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Defining the American Warrior Leader

JOHN C. BAHNSEN and ROBERT W. CONE

The term "warrior leader" conjures up an image of a heroic figure who leads soldiers on the modern battlefield, always winning and never being hurt. In actual fact, warrior leaders often die for their country. In many cases, warriors lead youngsters to their deaths. This morbid side of the modern warrior image is often neglected or downplayed. But there is no higher calling in our society than to be selected to lead American soldiers into combat to preserve our freedoms. America's soldiers are by definition the best we can find and train; therefore, they deserve the very best leadership we can develop.

The US Army has shown significant concern in recent years for insuring that leaders measure up to this challenge, and increasing attention has been focused on the development of the "warrior spirit." Despite the Army's renewed emphasis on the importance of this attribute, we are facing an identity crisis among insecure officers, untested in combat, who dearly want to be warriors. Unfortunately, many of these officers have seized on the more basic and visible features of warriorship to the exclusion of other more important and complex aspects. Worse yet, some have misinterpreted the fundamental meaning of warriorship to justify uncaring, roughshod treatment of subordinates, shallow showmanship, or poor professional preparation on their own part. No course could be more misguided. The purpose of this article is to examine the origins of the American "warrior spirit" and provide some insight on what it should mean to the officer in today's Army.

The Army defines the warrior spirit in "The Professional Development of Officers Study." This document specifies the need to "have a warrior

spirit" as a foundation for the officer professional development process. Officers imbued with the warrior spirit act as follows:

> Officers accept the responsibility of being entrusted with protection of the Nation; are prepared physically and mentally to lead units to fight and support in combat; [are] skilled in the use of weapons, tactics, and doctrine; inspire confidence and an eagerness to be part of the team; have the ability to analyze, the vision to see, and the integrity to choose, and the courage to execute.[1]

Many young officers read this statement and orient almost exclusively on the images of superb physical readiness, outstanding tactical and technical competence, and extraordinary courage. These are the basic attributes that allow the warrior to lead by example from the front. They are important. To achieve and maintain these highly perishable attributes requires almost constant attention and focus. Fortunately, we have no shortage of young leaders who are willing to persevere in such efforts. Although these critical attributes are an absolutely essential foundation, they alone do not compose the total makeup of the American warrior leader in his manifestations throughout America's military history.

The complete character of the American warrior leader must be fleshed out with deeper but less glamorous qualities. Although not as colorful, these qualities distinguish the unique heritage of American arms. The first is a sincere recognition of the privilege of *special trust and confidence* accorded those whose responsibility is to defend our democracy. S. L. A. Marshall here describes the unique bonding between the nation and the officer that accrues through the commissioning process's solemn acknowledgment of the apprentice leader's "patriotism, valor, fidelity, and abilities":

> Having been specially chosen by the United States to sustain dignity and integrity of its sovereign power, an officer is expected to maintain himself, and so to exert his influence for so long as he may live, that he will be recognized as a worthy symbol of all that is best in the national character. In this sense the trust imposed in the highest military commander is not more than what is enjoined upon the newest ensign or second lieutenant. Nor is it less. It is the fact of commission that gives special distinction to the man and in return requires that the measure of his devotion to the service of his country be distinctive, as compared with the charge laid upon the average citizen.[2]

This special trust and confidence, symbolized by the commission, distinguishes our officers from those of many other nations, whose citizens live in fear of or are uncertain of their armies' support for civilian rule.

The second less glamorous but no less vital component of the warrior spirit is *mental readiness*. Mental readiness goes beyond simple mental toughness by insisting on a mastery of doctrine combined with the ability to think,

analyze, and develop a vision for success. This means that the warrior leader uses intellect to solve problems and find solutions. The warrior leader is confident in subordinates' ability to withstand hardship, but works intently to avoid abusing that confidence. The warrior leader uses the same aggressive spirit in planning and thinking through tactical operations that is expected of subordinates in execution. The warrior leader's goal is to be successful without unnecessarily risking soldiers' lives. Only the intellectual mastery of the art of war makes this goal achievable.

The warrior leader must also possess the *integrity and moral character* to do the harder right instead of the easier wrong. This means more than the ability to pass judgment on others or adhere to the party line. It means that the warrior has the strength of character to always do what is right for the Army and the nation. This may sometimes mean taking unpopular or controversial stands that result in damage to one's own career. Some of the very best careers are short but outstanding—marked by integrity and honor and shortened by casualty or a stand of conscience. Quality of service, not length, is the measure that should be used to evaluate a soldier's career. The warrior leader owes his absolute integrity above all else to his soldiers, the Army, and the nation.

