

ETHICAL ASPECTS OF THE EXERCISE OF COMMAND

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I come to you, at the invitation of the Chief of Chaplains, as an old soldier who has obeyed many commands and grumbled about quite a few; as a wartime company commander who has issued many commands, some effective and some futile; and as a scholar and teacher who for 25 years has worked in the field of social ethics, trying to learn what the processes of our society do to people.

I am aware of the many worlds of experience that meet here in this room. I am also aware that each of us individually is a meeting ground of differing worlds of experience. One of my students this past year impressed me with the way in which worlds can interact in one person. He was an officer in the United States Army, sensitive to the values and loyalties of the military world. He was a chaplain, an ordained clergyman, with commitments to his church and its faith. He was a candidate for the degree of Doctor of Education, alert to the demands of the world of scholarship. And he was a black man, sharing the aspirations and anger of his racial group at this particular time in history. A rare and thoughtful human being, he thus found in himself these four worlds of experience—each with its prestige systems, its goals and its carefully cultivated symbols. The act that earned him status in one world could cost him status in another. He therefore had to ask himself: was he an authority figure or a rebel, a man ambitious to rise in an establishment or a challenger of all establishments? Because he was such a questioner, he was a better human being.

We here find our identities in many communities. We look for approval to varied reference groups. We laugh at different jokes, our spines tingle to diverse music, and we become angry over contrasting types of sacrilege. We may know the worlds of the military, of political leadership, of diplomacy, of business, of church and synagogue, of higher education, racial heritage, of sexual identification.

These worlds of experience are also worlds of discourse, with

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differing vocabularies. Bulls and bears on the prairies and in the forests are not the same as bulls and bears on Wall Street. Plumbers mean one thing in my kitchen, something else in national politics. Laundering has a clear meaning at home, another meaning in financial electoral campaigns. The word "gay" has quite different meanings in different communities. Long hair and a shaggy beard are a way of saying "I belong" in some worlds and "I don't belong and don't want to belong" in other worlds.

So communication is difficult at the interfaces between different worlds of discourse. What I say here today will come through differently to different hearers. But precisely at these interfaces communication may be rewarding. I welcome the opportunity to try. And I expect that the most challenging questions you ask will be the ones from which I learn most.

I.

The topic is "Ethical Aspects of the Exercise of Command." I begin by describing three paradoxes that I find in the nature of military command. They are there because life, seen honestly, is paradoxical. Conflicting values are part of human experience, and they pull us in opposing directions.

The first paradox comes out of the relation of command to the American ethos and experience. In some societies the basic idea of command raises no ethical problems, because people assume that God or nature made some people to command and others to obey. The American heritage, which is related to the biblical heritage, does not. At the birth of our country the Founding Fathers said: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights. . . ." Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin and their co-signers knew that people are not equal in athletic ability, intelligence, or governmental skills. They meant that people are equal in human dignity, in basic rights and responsibilities.

If that is the case, what is the justification of command? Why should any human being have a moral right to command another human being? To claim such a right is to assume a heavy burden of proof.

Yet life often requires that we accept that burden of proof—nowhere more obviously than in combat situations. Events require decisions—prompt decisions. The success of a mission and human lives are at stake. There is no time to call an assembly and work toward a consensus, to appoint a committee that will report next year, to consult legal counsel, to develop an encounter group. Authority must be located—preferably in the best person,

certainly in a person trained and designated for that kind of decision-making.

So the exercise of command is justifiable. I suppose it is inherent in governmental processes, but especially conspicuous in military organizations. Yet it is ethically paradoxical, and it always requires the effort of justification.

I remember confronting the issue in my first week of basic training at Camp Wolters, Texas, in 1941. The platoon sergeant, a regular army man, was explaining to his fresh trainees the importance of obedience to orders. After all, he said, we were not exceptional in having to take orders. The NCO's took orders from the company officers, who took orders from battalion officers, and so on up the line to the Commanding General of the Division. And *he* took orders through a chain of command that went to the Chief of Staff in Washington. And *he* took orders from the Commander in Chief, the President. "And," the Sergeant wound up, "who do you suppose the Commander in Chief takes orders from? From you, the voters!" That, I found, was no comfort when I was ordered to do Sunday guard duty. But it was an important evidence of the weight our system of government attaches to mutual responsibility.

I thought about that responsibility often. I thought about it when I was commissioned and became a platoon leader. I rather liked the title of platoon *leader*. When I became a company *commander*, the designation was more perplexing. That anybody should be labeled a commander of other people raised all the perplexities that have haunted Western civilization from the times of the Hebrew prophets and Plato. I understood the necessity and the rationale. I hope I never forgot that the exercise of command involves an immense burden of responsibility and the possibilities of terrible abuse.

