

How Much Obedience Does an Officer Need?

Beck, Tresckow, and Stauffenberg—Examples of Integrity and Moral Courage for Today's Officer



by
Major (General Staff) Dr. Ulrich F. Zwygart



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Commemorating the Centennial of International Officer Participation in the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College

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PREFACE

Major Ulrich F. Zwygart's essay, "How Much Obedience Does an Officer Need?" was awarded second place in the 1992-93 MacArthur Writing Award competition. The excellence of Major Zwygart's accomplishment is especially remarkable in that he wrote in a language other than his own.

It is fitting that the Combat Studies Institute publish Major Zwygart's work in conjunction with the commemoration of the centennial of international officer participation at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College (CGSC). One hundred years ago, on 19 December 1893, Lieutenant Colonel Henry C. LeComte, Swiss Army, reported for duty at CGSC for a six-month course. Today, Major Zwygart exemplifies the continued excellence of international officers at CGSC.



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I. INTRODUCTION

We are born with a potential for obedience, which then interacts with the influence of society to produce the obedient man.¹ Conscience, which regulates man's impulsive aggressive action, is diminished, however, when man enters a hierarchical structure. In this context, the individual no longer views himself as responsible for his own actions but defines himself as an instrument for carrying out the wishes of others.² Stanley Milgram, professor of psychology, describes the process that finally leads to disobedience—inner doubt, externalization of doubt, dissent, threat, and disobedience:

It's a difficult path, which only a minority of subjects are able to pursue to its conclusion . . . The act of disobedience requires a mobilization of inner resources, and their transformation beyond inner preoccupation, beyond merely polite verbal exchange, into a domain of action. . . . The price of disobedience is a gnawing sense that one has been faithless. Even though he has chosen the morally correct action, the subject remains troubled by the disruption of the social order he brought about, and cannot fully dispel the feeling that he deserted a cause which he had pledged support. It is he, and not the obedient subject, who experiences the burden of his action.³

The purpose of this essay is to analyze cases of disobedience during twentieth-century military history as a means of addressing a number of issues. Why do soldiers disobey? What are their motives for disobedience? What is the legitimacy and morality of disobedience? What is the relationship of obedience to disobedience and blind obedience? And, finally, what is the value of this analysis for today's officer?

The first case study deals with three of the most important personalities in the conspiracy against Hitler: Ludwig Beck, Henning von Tresckow, and Claus Count von Stauffenberg. I chose them namely for two reasons: first, the three German officers illustrate three different paths from obedience to

disobedience, as they risked career, life, and honor. Second, the German military resistance to Hitler is, in my perception, not yet fully analyzed. I have the impression that the decisive role of Beck, Tresckow, and Stauffenberg is only marginally known in the British and American military.⁴ Other examples are added to give an overview of disobedience in twentieth-century military history, followed by an analysis of the legitimacy and morality of disobedience and the relationship of obedience to disobedience and blind obedience. I will arrive at the conclusion that today's officer should live and be educated according to the principle of what I term "critical obedience."

II. DISOBEDIENCE IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY MILITARY HISTORY

Beck, Tresckow, and Stauffenberg

A Short Summary of the Military Resistance to Hitler

Several events between 1933 and 1938 placed some senior German military men in opposition to Hitler.⁵ First to mention is the assassination of Röhm, leader of the SA (*Sturmabteilung*/storm troops), in the summer of 1934 at Hitler's orders. Subsequently, a total of eighty-five men were killed, including Röhm, his staff, and former Chancellor von Schleicher. Second, Hitler consolidated his power after President von Hindenburg's death on 2 August 1934, when all soldiers swore "unconditional obedience" to Hitler—not the nation or the constitution. Third, Hitler alienated some military supporters after the Blomberg-Fritsch crisis (November 1937), in which the war minister, Fieldmarshal von Blomberg, and the commander in chief of the German Army, General von Fritsch, had to resign on trumped-up charges. The fourth significant event was the night of 9–10 November 1938, the so-called *Reichskristallnacht* ("Night of the Broken Glass"), with the burning of 119 synagogues, the arrest of 20,000 Jews, and 36 deaths.

