

Strategic Military Leadership

The protection and promotion of positive morals and morale

by CDR W. Dan Stallard, CHC, USN

In 1995, Congressional Medal of Honor recipient ADM James Stockdale presented a lecture at the Marine Corps Amphibious Warfare School, Quantico, titled, “The Stoic Warriors Triad: Tranquility, Fearlessness and Freedom.”¹ During this lecture, he quoted Carl von Clausewitz’s definition of war as “an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will.” He went on to ask, “What is the most important weapon in breaking people’s wills?” In response, he stated, “This may surprise you, but I am convinced that holding the moral high ground is more important than firepower. For Clausewitz, war was not an activity governed by scientific laws, but a clash of wills, or moral forces.”² ADM Stockdale went on to make this sobering statement about strategic national leadership:

I had the wisdom of Clausewitz’ [sic] stand on moral integrity demonstrated to me throughout a losing war as I sat on the sidelines in a Hanoi prison. To take a nation to war on the basis of any provocation that bears the smell of fraud is to risk losing national leadership’s commitment when the going



ADM James B. Stockdale. (Photo from wikimedia.org.)

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gets tough. When our soldiers’ bodies start coming home in high numbers, and reverses in the field are discouraging, a guilty conscience in a top leader can become the Achilles’ heel of a whole country. Men of shame who know our road to war was not cricket are seldom those we can count on to hold fast, stay the course.³

To stay the course during war is to be driven by doing what is right, which is the essence of taking the moral high

ground; when you do what is right, then morale will be high. United States strategic military leaders are responsible for the protection and promotion of positive morals and morale of their forces. Positive morals and high morale are essential for winning our Nation’s wars.

Morals and morale are not new concepts to the strategic military leader. The oldest text on military strategy is Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*, which begins with the following:⁴

The art of war is of vital importance to the State. It is a matter of life and death, a road either to safety or to ruin. Hence it is a subject of inquiry which can on no account be neglected. The art of war, then, is governed by five constant factors, to be taken into account in one's deliberations, when seeking to determine the conditions obtaining in the field. These are: (1) The Moral Law; (2) Heaven; (3) Earth; (4) The Commander; (5) Method and Discipline. The MORAL LAW causes the people to be in complete accord with their ruler, so that they will follow him regardless of their lives, undismayed by any danger.⁵

Sun Tzu realized that the fundamental principle of moral law, which in Chinese tradition can mean "harmony," is an essential element of effective strategic military leadership.⁶ Lionel Giles noted in his 1910 translation of *The Art of War* that the Chinese word for "moral" could easily be rendered as "morale."⁷ The etymology of the English word "moral" comes from the Old French and Latin word "moralis," which means "an individual's proper or good behavior within society."⁸ The word "morale" is the Old French feminine form of "moral" that came to mean "the state of the spirits of a person or group as exhibited by confidence, cheerfulness, discipline, and willingness to perform assigned tasks."⁹ "Moral" and "morale" could be considered the two sides of the same coin; "moral" is right action and "morale" is right attitude.

The purpose of this article is to explore the strategic military leader's role and responsibility in protecting and promoting positive morals and morale in his forces. To achieve this end, I will survey the origin of morals and morale in the U.S. military; how the strategic military leader protects and promotes positive morals and morale in his forces; and conclude with a brief analysis of Gen James F. Amos' strategic initiative on leadership and conduct.

The Origins of Morals and Morale in the Modern U.S. Military

A lengthy but relevant quote from ADM Arleigh Burke, taken from *Moral Leadership: The Protection of Moral*

Standards and Character Education, produced as a program of study for the Navy and Marine Corps in the 1950s, sheds insight on the imperative of moral leadership:

America's most important role in the world, almost from the day our country was born, has been the role of moral leadership . . . teach our young people to believe in the responsibility of one to another; their responsibility to God; to the peoples of the world. Teach them to believe in themselves; to believe in their worth as human beings; to believe in their place in leading the world out of the darkness of oppression. Teach them to believe that no one owes us a living; but that we owe so much to others. Teach them to believe in their priceless heritage of freedom; and that it must be won anew by every generation. And teach them to believe in the United States of America. The hope of the world lies here, in our physical power, our moral strength, our integrity, and our will to assume the responsibilities that history plainly intends us to bear.¹⁰

ADM Burke knew firsthand the importance of moral leadership and the effect it had on the morale of forces in order to win wars. His combat exploits in World

During an era of social unrest and racial prejudice, Gen Chapman led the Marine Corps with moral courage.

