

# Thinking about Core Values

by  
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"Our scientific power has outrun our spiritual power. We have guided missiles and misguided men."<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr.

When I became aware of Air Force "core values," I was skeptical. Although "self-evident," the thought behind them was unclear. The original core values relied on politically correct explanations, avoiding philosophical and theological bedrock in favor of political documents like the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, as if values were invented in 1776. "Accepting responsibility for one's actions," "Being a morally upright person," "Doing your best," and "Living one's convictions"<sup>2</sup> were pleasant platitudes, but vague guidelines in these times of moral relativism. Colin Powell may be right in saying, "A sense of shame is not a bad moral compass,"<sup>3</sup> but that's unsure guidance for the shameless.

"Integrity first," "Service before self," and "Excellence" are more succinct, but what do these terms really mean? On reflection, the Core Values answer three critical questions for airmen: Who we are, what we are doing, and how we should do it. Through this article, you will see that we must be persons of integrity so we can serve our country to the best of our ability.

## WHO ARE WE? - Integrity First

"Beloved Pan, and all ye other gods who haunt this place, give me beauty in the inward soul; and may the outward and inward be at one." Socrates

Integrity carries with it ideas of unity, completeness, soundness and wholeness.<sup>4</sup> This unity should extend from ourselves to our organizations, service, country, and God. Individual integrity is critical to society and service just as strong beams are critical to a house. If the beams are not whole, sound or complete, if rotten is mixed with good, if termites have eaten the insides, then individual beams will break under stress; beams will fail in their relationship to other beams; nails will pull out and the house will fall.

Individual integrity requires unity within ourselves. It requires unity of thought, perception, word and action that manifests itself in our speech, actions, and interactions. In the Aristotelian sense of *eudaemonia*, integrity yields excellence of character and happiness when "the man who wants to act appropriately does so without internal friction."<sup>5</sup> As our society changes, many feel they can separate their off-duty behavior from their on-duty behavior. This thinking violates integrity. One face or the other is false. You cannot be both fresh and bitter. Like Popeye, we should be able to say, "I yam what I yam." Military service is not what you do; it is who you are.

"It is with trifles, and when he is off guard, that a man best reveals his character."  
Arthur Schopenhauer

If we have integrity, there will be unity between our perceptions and our words. We will be honest, sincere, and candid. If the emperor is walking around in his underwear, we should say so. The lack of candid honesty contributed to our failure in Vietnam. It is expedient to say what our leaders want to hear. A person whose perceptions and words are habitually integrated must say the truth our leaders need to hear.

If we have integrity, there will be unity between our thoughts and our actions. We will have the courage of our convictions. We will live according to promptings of God, conscience, and the law. But especially when the guidance is not clear, we should follow the Apostle Paul's advice to "avoid even the appearance of evil." Others will see the unity of our beliefs and actions.

If we have integrity, there will be unity between our words and our actions. We will keep our promises especially when it involves sacrifice. The highest example of integrity is our unity with our oaths; however, this applies to trivial items too. Showing up late to an appointment is a breach of integrity, a violation of the unity of word and action. If you call a meeting, start it on time. Failing to show up on time is selfish and disrespectful. Failing to start meetings on time breaks the unity of word and action, then encourages breaches of integrity in others.

Be careful. English is a marvelously subtle language, awash in nuance and double meaning. As much as possible, make your meaning clear. When a twisting of phrase may work to your benefit, chose integrity above temporary advantage. Interpret agreements by the spirit rather than the letter. One author traces Richard Nixon's eventual downfall to hiding behind deceptively phrased words during the Alger Hiss hearings.<sup>6</sup> Nixon eventually separated his personal Quaker morality from political morality. That violated his integrity and led to his political destruction.

