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From the Archives: The Commander's Concept of Duty

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The Commander's Concept of Duty

Shortly before the 1942 American invasion of North Africa, the Task Force commander, George S. Patton, wrote in his diary, " I hope that, whatever comes up, I shall be able to do my full duty. If I can do that, I have nothing more to ask. Fate will deliver what success I shall attain . . ." Three centuries earlier, the Frenchman Pierre Corneille advised in *El Cid*, "Do your duty, and leave the rest to heaven." Since the Age of Pericles, philosophers, playwrights, and generals have never doubted that duty was the central virtue of the professional military man. But this was not so in 1984, when two Washington study groups wrote 500-word statements of philosophy for Army systems that governed officer personnel management and professional development—never using the word Duty. Moreover, they did not mention Honor or Country. Instead, they wrote of commitment, selfless service, loyalty, and candor.

Was this a mere substitution of modern words for antique ones? Or was there a new message, a departure from a long tradition?

. . .

The substantive difference between old and new was in the concept of self, the worth of the person, and the place of the individuals in a shared human enterprise. While the new word "commitment," for example, implied giving over one's will to the cause (be it institution, ideal, or group), the old word "duty" implied that the individual should determine the nature and extent of his obligation, and then give the obedience and allegiance that reason dictated.

While the new "candor" called for truthfulness and frankness, it did so as an institutional requirement, for automatic conformance by the individual involved. The old word "honor" called for truthfulness and honesty to sustain, not only the institution, but the honor or reputation of the individual, whose most valuable asset was his good name for integrity and trustworthiness.

Source: Roger H. Nye, *The Challenge of Command* (Wayne, New Jersey: Avery Publishing Group Inc., 1986), 115-16.