War II and Korea are legendary, and his three terms as Chief of Naval Operations are unprecedented.¹¹ He was a strategic military leader who protected and promoted positive morals and morale in his forces.

Renowned and revered Fleet ADM Chester Nimitz is another example of a strategic military leader who understood the correlation between morals and morale, which is captured in his immortal statement about the Marines on Iwo Jima:

The battle of Iwo Island [Ijima] has been won. The United States Marines, by their individual and collective courage, have conquered a base which is as necessary to us in our continuing forward movement toward final victory as it was vital to the enemy in staving off ultimate defeat . . . Among the Americans who served on Iwo Island, uncommon valor was a common virtue.¹²

ADM Nimitz's correlation between virtue and valor captures the essence of right attitude and right action. The most effective strategic military leaders are exemplary moral examples whose actions demonstrate that good morals can lead to higher morale.

Another strategic leader who keenly understood the complexity of morality and military leadership was the 24th Commandant of the Marine Corps, Gen Leonard F. Chapman. During an era of social unrest and racial prejudice, Gen Chapman led the Marine Corps with moral courage. His now famous quote, "Marines don't do that," is grounded in his statement of ethical and moral behavior that all Marines were to embody. Commandant of the Marine Corps, Gen James L. Jones, noted at Gen Chapman's funeral that he was a "Rock of Gibraltar in sea of change," and he "had an intuitive ability to do the right thing."¹³ Again, strategic military leaders set the moral example and the expectations of the men and women they lead. Moral leadership directly influences individual morale and command climate.

What is the origin of positive morals and morale in the U.S. military? The U.S. military turns to Clausewitz's classic *On War* to find the moral factors in war.¹⁴ Clausewitz wrote, "The moral elements are among the most important in war."¹⁵ Furthermore, he concluded that moral forces:

. . . constitute the spirit that permeates war as a whole, and at an early stage they establish a close affinity with the will that moves and leads the whole mass of force, practically merging with it, since the will itself is a moral quality.¹⁶

In *On War*, it is clear that Clausewitz believed that morals and morale

are inseparable phenomena. Clausewitz begins book two, “On the Theory of War,” chapter one, “Classifications of the Art of War” with:

Essentially, war is fighting, for fighting is the only effective principle in the manifold activities designated as war. Fighting, in turn, is a trial of moral and physical forces through the medium of the latter. Naturally moral strength must not be excluded, for psychological forces exert a decisive influence on the elements involved in war.¹⁷

This leads to Clausewitz’s metaphorical “sword of war” illustration: “One might say that the physical seem little more than the wooden hilt, while the moral factors are the precious metal, the real weapons, the finely honed blade.”¹⁸ Clausewitz concluded, “Hence most of the matters dealt with in this book are composed in equal parts of physical and moral causes and effects.”¹⁹ Clausewitz’s moral factors included: intellect, emotion, the spirit, and the psychological. Clausewitz believed the moral factors of war were critically important for victory. With victory in mind, the strategic military leader must promote and protect positive morals and morale in his forces.

However, decades before Clausewitz penned his classic text, the founders of the United States and our first strategic military leaders looked to religion and philosophy to understand morality. GEN George Washington, the first U.S. strategic military leader, was a living example of moral leadership who led his forces to victory over a superior military force. Washington laid the foundation for morality in the military and among the citizenry. In Washington’s farewell address as President, he emphatically stated:

Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of patriotism who should labor to subvert these great pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of men and citizens.²⁰

Washington believed that “national morality,” which included the military, could not be gained without “religious principle.”²¹ Christianity formed the preponderance of religion in colonial

America; however, the founders of the United States ensured Congress would not establish a state church or forbid the free exercise of religion, thus, Christianity was an influence on national morality, but not the sole source. The founders looked to philosophy as an additional source of understanding morals. Philosophers such as Aristotle, Epictetus, Hobbs, Bacon, Kant, and Locke influenced our founders.



George Washington. (Photo from wikimedia.org.)