When Hitler issued orders to prepare a surprise attack on Czechoslovakia early in 1938, General Beck warned the commander of the Wehrmacht, General von Brauchitsch, that France and Britain would assist Czechoslovakia. On 16 July 1938, Beck handed out prepared notes to Brauchitsch: "All upright and serious German men in positions of responsibility in the state must feel called upon and duty-bound to employ all conceivable means and ways, including the most extreme, to avert a war against Czechoslovakia which in its effects must

lead to a world war that would mean *finis Germaniae* (the end of Germany).”⁶

Beck even went a step further and requested a collective protest by senior commanders. On 4 August 1938, the senior German Army commanders were briefed by Brauchitsch and Beck. The latter’s memorandum of 16 July showed nearly unanimous agreement among the assembled generals. But Brauchitsch did not request that the generals confront Hitler with a refusal to carry out orders in case of war. Beck was isolated. Hitler must have been informed of this gathering, for he promptly ordered the senior chief of staffs to his Berghof vacation house on 10 August. There, after a three-hour speech, he found little opposition and concluded that only one or two of the commanding generals had the courage to live up to their convictions. General Beck resigned on 18 August and handed over his duties to his successor, General Franz Halder.

Halder, although he did not have the same perseverance as Beck, was ready to announce a coup if Hitler gave the order to attack Czechoslovakia. The conspirators, among them Generals von Witzleben, Oster, and Hoepner, were uncertain of Halder and therefore ready to act without his agreement. The deployment of units of the army and the police of Berlin was planned in detail. Hitler was to be arrested or shot down on sight. On 28 September 1938, a general mobilization was expected, whereupon the conspirators planned to strike. But in the afternoon, news came of an international conference in Munich the following day. The preconditions for a coup failed to materialize. Sir Neville Henderson, the British ambassador in Berlin, wrote to Lord Halifax, secretary of state: “By keeping the peace, we have saved Hitler and his regime.”⁷

The conspirators tried again in 1939. Colonel General Kurt Baron von Hammerstein-Equord, who was assigned to arrest Hitler, was appointed commander of Army Detachment A in

the west. But Hammerstein was soon relieved of his command before Hitler visited his headquarters.

During the next three years, Hitler's successes continued to demoralize the military resistance. As the war went on, Hitler became even less accessible. After Hammerstein's death in 1942, the sicknesses of Witzleben in the same year, and of Beck one year later, the conspirators, at least temporarily, lost their military leaders. The initiative passed to younger officers. The two outstanding personalities were Colonel (later Major General) Henning von Tresckow and Lieutenant Colonel (later Colonel) Claus Count von Stauffenberg. Both tried to convince several general officers, among them Field Marshals Manstein and Kluge, to act against Hitler. Failing to persuade them, they decided to act on their own in close cooperation with the conspiracy's unofficial headquarters in Berlin (under Admiral Wilhelm Franz Canaris of Military Intelligence). On 13 March 1943, Hitler visited Army Group Center, where Tresckow had gathered a group of anti-Nazi officers. One of Hitler's staff officers was asked to take a gift to Berlin. The parcel contained a bomb, but it did not explode. On 21 March 1943, Major (later Major General) Rudolf-Christoph Freiherr von Gersdorff, an officer of Tresckow's circle, was supposed to blow himself up with Hitler during an exhibition of captured war materiel. Hitler, almost as if he felt the danger, virtually rushed through the rooms at the exhibit and left after a few minutes. Gersdorff could only defuse the mine.

When, in the second half of 1943, Stauffenberg was posted as chief of staff to General Olbricht, commander of the Home Army and a member of the conspiracy, new dynamics got hold of the military resistance. This assignment gave Stauffenberg a great opportunity to organize the plot under the code word *Valkyrie*. The plan was to assassinate Hitler and to accuse unnamed Nazi party notables of "stabbing the fighting front in the back" so that the Army would have to take power. The paperwork for Operation *Valkyrie* is a masterpiece of general

staff work, taped in secrecy by Tresckow's wife and her friend, Margarethe Countess von Hardenberg.⁸ Volunteers to kill Hitler were found: Captain Axel Baron von dem Bussche (who just died recently), Lieutenant Ewald Heinrich von Kleist, and Captain Eberhard von Breitenbach. However, the three young officers never came close to Hitler, because either an Allied air raid prevented the show of equipment, the viewing was postponed, or the "assassin" was barred from entering the conference in the last minute.

