soldier places the line of duty above the line of self-interest."

In the extreme conditions of prison camp, it is what kept Admiral James Stockdale and his fellow prisoners-of-war in Vietnam morally alive. And in the intellectual world, that is exactly what you, the members of JSCOPE, are doing--by the very fact of coming together, you are reaffirming the need to preserve these values.

In my own Department we are dealing with the aftermath of Tailhook, with incidents of hazing and discrimination, and now the cheating and lying to cover it up at the Naval Academy. While the actual numbers involved are not enormous, the ethical issues these events raise remain deeply troubling. In your own particular Services you know where your problems are.

Despite those problems, I believe that the military is in a better place to address them than some of the other sectors of our society, simply because our military tradition and history ^¾and our discipline¾ make those moral values so clearly visible in both doctrine and example. Why else, for example, is the matter of cheating at the Naval Academy so noteworthy¾ given that cheating may occur at other academic institutions? Our transgression is more striking because we make our commitment to honor and integrity so clear. The military makes its ethical commitments "up front"; these are part of what keeps us together, and part of what keeps us alive.

I have seen the reality of personal character and ethical behavior at all points in my own experience of naval service. As a midshipman at the Academy, I learned the tradition of integrity and service, and began to see "first-hand" how that tradition inspired ethical behavior. My class¾ the class of 1964¾ has been so affected by what we learned there about character and ethics that we have a class project to work together on a book that will describe our own sense of these concepts and their continuing importance in our lives. This book will be given to graduating midshipmen.

When the twenty-second Commandant of the Marine Corps, General David M. Shoup, was once asked why his Marines maintained such high *esprit* and were so well noted for their integrity and self-sacrifice, he answered: "Love. Love of country, love of . . . [Service], and love of the man to the right of you and the left of you."

During my tour as a Division Officer I began to realize that every command decision calls us to act on our own personal integrity and our own willingness to sacrifice because we love the person on either side of us. There can't be any standard "school solution" to the real

problems of leadership in a situation where death is a real outcome. I know from experience that the challenge of learning to lead in a moral and ethical way is at least as great as the challenge of learning the technology and the systems thinking we need to fight a modern war.

For all those reasons, I believe that even though we too have problems with character and ethical behavior, we in the military service have the history and the tradition that will enable us to solve them. We have the vision and the perseverance to rediscover our traditions in the present and to keep them alive and real in the future.

It is therefore no accident that I am here today beginning what one of my assistants calls "a reaffirmation of character." It's no accident that you are here today for a joint conference on professional ethics. Many of you are involved in the education of military officers and enlisted personnel^{3/4} and are actively engaged in examining new leadership styles and practices. The subject of character and ethics is obviously an integral part of this kind of education, because it's an integral part of the kind of readiness we need now and in the future.

It troubles me to see and hear how far values may have eroded. Let me give you some illustrations that serve as real life examples.

Consider a senior Naval officer who is visiting a hospitality suite at a convention with a large number of naval officers are in attendance. He hears a rumor that there is a group of officers gathered in the hallway in order to "inspect" female guests. As far as he knows, none of these officers are members of his command. Many are recent war veterans who have spent many months deployed for combat. A number have been drinking and partying; they are boisterous; but this is a civilian hotel. The atmosphere is, to say the least, festive. As far as he can see, officers and guests have been enjoying themselves after a day of seminars and fun.

It occurs to him that things might get out of hand. But, the hotel certainly has its own security^{3/4} they should step in if something goes wrong. There are other, more senior officers present, and they don't seem concerned. He knows the Navy's moral code would not tolerate participation in conduct unbecoming naval officers, but he thinks to himself: maybe the world has changed; maybe laxer standards apply. Why interfere if this is an acceptable way to "blow

off steam" in the 1990's? Wouldn't it compromise his command reputation? Wouldn't his superiors be embarrassed because they had not intervened¾maybe angry? How would a confrontation with seniors over such an event impact his fitness report? The result is that he pretends not to see and thus condones behavior that he himself believes is wrong.

Or take the midshipman who enters a classmate's room on the night before an exam. He hears two classmates going over a particular question. They advise him to study certain questions because they are guaranteed to be on the exam. He asks how they know it will be used, they tell him that the questions have been circulating. He isn't sure what they mean by that, but on the next day, he indeed finds the questions on the exam.