"Integrity has no need of rules." Albert Camus

The Joint Ethics Regulation is a nit-picking Pharisees' delight. As in Jesus' day, the fact that we have and need such detailed regulations is evidence of ethical decline. If we stayed near the center of the envelope, there would be no need to define the borders so precisely. The lawyer Alan Dershowitz poses this problem. If a bird lands in my neighbor's yard, he owns the bird. If the bird lands in my yard, I own the bird. But, Dershowitz asks, what if the bird lands with one foot in each yard?

Dr. James Dobson, Jr. related story about children in a schoolyard. Normally the kids would play anywhere they wanted in the fenced yard. As an experiment, the administration removed the fence. Suddenly the students began hovering in the middle of the school yard. The fence defined the border between safe and unsafe. As airmen, there is a time to push the envelope. But if the borders are ill-defined, head for the center. Leave borderline questions to the lawyers. Integrity avoids conflict of interests and the perception of unfair or personal advantage. Fly in the center of the envelope.

"A house divided against itself can not stand." Mark 3:25

Integrity of the individual for the individual is not enough. A wooden beam, though clear of knots and pressure treated, is useless lying in the middle of a field, and it will soon become warped. A hermit does not need the Ten Commandments. As service members, we maintain our personal integrity as part of the integrity of our organizations, our service, and our nation. We are responsible not only for our personal integrity, but also for our unit's integrity. A building is no stronger than its weakest beam. In addition to choosing and maintaining good beams, we must maintain the glue and nails that hold the beams together.

Personal integrity is the foundation of unit and service integrity. Breaches of integrity strain, erode, and break the bonds of trust that tie people together. The lack of integrity is an internal violence that we inflict on ourselves, tearing organizations apart. Unit integrity lies at the heart of the Academy's honor code. It should be no different in the rest of the Air Force. To lie, cheat, steal, or tolerate those who do undermines unit integrity. As parts of units upon whom our lives and our country's well-being depends, we must maintain unit integrity by practicing and enforcing the ethical behavior that builds the trust that unites the unit. Stealing violates trust. Cheating violates trust. Writing a glowing EPR/OPR for a poor or mediocre performer violates trust.

"To be humble with superiors is duty, to equals, courtesy, to inferiors, nobleness."  
Benjamin Franklin

While personal integrity is the beginning of unit integrity, respect is its magnetic lubricant. Respect draws people into an organization and draws them close to each other because their needs for self-worth and fellowship are met. Moreover, respect allows them to interact with each other without undue friction, so they can take risks.

Disrespect and lack of regard for integrity underlie illegal discrimination and harassment. Proper regard for unit integrity means proper respect for co-laborers, strengthening the bonds that tie us together. Sexual harassment and racist or other demeaning behavior repels people and violates unit integrity. Treating others with dignity and respect is a higher application of Hobbes's social contract, where the harm we agree not to do to each other is social and psychological rather than physical. As people dedicated to integrity, we aim to strengthen rather than weaken ties. The purpose of violence in warfare is to break the enemy army's integrity. We do violence to ourselves when we break unit integrity through mistreating our co-workers.

"Great achievement in war and peace can only result if officers and men form an indissoluble band of brothers." Field Marshall Paul von Hindenburg

Loyalty is a word one rarely hears, but it is a crucial part of unit integrity. Loyalty and trust are flip sides of the same coin. Peers, subordinates, and supervisors must be loyal, although loyalty takes different shapes in each circumstance. Protect confidences and privacy. Avoid undue influence. Regardless of the direction the loyalty takes, the purpose is to support the trust that unites the organization in service to the country.

"All that is essential for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing." Edmund Burke

How do you maintain your integrity? Do you spend your day of worship honing your golf game rather than sharpening your moral sensibilities? Have you read every one of Tom Clancy's novels but you don't know the relationship between the Old Testament and the Koran or the Book of Mormon? When did you last read a classic, biography or history without being coerced? Robert Fulgham may have learned all he needed to know in kindergarten, but you won't get all you need from PME. Nobody arrives at character overnight. It comes through a lifetime of study, practice and experience. The habitual study and practice of integrity yield soundness of character and strength in time of need.<sup>7</sup>

Much has been made of the moral decline in our society. Are your values hermetically sealed in a vacuum, or do you share them with your community?<sup>8</sup> If a strong nation and a strong military requires people of integrity, then where will those people come from if we don't help build them? Sir John Winthrop Hacket said, "When a country looks at its fighting forces it is looking in a mirror: if the mirror is a true one the face that it sees will be its own."<sup>9</sup> Are you concerned about the young people entering your Air Force? What should you do?