The final element is *inspiring leadership*. The origins of this kind of leadership are deeply rooted in the history of the communal warlord and are the basis for charismatic authority.[3] Beyond the tools of rank and position, the warrior leads with a sense of personal magnetism drawing upon the subordinates' recognition of the leader's exceptional character and qualifications. Soldiers desire to follow the warrior leader because they are confident of his abilities and trusting in his judgment. Given a free choice, they would elect the warrior leader as their captain. Soldiers may not always like their warrior leaders, but they respect them above all else.

An important dimension of inspiring leadership is a manifest solicitude for subordinates' welfare. Major General John M. Schofield brilliantly

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captured this form of caring leadership in an address to the United States Corps of Cadets at West Point on 11 August 1879:

> The discipline which makes the soldiers of a free country reliable in battle is not to be gained by harsh or tyrannical treatment. On the contrary, such treatment is far more likely to destroy than to make an army. It is possible to impart instruction and to give commands in such manner and such a tone of voice to inspire in the soldier no feeling but an intense desire to obey, while the opposite manner and tone of voice cannot fail to excite strong resentment and a desire to disobey. The one mode or the other of dealing with subordinates springs from a corresponding spirit in the breast of the commander. He who feels the respect which is due to others cannot fail to inspire in them regard for himself, while he who feels, and hence manifests, disrespect toward others, especially his inferiors, cannot fail to inspire hatred against himself.[4]

The essence of this style of leadership is found in mutual trust and respect between leader and follower. General Schofield's definition of discipline has been required memory work for all West Point plebes for many years.

Most of the traits of the ideal American warrior are well represented in the character of Colonel Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain as displayed during the American Civil War. A description of Colonel Chamberlain's performance as the Commander of the 20th Maine Regiment in the Battle of Gettysburg serves as the introduction to the Army's Field Manual 22-100, *Military Leadership*. Chamberlain's creative and cerebral leadership were the keys to Union success during the actions at Little Round Top, Quaker Road, and Five Forks. His willingness to lead from the front was evidenced by his being wounded six times and cited four times for valor, including the Medal of Honor. His exceptional abilities were recognized by General Ulysses S. Grant, who chose Chamberlain to receive the Southern surrender at Appomattox.[5]

This superb officer clearly possessed the basic warrior attributes—the physical readiness, tactical and technical competence, and courage that allowed him to lead from the front. But beyond those, he possessed the more

complex and subtle characteristics of warriorship. Chamberlain understood the obligation of service to nation and community. As a professor of rhetoric at Bowdoin College, he took a sabbatical in order to volunteer to serve the Union cause. Following the war, he returned to Maine to serve as Governor and later Dean of Bowdoin.

Colonel Chamberlain also possessed superior intellectual traits. Many observers, focusing on the devastation and brutality of war, erroneously place a low premium upon the intellectual qualifications demanded of its practitioners. They are advised to heed the wise warning of Sir William Francis Butler, England's 19th-century soldier-statesman: "The nation that will insist on drawing a broad line of demarcation between the fighting man and the thinking man is liable to find its fighting done by fools and its thinking done by cowards."[6] Chamberlain's own high intelligence merged with battlefield savvy and a deep understanding of basic tactics. This combination resulted in brilliant improvisation on the battlefield, as reflected for example in his inspired bayonet counterattack at Little Round Top.

Perhaps most significant was Chamberlain's caring leadership of soldiers and his insistence on avoiding unnecessary human suffering. Such attributes, combining the quintessentially martial virtues with the intellectual qualifications for warfare and a psychological mastery of human motivation, place Joshua Chamberlain in the forefront of prototypes of the American warrior.

Our message to aspiring young warrior leaders should thus be clear. The heritage of the American warrior is indeed rich. It combines the finest elements of gung ho, lead-from-the-front captaincy, on one hand, with the assurance that our soldiers are led in the right direction, with the best possible plan, and with the least possible suffering and loss of life, on the other hand. Our task as warrior leaders is not simply to get out in front and brave the bullets, but to know where we are going, why we are going there, whether it is the right place to go, and the best way to get there.

NOTES

1. Department of Army Pamphlet 360-888, Commanders Call, Special Issue, *The Professional Development of Officers Study* (Washington: Office of Secretary of the Army, Public Affairs, May-June 1985), p. 5.

2. S. L. A. Marshall, *The Officer as a Leader* (Harrisburg, Pa: Stackpole, 1966), p. 25.

3. Max Weber, *On Charisma and Institution-Building*, ed. S. N. Eisenstadt (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press), pp. 34-35.

4. John M. Schofield, quoted in *Bugle Notes*, Vol. 42 (West Point, N.Y.: US Military Academy, 1950-51), p. 206.

5. Michael Shaara, *The Killer Angels* (New York: David McKay, 1974), p. 374.

6. Sir William Francis Butler, *A Narrative of the Historical Events Connected with the Sixty-Ninth Regiment* (London: W. Mitchell, 1870), p. 92.