Does he report that the exam has been compromised? Can he actually be certain that others had the exam questions¾or did they just have old exams or make intelligent guesses as to what would appear? Both of the classmates are close friends. Both are individuals he considers to be honorable. The exam is for a tough course that just doesn't seem relevant to being a naval officer. Maybe it's better if he just lets the whole thing slide. After all, he studied the recommended questions too. He would be putting himself on report. It might end his career. And what would his classmates, with whom he has shared many bonding experiences, think? Doesn't he owe them loyalty? Should he "bilge" a classmate?

Now, neither of those illustrative scenarios takes place in Jim Stockdale's prison camp, but these ethical issues have consequences. The first issue is of course one of personal integrity and sacrificial service: do I do the safest thing for myself or the best thing for the group? Do I follow the ethical doctrine and tell the truth as I see it, or do I keep quiet because my superior may be angry with me for raising this problem? People who behave this way may ask whether the climate of our community contributes to these failures of personal integrity and honesty. In what way does our leadership contribute to the failure of the men and women we supervise to speak the truth when they know it isn't what we want to hear?

The second issue in these examples is that organizational practice doesn't appear to support organizational doctrine. In short, despite its rhetoric, organizations may not always value personal integrity and sacrificial service.

Now, having given such examples, it is my turn to ask you as members of JSCOPE—you who have studied the literature of our professional ethics, and may have faced such dilemmas—for ideas as to the appropriate means to interject character and moral behavior into those settings and our overall organization.

Do we have an effective code of professional personal behavior--moral rules as you might call it at this seminar? How do we make the code real to those who face the pressure of competition and of perfection? How do we make it practical, so that individuals can recognize the appropriate course of action? How do we create a system to reinforce it? How do we reward compliance--reward the right choice?

At the heart of this is a very practical question--and I think you're the right people to ask: what should the organization look like that really supports the values of personal integrity and selfless service? A number of organizational models exist now--on the management side we have the free and open "learning organization"; in the world of science we have the ecosystem in which even the smallest part plays a critical role. Both of these have something to teach us, I think.

But the models we're more used to in the military are the models of team and of family. The team model is a good one for many of our purposes, stressing as it does the subordination of personal ambition to the achievement of team goals, and the commitment of personal talents and skills to the building of a team that works together to win. But the team model may stress "winning" so much that it actually contributes to the failures I have been outlining above. "Winning" may be pretty clear in some battle situations, but what does "winning" mean in a large bureaucracy, such as our Services have become?

The team model may also encourage individuals to subordinate their personal moral judgments to those of the team. Often the team's values are the proper ones. What about the instances when they are not?

These are the questions that I hope you will discuss and examine. I know that teaching ethics is a topic you intend to address and I look forward to your ideas.

Today is the first in a series of speeches I will be giving on the topic of character renewal. I am currently working with the military and civilian leadership of the Navy and Marine Corps to reemphasize our core values and concepts of moral behavior within their leadership training programs. This training will be career-wide and Service-wide. In my view, it is not something new at all—it is a **return** to a traditional goal. It is a significant part of maintaining our readiness.

We have history and tradition and military doctrine that affirm the values of personal integrity and sacrifice in service to others. We now have to use the system that we have in order to build the trust and to ensure the honesty that we need to make those values real and relevant at all levels in the organization. I submit to you that sexual harassment, sexual and racial discrimination, hazing, cheating and lying all exist because there is a great gulf between doctrine and practice, and this is a gulf that only true leadership can bridge. Our junior people won't believe in the values we proclaim unless we leaders are living them every day. Our best junior people will leave us if we don't encourage them to talk honestly about the ethical issues that they encounter. No family works well if its members can't tell one another the truth. And no one will be ready for the dilemmas of life if they haven't built the character to do that.

I am grateful to you for the opportunity to share my concerns with you, and I hope that you will give me the benefit of your own knowledge and expertise as I continue to address these matters. If at the end of my tenure as Secretary of the Navy I am remembered for having encouraged the men and women of the Navy and Marine Corps to feel that they belong to a community that concretely values and requires personal integrity and sacrificial service to others, I will be deeply satisfied indeed.