The second ethical perplexity of command has to do specifically with military command and the whole morality of war. War is, at best, a tragic necessity—an answer to aggression and oppression. It is, at worst, mankind's most cruel and destructive activity.

The message of the horrors of war and the good of peace comes not only from pacifists but from the heart of the military establishment. The Strategic Air Command has chosen the motto: "Peace is our profession." At the entrance to Carlisle Barracks, just under the words "Army War College," is the quotation, "Not to promote war, but to preserve peace," from "Elihu Root, Founder."¹ General Eisenhower, thinking about nuclear war as President of the United States, said in 1960: "War is now utterly

¹ For a photograph of the motto, see *Army*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (March 1972), p. 56.

preposterous.”² General Bradley described war as “a wretched debasement of all the thin pretensions of civilization.”³ General Patton, the most aggressive of all generals in World War II, nevertheless saw the moral and religious paradoxes of his role. On his first Sunday in Normandy, he has reported: “I went to a Catholic Field Mass where all of us were armed. As we knelt in the mud in the slight drizzle, we could distinctly hear the roar of the guns, and the whole sky was filled with airplanes on their missions of destruction . . . quite at variance with the teachings of the religion we were practicing.”⁴

Like many of you, I have lived with this perplexity. I have believed it my conscientious duty to enter into war for the sake of justice and peace. In a world where hard ethical decisions involve conflicts of values, the military commander is not uniquely involved in such conflicts, but he is more openly involved than most people. And he stands peculiarly in a situation of temptation. Often the incentives that influence people generally—professional advancement, public acclaim, the approval of peers—are in his case related to achievement in war. The temptations are great to forget that the ultimate mission of the military is “not to promote war, but to preserve peace.”

The third ethical paradox arises out of the cultural situation in which our generation lives—throughout most of the world and quite specifically in this nation. It is a confused cultural situation with deep disagreements about important human goals. We live in a world that is restive under authority, a world that distrusts concentrated power. An “anti-establishment” mood marks many societies and infiltrates even the most authoritarian societies—even, for example, the Soviet society. Centralized line organizations are not in style. Free-floating, charismatic authority rather than fixed hierarchical authority appeals to many people. Various groups—conspicuously youth, black people, women, poor people, those at the bottom of status ladders—are saying: “Nobody is going to tell us what to do. We want to make the decisions that affect our destiny.”

Such claims sometimes have a rhetorical excess. Nobody makes all the decisions that affect his own destiny. All people live with some restraints, as well as some opportunities, defined by society. But some people have suffered many restraints and few opportunities. So it is not only a contemporary style but also a profound ethical demand that they be heard. The professional leaders of the “new army” are struggling with hard decisions

² Speech in Rio de Janeiro, Feb. 24, 1960. Text in *New York Times*, Feb. 25, 1960, p. 8.

³ *A Soldier's Story* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1951), p. 311.

⁴ *War as I Knew It* (New York: Pyramid Books, 1966; first published by Houghton Mifflin Co., 1947), p. 94.

these days: how can we increase the freedom and dignity of the soldier, what of the old style is "Mickey Mouse" and what is essential, what is the right combination of relaxed and permissive life styles with traditional disciplines?

Although nobody knows the answers for certain, the questions themselves are evidences of the perplexity our entire society faces. Although I live chiefly in, and share the values of, the world of higher education—where protest movements, freedom and spontaneity have been the recent vogue—I have some appreciation of the values of the military system. I think of two examples.

The first is the racial desegregation of the Army. Like the rest of American society, the Army waited too long to desegregate. But when it moved, it moved faster and more effectively than most social institutions—often shaming business, public schools and churches in the process. There is not the slightest doubt that the processes of command and discipline deserve much of the credit. The current racial problems in the armed services are evidence that command and discipline have limited effects and that the contagious diseases of our society cannot be banned from military life by edict. But the creative uses of command have served the purposes of democracy in the desegregation of the Army.

The second example comes from the experience of prisoners of war. I can barely imagine the ordeal of those soldiers and airmen who fought in what General Maxwell Taylor has called "the dirtiest, most unpleasant and least glorious war in our history,"⁵ who then suffered the painful physical and psychic experiences of imprisonment. It is to be expected that the wounds of those experiences will not quickly heal. Yet the strength of those men has impressed many people, even among those totally opposed to the war in which they fought. As *Newsweek* columnist Shana Alexander has put it, "these POW's now appear to us to embody precisely those moral qualities of honor, patriotism, discipline and purpose which many of us feel have largely disappeared from American life."⁶ From my own far shorter and far less cruel experiences as a prisoner of war, I can testify to the values in the military system of command.

It is not the system for organizing a university, a congress or a church. The old system is not exactly the system for the future. The military system faces the perplexity of revising its methods to meet a changed cultural situation. And the whole culture faces the perplexity of relating some of its traditional values to the values getting more obvious expression today.

