Personal Ethics versus Professional Ethics

MAJ GEN JERRY E. WHITE, USAFR

We have grasped the mystery of the atom and rejected the Sermon on the Mount. The world has achieved brilliance without wisdom, power without conscience. Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants.

—General of the Army Omar Bradley
INTEGRITY, honesty, and moral conduct are essential elements in a good leader. Most people would agree with that statement. Disagreement comes when these standards are applied equally to personal and professional lives. The general thinking of society today maintains that “if it doesn’t hurt anyone else, I can do whatever I wish. What I do in my private life is my business. My employer has no right to evaluate or punish me for my private conduct as long as my job performance is not degraded.” This philosophy is applied—especially in the civilian sector—to using drugs, drinking alcohol, having sex, lying, and cheating. Increasingly, the courts are agreeing with this position.

In the military, we take a different view. Drugs are not tolerated. Alcohol abuse can ruin a career. Sexual involvement with other people in the workplace is disciplined—and in many cases prohibited. Dishonesty is severely punished.

Since becoming a general officer, I have heard senior leaders say at various times to closed-door gatherings of general officers, “If you are sleep­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­
and compliance. In reality, it also affects much of our culture. Fear of career derailment, of public exposure, of court-martial, of job security—all provide significant motivation to restrain our baser selves to conform to some set of moral rules. Both fear and law lead people to live at the edge of these set boundaries, sometimes stepping over them or being overly scrupulous—not out of personal conviction of right and wrong but out of self-preservation. Fear and law are effective only in limited ways.

Personal convictions form the most effective basis for moral and ethical behavior. The dream of every commander is to have people who instinctively do what is right whether or not regulations give guidance. Unfortunately, personal convictions change with our society. Relativism—which holds to no clear right or wrong, especially in the areas of sexual and behavioral conduct—has captured most of the intellectual and educational community.

The United States Air Force Academy honor code—We will not lie, steal, or cheat, nor tolerate among us anyone who does—is simply not accepted by society as an appropriate standard. The response to people who would espouse any ethical norm is, How dare you tell me how I ought to live in my private life? Note again the implied dissection of private and professional behavior.

I like to think of each of us having an inertial guidance system able to sense when we are off course and then initiate immediate correction. We need a moral compass.

Personal convictions develop from family, community, education, religious/spiritual upbringing, and peer influence. We recognize these influences, for better or worse, as given in the life of each 18- or 22-year-old who enters the Air Force. We live with the results and attempt to bring these young people from their current state of moral convictions to one that we define in our profession.

Prof Kenneth Andrews wisely notes that “moral character is shaped by family, church, and education long before an individual joins a company to make a living.” 4 All of these influences are in trouble. The family structure and its influence are breaking down. Yet, the family is the bedrock of moral teaching. Although we cannot change a person’s family background, we can do much to aid and abet military families to instruct and influence the next generation. I applaud all the efforts we are making today to make the Air Force more family friendly and family focused.

My childhood years were spent in a small Iowa farm community, where adults kept an eye on youngsters and enforced some semblance of moral restraint. That kind of community is disappearing, giving way to the declining morality of the inner city and metropolitan suburbia. Real community is a thing of the past. Once again, in our Air Force community, we have much more opportunity to build a place for our families. Our base commanders need to be empowered and encouraged to do so.

Education has lost its moral punch. Permeating our educational system is the belief that we must not teach moral values which delineate right and wrong. Chuck Miller writes that “a 1940 survey of public school authorities found their top discipline problems were talking, gum chewing, making noise, running, dressing improperly and littering. A 1986 poll of educators listed rape, robbery, assault, burglary, arson, bombings, murder, suicide, absenteeism, vandalism, drug abuse, alcohol abuse, gang warfare, pregnancy, abortion and venereal disease.” 5 We are living in a different world!

Religion and spiritual upbringing are still very effective, but decreasing numbers of young people fall under the influence of the church. In previous decades, parents sent their children to religious education even if the parents themselves did not attend. Such a sense of obligation to expose children to religious training and its consequent moral commandments no longer exists. This situation is exacerbated by the church-state debate, which presents even more of a barrier to the influence of the church.

The effect of peer influence is obvious: “Do not be deceived. Bad company corrupts good morals” (1 Cor. 15:33). Most drugs, alcohol, sexual immorality, lying, and cheating result from the influence of peers.
There is a growing degree of cynicism and sophistication in our society, a sense that all things are relative and that nothing is absolutely right or wrong.
—Jody Powell
Press Secretary to President Jimmy Carter

To illustrate our national problem, Daniel R. Levine notes that “honesty and integrity have been replaced in many classrooms by a win-at-any-cost attitude that puts grades, expediency and personal gain above all else.” Moreover, “Moral standards have become so eroded that many children can no longer tell right from wrong,” says Kevin Ryan, founding director of the Center for the Advancement of Ethics and Character at Boston University. According to Stephen F. Davis, a professor of psychology, “There’s no remorse. For students, cheating is a way of life.” Ryan further comments that “kids have no moral compass other than enlightened self-interest”; Ryan blames the nation’s schools for abandoning their traditional role of providing students with moral guidance. Similarly, Jay Mulkey—of the Character Education Institute of San Antonio—observes that “students who cheat in class may well cheat in their jobs or on their spouses. When you have a country that doesn’t value honesty and thinks character is unimportant, what kind of society do you have?”