We "take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion."

From the beginning, military service demands integrity. Both the Enlistment and Commissioning Oaths require that we swear to support the Constitution of the United States. To do that, we must be sound and whole - single-minded. From the time we enter service, we should be wholly committed to our military endeavor, holding nothing back. If we have integrity, there will be unity between ourselves and our purpose. This unity will lead naturally into service before self and excellence.

## **WHAT ARE WE DOING - Service Before Self**

"I regret that I have but one life to give for my country." Captain Nathan Hale

Integrity, especially unit integrity, does not exist for its own sake. We must put service before self, individually and corporately. We are here to serve our nation. General MacArthur called service above self "duty." Under the concept of duty in the professional code, the military contract demands an almost unconditional subordination of individual interest, friends, or family to the performance of duty and in fulfilling responsibilities.<sup>10</sup> If we are doing things that do not serve the nation, then we may be obligated to break unit integrity in the nation's best interest. Remember the purpose for which we have been recruited, trained, and equipped is that we should fight at the right place and the right time.<sup>11</sup>

"I have one yardstick by which I test every major problem - and that yard stick is: Is it good for America?" Dwight Eisenhower

Often, as with General Motors, people sometimes think that what is good for them is good for the country. Although what we do for ourselves may sometimes benefit the nation, we must honestly assess who is really being served. If a senior officer at Mather AFB sent a T-43 on a navigator training mission so he could transport his family to San Antonio for a wedding, the

nation may have been served, but he was primarily serving himself. As with integrity, we should avoid the appearance of evil and err toward the center of the envelope.

"I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same."

Unlike soldiers in some nations, our service is not to a person or party but to a document and the ideals it embodies. "The commitment of the American military officer is to maintain a particular value structure within American society. Support and defense of the constitution requires fealty to the principles and values it proclaims." <sup>12</sup> Oliver North may be a hero or a liar, but because he circumvented the law to support people and interests that were at odds with American values and congressional intent, he violated his oath.

As soldiers, we are instruments of national power for politicians to use within moral, legal and constitutional bounds. Because we cannot be both the hammer and the hand that wields it, military people must stay out of politics, beyond their civic duty to vote. We have a professional responsibility to be informed about government and issues, and an equal responsibility to remain neutral regarding politics and political parties. Jokes about political leaders are out of place on the lips of military leaders.

"The Nation today needs men who think in terms of service to their country, and not in terms of their country's debt to them." General Omar N. Bradley

Often we forget why we are here. This failure to put things in perspective causes more trouble than we recognize. During a recent headquarters reorganization, officers seemed as concerned with the impact on their careers and the chance that they would become "second class citizens" by working for a lower organization as they were with the efficient organization of the unit. Were these the same people who 10 or 15 years prior volunteered to sacrifice their lives in the service of their country? Whom were they calling second class citizens?

Capt Mark Peterson comes to mind. His generation of officers was offered VSI and SSB while the Sword of Damocles, the Reduction in Force (RIF), dangled over their careers. He declined the separation incentives and was "RIFfed." During his farewell speech he said, "When I joined the Air Force, I was willing to sacrifice my life for my country. All my country has asked for was my career." What is a life shaking tragedy to some people was both noble and acceptable to this man who viewed his career through the lens of service above self.

"My kind of loyalty was loyalty to one's country, not to its institutions or its office-holders."