The U.S. military codified morality in the Uniform Code of Military Justice, Law of Armed Conflict, the Code of Conduct, and the individual Service’s core values. Military core values are derived from Aristotelian virtues. Also, for all commanding officers, *Title 10* prescribes the “requirement for exemplary conduct” which requires them to promote and protect positive morals and morale.²² Now, what role does the U.S. strategic military leader perform in protecting and promoting positive morals and morale among his forces?

Protecting and Promoting Positive Morals and Morale

Michael Evans noted that we equip our warriors with the latest external body armor to protect them from the enemy, but do we not provide them the “existential or inner armaments—with the mental armor and philosophical

protection—that is necessary to confront an asymmetric enemy who abides by a different set of cultural rules?”²³ He states that:

. . . comparatively little is done to provide Western military professionals with sufficient moral philosophy to protect their hearts and minds against the rigors of contemporary warfare in Iraq and Afghanistan.²⁵

Evans goes on to make the case for moral philosophy, especially Stoicism, as a source of preparing warriors to fight.

BG H.R. McMaster addressed the issue of morals in the military during the spring 2010 Ethics Conference at the Naval War College. The address was titled, “The Moral, Ethical and Psychological Preparation of Soldiers and Units for Combat.”²⁶ McMaster focused his remarks on military leaders’ connected responsibilities of ensuring moral, ethical conduct in war, while also preparing our soldiers psychologically for the extraordinary demands of combat.²⁷ He noted that the military is a “learning institution” and that morals can be taught. He went on to conclude that American warriors need to learn about applied ethics and values. Finally, when commenting on the leader’s role in moral, ethical, and psychological preparation of warriors for combat, he made the following observations:

- Leaders must be in positions to lead.
- Leaders need certain qualities such as those noted in *The Art of War*: “Leadership is a matter of intelligence, trustworthiness, humaneness, courage, and sternness.”
- Leaders develop other leaders.
- Leaders must effectively communicate to the troops so they can understand the commander’s intent, the risk of war and the law of armed conflict.²⁸

Finally, McMaster noted:

Senior commanders must establish the right climate and send a simple, clear message continuously to their troopers: “Every time you treat a civilian disrespectfully, you are working for the enemy.” It is, however, junior officers and noncommissioned officers who will enforce standards of moral conduct. Preparing leaders at the squad, platoon, and company levels for that responsibility is vitally important.²⁹



Gen Leonard F. Chapman, 24th Commandant of the Marine Corps. (Official photo, HQMC, Washington, DC, 11 August 1970.)

This all sounds good, but it is easier said than done. How does the strategic military leader accomplish this dual responsibility of protecting and promoting positive morals and morale within his forces? If you follow McMaster and Evans' arguments, U.S. servicemembers must be trained in moral philosophy, human relations, and cultural competency in order to fight effectively and manage combat stress in order to mitigate the negative effects of combat, which can lead to unraveling of personal character or psychological disorders.³⁰

Keeping Our Honor Clean: Leadership and Conduct in the Marine Corps

In October 1775, the newly formed Congress established the Marine Committee to help guide the development of all naval affairs, to include authorizing the equipping and building of ships, the organization of the Marine Corps into two battalions, and the "Rules for the Regulation of the Navy of the United

Colonies."³¹ ³² The first naval regulation focused on promoting virtues and preventing vice—the commander was to be "vigilant" to be a virtuous example.³³ The second regulation guided the commander to ensure divine services were held on ships twice a day and a sermon preached on Sundays.³⁴ The third regulation "enjoined" the commander to punish sailors or Marines for swearing, blasphemy, and drunkenness.³⁵ Since 1775, the Navy and Marine Corps have been guided by regulations and values that promote and protect morals and morale. For over two centuries, the effectiveness of the Marine Corps' warfighting can be attributed to emphasis on good morals and high morale. This is not to say that the history of the Marine Corps is without moral blemish or is a morally perfect institution, but what is true is that Marines try to keep their honors clean.