⁵ "Is an Army Career Still Worthwhile?" *Army*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (February 1973), p. 10.

⁶ "Prisoners of Peace," *Newsweek*, Vol. LXXXI, No. 10 (March 5, 1973), p. 32.

II.

I have described three ethical perplexities or paradoxes that I see in the exercise of military command. These will be with us for a while to come. I expect no instant solutions, least of all at this meeting. But I think I see better and worse ways of meeting these perplexities. To understand them we must look at one curious characteristic of systems of command—to some extent of all systems of command, but most especially of command systems within a democratic society.

Put it this way: a command is compulsory, yet its effectiveness does not depend solely on compulsion. Take the first part of that statement. A command is by its very nature compulsory. It does not begin, "Everybody who feels like it, come along." A command is not a question, a suggestion, a hint, an invitation, an entreaty. It is a command, and there are penalties for non-compliance. But take the second part of the statement. The effectiveness of a command does not depend solely on compulsion. It depends also on morale. General Eisenhower in his *Crusade in Europe* wrote: "Morale is the greatest single factor in successful war. . . . In any long and bitter campaign morale will suffer unless all ranks thoroughly believe that their commanders are concerned first and always with the welfare of the troops who do the fighting." ⁷ That tells a lot about the nature of command.

Let me reminisce. During the last phases of pre-combat training for World War II, the Ninth Armored Division had a rule that no soldier should be separated from his weapon during training. The Commanding General inspected my company during a lunch break in the field. The company was deployed in such a way that I did not see the next event. One soldier had laid aside his rifle while filling his messkit, and the General told his aide to pick it up. That night I—not the soldier but I—had to report to Division Headquarters to recover the weapon and take a dressing down from the Commanding General. General John Leonard and I both came from Toledo, Ohio, but we never realized that until after the war, and in any case it would not have done me the slightest bit of good. I returned to the company with the rifle—and with my ears smarting. I had been told, once again, that it was my duty to *enforce* discipline. I understood the system. But, licking my wounds, I refreshed my memory again on the definition of discipline in the basic infantry field manual: "cheerful willing obedience" to the command of a superior. I knew that there was no discipline without enforcement, but I knew also that no force could compel that obedience be

⁷ Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1948, p. 210.

cheerful and willing. Effective command cannot simply be compelled; it must be evoked, won, earned.

I want to mention three ethical qualities of command that have something to do with the winning of discipline. The first is fairness. There must be no favoritism. Inevitably a commanding officer likes some of his subordinates better than others—and his wife likes some of their wives better than others. Probably he likes some of their wives better than others. That does not give him the right to assign the dangerous and unpleasant missions to those he likes least. His commands must be just; they may be strict, but they cannot be a matter of whim.

Most important of all, he avoids favoritism not only among his subordinates but also towards himself. He does not spare himself. He does not issue orders out of his emotional frustrations. He does not take delight in demonstrating his authority. He does not use others for the sake of his ambitions. He matches and seeks to surpass whatever loyalty he demands.

A second quality of command is courage. Everybody knows that soldiers are expected to have courage and that they expect their commanders to have courage. Not everyone thinks through the kinds of courage that life demands. The person conspicuous for one kind of courage may lack another.

A society like ours puts a high value on stability and the achievements of a civilization that has overcome some of the risks that are common to human life elsewhere. We don't expect tigers to pounce on us, bad weather to drive us to starvation, or enemy tribesmen to kill us. Since life is usually less precarious than in most past history, the demand for physical courage in danger is less frequent. It is therefore the more admirable when men who love life conquer their fears and risk their lives for comrades and a cause.

There is another kind of courage equally important—the moral courage to resist pressures and take a stand against immoral acts. Without pretending to know the details, I think that G. I. Ronald Ridenhour may have had it when he spilled the story of My Lai; or Airman Lonnie Franks when he disclosed General Lavelle's unauthorized bombings of North Vietnam; or Major Hal Knight when he told a Senator of the falsification of records of secret bombings of Cambodia. The man in a chain of command turns over some of his rights of judgment; he must act on the judgments of his superiors, even though his own judgment differs. What he cannot turn over to anybody else is his conscience and his integrity.

The last of the three qualities of command that I have chosen to emphasize, I can approach through an anecdote. A few days

after the cross-channel invasion of France in World War II, General Marshall flew across the ocean for a conference with General Eisenhower and General Bradley. We are told that they went over the military situation, as commanders do. Then, in a more relaxed way, they fell to talking about war and military leadership. They talked about historic commanders since Gideon. And they put up the question, what is the indispensable quality for the leader who must order other men to face death? The answer they agreed on came in one word provided by General Marshall. The word was *selflessness*.