Mark Twain

In our loyalty to our organizations and our people, we occasionally forget service above self and loyalty to country. Loyalty and excellence may say that our people deserve the best evaluations we can give them. Integrity and service above self insist they get the best evaluations they deserve. If a general interferes in the promotion process in the interests of one of his favorites, he

may sincerely believe he was promoting the best candidate in the greater interests of the nation. He also undermines the system, to the detriment of the service and the nation. Similarly, the supervisors who gave positive evaluations to those involved in shooting down the Blackhawk helicopter in Iraq put their people and themselves above their service. We maintain unit integrity for service. Personal integrity makes that easier to do.

Theirs not to make reply

Theirs not to reason why

Theirs but to do and die

Into the valley of Death rode the Six Hundred. Alfred Lord Tennyson

Service requires obedience. Obedience enables any organization to function, especially a military organization. Obedience flows naturally when we place service above ourselves. Moreover, our obligation is to thinking obedience, not blind or mindless obedience. More than one officer has regretted the day an enlisted person did *exactly* what he was told. The volatility, high technology, visibility, and speed of modern warfare require initiative, thinking obedience, in support of the commander's intent in the service of the nation's best interest.

As we enter the 21st century, service and the accompanying concepts of loyalty and obedience are growing more complicated. Does service in a UN operation, or under a foreign commander, to stop a distant civil war tie a more tenuous link to oath and country? As with soldiers in the Civil War, we may struggle to find honorable ways of maintaining integrity, upholding oaths, remaining loyal, and avoiding disobedience.

"When our passions impel us to do something, we forget our duty." Blaise Pascal

The need to put service to Constitutional values and principles at the forefront of our thought and behavior is imperative in our days. As we participate more often in "Wars of the Third Kind" under the scrutiny of CNN, BBC, and Good Morning America, the need to put service above self becomes crystal clear. Whether Auschwitz, My Lai, or Bosnia, our actions must serve the nation, not our superiors or emotions. Lieutenant William Calley thought he would be a movie hero, like Audie Murphy. "Kick in the door, run in the hooch, give it a good burst - kill." Unlike Shakespeare's soldier in *Henry V*, the king can not use our obedience to wipe the crime out of us.<sup>13</sup> Because we are a nation of laws, we must uphold the law, national, international and moral, in our military service. Failure to do so is to serve something other than the nation.

"My war experience led me to believe that the staff must be the servants of the troops, and that a good staff officer must serve his commander and the troops but himself be anonymous."

Field Marshall Viscount Montgomery

If our objective is to give rather than to get, we have complete control over our success or failure. If our emphasis is on how we can serve, the service is its own reward, and anything beyond that

is gravy. When Jesus washed his apostles' feet, he emphasized the servant role, especially of the leader. The rank on our shoulders measures the number of people we serve, not of the number of people who serve us. In our service we must display and expect excellence.

## **HOW WE SHOULD DO IT - Excellence**

"It is not the big armies that win battles, it is the good ones." Marshal Maurice de Saxe

Excellence is more critical to the military than any other profession. The root of moral or ethical obligations to excellence is the nature of the profession. Whereas the client of an incompetent attorney may spend extra time in jail (until she finds another lawyer), and a doctor may kill or harm a single patient, the military professional can harm or kill hundreds or thousands through incompetence. With so much at stake, excellence is an ethical imperative.

Does the Air Force demand excellence more than the other services? Men probably fought as soldiers as soon as they picked up sticks and stones, and men floating on logs approximate a navy, but the Air Force requires exceptional imagination, drive, discipline, and technology. Eddie Rickenbacker said, "Aviation is proof that, given the will, we have the capacity to achieve the impossible." Jacqueline Cochran revealed her driving aspirations by saying, "I might have been born in a hovel, but I determined to travel with the wind and the stars." Excellence is right will coupled to action and persistence

"We succeed only as we identify in life, or in war, or in anything else, a single overriding objective, and make all other considerations bend to that one objective.  
Dwight D. Eisenhower