Another illustration comes from a Rutgers University professor who conducted a survey of 31 highly selective colleges (14 with honor codes, 17 without). Thirty percent of the colleges with an honor code reported cheating on tests in 1995—up from 24 per cent in 1990. Forty-seven percent of the colleges without a honor code reported cheating on tests in 1995—up from 45 percent in 1990. These sad statistics give some credence to having an honor code.

I am firmly convinced that integrity and ethics must be built from within, reserving the law and fear as last choices only. The real question is, How do we do this? I submit the following suggestions for consideration:

1. We must recognize that the young people we are bringing into our Air Force today, in the main, have not been taught ethics and morality. They reflect the national norm on cheating and lying. Simply giving them a new set of rules with warnings of punishment will not change them.

2. As these young people go through basic training and Officer Training School, we must not assume that they have a consistent foundation of integrity, morality, and ethics. We need to define and teach moral behavior—both public and private. We must do this repeatedly and consistently, giving it major emphasis.

3. We need to help our people build an internal moral compass, utilizing the Chaplain Corps for that purpose. We need to encourage and enable our chaplains to teach spiritual principles of ethical behavior—not just philosophy—from the viewpoint of their religious beliefs. The Ten Commandments and the book of Proverbs are a good place to begin, since they contain tenets accepted by almost all faiths. We certainly should not coerce people into religious instruction, but we can and should encourage them. I emphasize this aspect because religious belief calls for an internal transformation rather than just a change in behavior. Interestingly, hardly any secular literature even mentions religious instruction as part of the solution—a puzzling exclusion in view of the impressive historical place such instruction holds in forming the moral concepts of our nation.

4. Commanders and leaders at all levels must set an example. If our lives reflect morality and integrity, our influence will be great. Commanders need to speak out on these issues often, rewarding integrity and punishing lack of integrity.

5. We must have and practice a no-tolerance policy on sexual harassment—not because it fits the mood of the moment in our corporate world but because sexual harassment is morally wrong.

6. We need to help our Air Force families in their training of the next generation. Through our chaplains, counseling, and seminar resources, we need to work at building and preserving marriages.

In order to be a leader, a man must have followers. And to have followers, a man must have their confidence. Hence the supreme quality for a leader is unquestionably integrity. Without it, no real success is possible, no matter whether it is on a
section gang, a football field, in an army, or in an office. The first great need, therefore, is integrity and high purpose.

—Gen Dwight Eisenhower

I began this article by contrasting personal and professional ethics. In our profession, they cannot be separated. We are on duty 24 hours a day. Personal ethics, morality, and integrity will strongly influence a person’s professional ethical conduct. Integrity means wholeness or completeness—continuity of life in all its actions. As leaders, we want to exhibit that kind of integrity. As trainers of the next generation, we want to encourage that kind of integrity. We must not delude ourselves or the people we lead by thinking that we can practice conduct.

Notes
3. ibid., 40.
7. Quoted in ibid.
8. Quoted in ibid.
10. Quoted in ibid., 70.

The quality of a person’s life is in direct proportion to their commitment to excellence, regardless of their chosen field of endeavor.

—Vince Lombardi

Contributor

Maj Gen Jerry E. White, USAFR (BS, University of Washington; MS, Air Force Institute of Technology; PhD, Purdue University), is mobilization assistant to the commander, Headquarters Air Force Materiel Command, Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio. The general entered the Air Force in 1959 as a distinguished graduate of the University of Washington Reserve Officer Training Corps program. He served as a mission controller at the height of the space program. He taught at the US Air Force Academy for six years, coauthoring a national textbook on astrodynamics that is still a standard reference text. In his civilian capacity, General White is president and chief executive officer of The Navigators—an international Christian organization headquartered in Colorado Springs, Colorado, which boasts a staff of 3,600 in 95 countries. The general is a graduate of Squadron Officer School, Air Command and Staff College, and Air War College.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed or implied in the Journal are those of the authors and should not be construed as carrying the official sanction of the Department of Defense, the Air Force, Air Education and Training Command, Air University, or other agencies or departments of the US Government. Articles may be reproduced in whole or in part without permission. If they are reproduced, the Airpower Journal requests a courtesy line.