On 23 March 2012, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, Gen James

F. Amos, issued *White Letter No. 1–12, Leadership and Conduct*. The Corps' honor was being tarnished, leaving the Commandant distressed and frustrated over the conduct of a few Marines. Gen Amos began this letter by noting that, throughout Marine Corps history, the Corps' reputation was built on "disciplined adherence to orders."³⁶ Amos extolled the efforts of Marine forces in Afghanistan and noted that success in combat came at a great cost in "blood and treasure."³⁷ To reinforce his message to the Corps, he directed Marine leadership to review *U.S. Central Command General Order 1B*, which "identifies and regulates conduct that is prejudicial to the maintenance of good order and discipline of all forces in the USCENTCOM [U.S. Central Command] AOR [area of responsibility]."

Gen Amos went on to direct all general officers, commanding officers, officers in charge, and sergeants major to ensure they refamiliarize themselves

with all orders and directives that govern proper conduct in combat and, one can conjecture, conduct at home in garrison. He then reinforces his message by stating:

. . . the indispensable condition of Marine Corps leadership is action and attitude, not words. We lead by example, and provide continual and close supervision to those we have the privilege to lead. I expect each of you to hold yourselves and your Marines to the highest standards . . . nothing else is acceptable.³⁸

In April 2012, Marine Corps University sponsored the Russell Leadership Conference. The conference targeted field grade officers and senior enlisted Marines to discuss how to address sensitive ethical issues in order to develop a Corps-wide ethical stand-down to focus on proper conduct of Marines at home and abroad. During the conference, Gen Amos delivered a final message on ethical leadership.³⁹ The key points of this lecture included:

- It is the Marine leader's job to preserve the Corps heritage. Hold yourself to a higher standard.
- Protect your Marines.
- The Marine Corps should always be synonymous with ethical behavior.
- The Marine Corps should not have a "zero-defects" mentality.⁴⁰

The final outcome of the conference was to develop a better understanding of the problem and a means to correct the problem. The Marine Corps has long recognized that the nature of leadership is grounded in proper ethical and moral behavior. The health and well-being (morals and morale) of our Marine Corps rests here: doing the right thing all the time by keeping our honor clean.

Notes

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2. Ibid., p. 1.

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5. Ibid., p. 33.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

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9. Definition of "morale," *The American Heritage Dictionary, 4th Edition*, Houghton Mifflin Company, New York, 2000.

10. Department of the Navy, United States Navy Personnel No. 15890, "Moral Leadership: The Protection of Moral Standards and Character Education Program," Washington, DC, 1950.

11. Burke, ADM Arleigh, "Biographies in Navy History," available at www.history.navy.mil, accessed 15 January 2011.

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14. Von Clausewitz, Carl, *On War*, translated and edited by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 1989.

15. Ibid., p. 184.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid., p. 127.

18. Ibid., p. 185.

19. Ibid., p. 184.

20. Washington, GEN George, "Washington's Farewell Address to the People of the United States," 1796, p. 20, available at www.gpo.gov, accessed 25 January 2011.

21. Ibid.

22. *Title 10*, Subtitle C, Part II, Chapter 51, Section 5947 for Navy and Marine Corps Commanding Officers says:

All commanding officers and others in authority in the naval service are required to show in themselves a good example of virtue, honor, patriotism, and subordination; to be vigilant in inspecting the conduct of all persons who are placed under their command; to guard against

and suppress all dissolute and immoral practices, and to correct, according to the laws and regulations of the Navy, all persons who are guilty of them; and to take all necessary and proper measures, under the laws, regulations, and customs of the naval service, to promote and safeguard the morale, the physical well-being, and the general welfare of the officers and enlisted persons under their command or charge.

Available at uscode.house.gov, accessed 1 February 2011.

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24. Ibid., p. 31.

25. Ibid.

26. McMaster, H.R., "Moral, Ethical and Psychology Preparation of Soldiers and Units for Combat," *Naval War College Review*, Newport, RI, 2011, pp. 7–19.

27. Ibid., p. 8.

28. Ibid., p. 17.

29. Ibid., p. 18.

30. Shay, J., *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat trauma and the undoing of character*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1994.

31. Information available at www.history.navy.mil.

32. Information available at www.loc.gov.

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.

36. Amos, Gen James F., *White Letter No. 1–12*, HQMC, Washington, DC, 2012.

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid.

39. Amos, Gen James F., "Ethical Leadership," *2012 Russell Leadership Conference Final Report*, available at www.mcu.usmc.mil.

40. Ibid., p. 6.