Because we are people of integrity who put service to our nation above all else, it follows that our service will be excellent because we have chosen to make that the most important thing we do. The singleness of purpose that flows from committing our lives to the defense of the Constitution demands that we serve to the best of our ability. Not only is our calling worth doing, it is worth doing well. We would do well to follow Harry Truman's example when he said about his presidency, "I have tried my best to give the nation everything I had in me. There are probably a million people who could have done the job better than I did it, but I had the job and I always quote an epitaph on a tombstone in a cemetery in Tombstone, Arizona: 'Here lies Jack Williams. He done his damnedest.'"

"Follow me." Infantry School motto

As members of the Air Force, we are all leaders to a greater or lesser extent. Leadership comes with the responsibility to set the example. Because we are integral parts of our units, and because we care about those around us, we must set the best example we can for our peers and subordinates. We must model the behavior that will best ensure mission accomplishment. In a combat or operational situation, having set the best example for others to follow may be the difference between life and death.

"To lead an untrained people to war is to throw them away." Confucius

Not only are we responsible for doing our personal best, we are also responsible for ensuring our people do the best they can. That means providing a good example and the tools and training they need. To do less breaches integrity with your oath, people and nation.

"The first thing to do in life is to do with purpose what one proposes to do." Pablo Casals.

Core values are a lifestyle, not a destination. None of us can claim to have "reached" excellence even if we are the best at what we do. The Apostle Paul reminds us that all have fallen short of the glory of God. Integrity is something to practice and build daily within ourselves, our organizations, and our country. Service is purpose, but our form of service will change from time to time. While we keep the purpose in mind, integrity and excellence will bear their fruit in service to our country, security for those we love. Samuel P. Huntington said, "Any given officer corps will adhere to the ethic only to the extent that it is professional, that is, to the extent that it is shaped by functional rather than societal imperatives. Few expressions of the ethic by an officer corps indicate a low level of professionalism, widespread articulation of the ethic a high degree of professionalism."<sup>14</sup> If this is the case, then we must both walk the walk, and talk the talk - Integrity, Service, Excellence!

## Notes

1. All uncited quotations are from the Dictionary of Military Quotations or the Great American Bathroom Book.
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3. Powell, Colin, *My American Journey*, Random House, 1995
4. Webster's II: New Riverside University Dictionary, 1984, Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, MA p 634.
5. Urmson, J. O., *Aristotle's Ethics*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 1988, p 31.
6. Aitken, Jonathan, *Nixon: A Life*, Regnery Publishing, Inc., Washington D.C., 1993, p 161.
7. Stockdale, James Bond, The World of Edictetus: Reflections on Survival and Leadership, from *War, Morality, and the Military Profession*, Malham M. Wakin, ed, reprinted from *The Atlantic Monthly*, April 1978
8. Szafranski, Toner, and Casebeer, "Military Ethics", *Airpower Journal*, Winter 1994
9. Sir John Winthrop Hackett, "Society and the Soldier: 1914-18," from *War, Morality, and the Military Profession*, Malam M. Wakin, ed., Westview Press, Inc. Boulder, CO, 1986, p 88.



10. Hays, Thomas, et al., *Taking Command: The Art and Science of Military Leadership*, Harrisburg, PA, Stackpole Books, 1967, p 49.
11. Carl von Clausewitz from *On War* as quoted in AFM 1-1, Volume II, March 1992, page v.
12. Hartle, Anthony E., *Moral Issues in Military Decision Making*, Lawrence, KS, University of Kansas Press, 1989, p 122.
13. Cited by Samuel P. Huntington in *The Military Mind from War, Morality, and the Military Profession*, Malham M. Wakin ed., Westview Press, Inc. Boulder, CO, 1986, p 48.
14. Samuel P. Huntington in *The Military Mind from War, Morality, and the Military Profession*, Malham M. Wakin, ed., Westview Press, Inc. Boulder, CO, 1986, p 38.