That word is surprising. We expect of commanders a certain kind of self-assurance, a flair, an ability to dramatize themselves, a capacity to project a decisive image. What the three Generals meant, I suppose, was that the commander's concern for himself and his status must be less than his concern for the cause he upholds and the troops he commands, leads and serves. I suggest another word that may help to interpret their word. My word is *responsibility*.

Responsibility flows both upwards and downwards in the hierarchy. The commander has a responsibility to his superior officers, as they exercise their lawful duties. He has a responsibility to the Constitution of the United States. As Hal Knight told a Senator in testimony last week, "Sir, I didn't take an oath to support the military. I took an oath to support the Constitution."⁸ It is a responsibility to international laws of war. It is, for many of us, a responsibility to God.

If responsibility—and particularly accountability—are most obviously upwards, moral responsibility also reaches downwards. The commander has a responsibility to those whom he commands. To forget it is to vitiate personal integrity and the ethical validity of the system. In Lord Acton's famous words, "All power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely." I don't know how often these days you hear the old slogan, RHIP. Rank has its privileges. Those privileges are deserved only if rank has its responsibilities. As the Bible puts it, "Everyone to whom much is given, of him will much be required; and of him to whom men commit much they will demand the more" (Luke 12:48).

There are commanders who understand that. In 1944 Ernie Pyle filed a story from the bruising Italian campaign. It was about the death of a company commander. As a company commander in training for battle, I read the story and aspired to

⁸ Reported in *The New York Times*, July 22, 1973, Section 4, p. 8.

be the kind of troop commander that Ernie Pyle described. I want to read part of that dispatch.⁹

Captain [Henry T.] Waskow was a company commander in the Thirty-sixth Division He was very young, only in his middle twenties, but he carried in him a sincerity and a gentleness that made people want to be guided by him.

"After my father, he came next," a sergeant told me.

"He always looked after us," a soldier said. "He'd go to bat for us every time."

"I've never knowed him to do anything unfair," another said.

I was at the foot of the mule trail the night they brought Captain Waskow down. The moon was nearly full, and you could see far up the trail Dead men had been coming down the mountain all evening, lashed onto the backs of mules.

The Italian mule skimmers were afraid to walk beside dead men, so Americans had to lead the mules down that night. Even the Americans were reluctant to unlash and lift off the bodies . . . , so an officer had to do it himself and ask others to help.

I don't know who that first one was. You feel small in the presence of dead men, and you don't ask silly questions. . . . They laid him on the ground in the shadow of the low stone wall beside the road. We left him there beside the road, that first one, and we all went back into the cowshed. . . . We talked soldier talk for an hour or more; the dead man lay all alone, outside in the shadow of the wall.

Then a soldier came into the cowshed and said there were some more bodies outside. We went out into the road. Four mules stood there in the moonlight. . . . The soldiers who led them stood there waiting.

"This one is Captain Waskow," one of them said quietly.

Two men unlashd his body from the mule and lifted it off and laid it in the shadow beside the stone wall. Other men took the other bodies off. Finally, there were five lying end to end in a long row. You don't cover up dead men in the combat zones. They just lie there in the shadows until somebody comes after them.

The unburdened mules moved off to their olive grove. The men in the road seemed reluctant to leave. They stood around, and gradually I could sense them moving, one by one, close to Captain Waskow's body. Not so much to look, I think, as to say something in finality to him, and to themselves. I stood close by and I could hear.

⁹ *Brave Men* (New York: Gosset and Dunlap, 1945), pp. 106-107.

One soldier came and looked down, and he said out loud, "God damn it!"

That's all he said, and then he walked away.

Another one came, and he said, "God damn it to hell anyway!" He looked down for a few last moments and then turned and left.

Another man came. I think he was an officer. It was hard to tell officers from men in the dim light, for everybody was bearded and grimy. The man looked down into the dead captain's face and then spoke directly to him, as though he were alive, "I'm sorry, old man."

Then a soldier came and stood beside the officer and bent over, and he too spoke to his dead captain, not in a whisper but awfully tenderly, and he said, "I sure am sorry, sir."

Then the first man squatted down, and he . . . took the captain's hand, and he sat there for a full five minutes holding the dead hand in his own and looking intently into the dead face. And he never uttered a sound all the time he sat there.

Finally he put the hand down. He reached over and gently straightened the points of the captain's shirt collar, and then he sort of rearranged the tattered edges of the uniform around the wound, and then he got up and walked away down the road in the moonlight, all alone.

The rest of us went back into the cowshed, leaving the five dead men lying in a line, end to end, in the shadow of the low stone wall. We lay down in the straw in the cowshed, and pretty soon we were all asleep.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I give you Captain Waskow as a soldier who understood the responsibilities of command.