Finally, Stauffenberg decided to become both "Chief of Staff" of the plot and assassin—a double role that, of course, did not favor the outcome. Stauffenberg was indispensable for the success of the coup after the assassination, and so he had to return to Berlin. The final act on 20 July 1944 stood under the star of misfortune. The conference had been shifted from the bunker to a wooden barracks. Stauffenberg placed the suitcase with the bomb as near as possible to Hitler, but an oaken pedestal was between the dictator and the explosives. Both the composition of the barracks and the pedestal fatally weakened the effect of the explosion and saved Hitler's life. Professor Hans Rothfels commented, "one cannot avoid the conclusion that a number of failures were caused by an unbelievable accumulation of trivial incidents."⁹

The results are known. Beck tried to commit suicide, failed, and was finally shot by an NCO. Stauffenberg, together with his aide and three other officers, were shot during the night of 20–21 July 1944. The Generals von Witzleben, Hoepner, Oster, Fellgiebel, Stülpnagel, Admiral Canaris, and between 160 to 180 other officers were arrested, tried, convicted, and hanged. In consequence, the war in Europe continued until 8 May 1945, hundreds of thousands were killed on each side during the last ten months of World War II, and Germany was devastated and occupied.

The Motives

General Ludwig Beck was born in 1880.¹⁰ After completion of school, he joined the 15th Field Artillery Regiment in Strassburg. In 1913, he became a member of the German General Staff. During the Great War, he served in various staff positions exclusively on the Western Front. After the end of World War I, he decided to remain in the German Army (Reichswehr), where he commanded an artillery battalion and later an artillery regiment. In the early 1930s, he commanded a cavalry division. In October 1933, Beck was appointed "Chef des Truppenamtes," a position which later was transformed to chief of the General Staff of the Army.

General Beck was a cultivated European with a sense of history.¹¹ He was an intellectual as much as a soldier,¹² a quiet and reliable man who did not tolerate any contradiction between words and deeds.¹³ Field Marshal Erich von Manstein referred to Beck as "the only one I would consider equal to Moltke the Elder."¹⁴ According to Fabian von Schlabrendorff, a conspirator in Tresckow's staff, General Beck made the impression of a wise man.¹⁵ Beck criticized Hitler's aggressive plans for territorial policy that could only lead to defeat and reduction of Germany.¹⁶ Beck renounced a brilliant career, preferring to resign in protest rather than serve a regime that did not act in favor of its people. His opposition was rooted in a firm Christian faith and in a conservative attitude that believed legality, integrity, ethics, and responsibility were crucial for the servant of a nation.¹⁷ When Beck resigned in 1938, he was motivated not only by "professional and political knowledge" but also by the "dictate of conscience"¹⁸—believing that "obedience ends where knowledge, conscience, and responsibility prohibit the execution of an order."¹⁹

Doubtless, the conspirators, civilian and military, held him in high esteem and looked to him as their true leader. After the

successful coup d'état he was meant to become *Reichsverweser* and commander in chief of the German Army.

General Henning von Tresckow was born in 1901.²⁰ Fighting as a platoon leader in World War I, he was awarded the Iron Cross in July 1918. After the war, he stayed in the German Army until October 1920, then enrolled at the university, had a short career as a businessman, and finally, in 1924, went for a trip around the world. In South America, he received a telegram saying that his family was suffering a financial crisis. He went home and successfully met the crisis. Later, he married Erika von Falkenhayn, daughter of the former chief of the General Staff during the Great War, and decided to join the ranks again (1926). A captain in 1934 and an outstanding student of the class of 1934–36 at the German war college, he became a member of the German General Staff.

He was an adversary of Hitler's regime from 1934. The events of the 1930s strengthened his antipathy against the Nazis. In 1938, he told his commander, General von Witzleben, that the generals should have acted in favor of General Fritsch. Witzleben replied that there would be plans for an action against the SS and the Gestapo and urged him to stay in the army. Nevertheless, after General Beck resigned in protest, Tresckow lost faith in the senior leaders. He felt that Hitler would lead his country into a catastrophe. He commented that the *Reichskristallnacht* was a personal humiliation and a degradation of civilization. And when he heard of the plans to invade Poland, he said in July of 1939: "War is madness. We have to prevent it. The key person is Hitler. We have to kill him."²¹

A staff officer in Field Marshal von Rundstedt's headquarters during the campaigns in Poland and France, he became the Ia (first general staff officer) in the Army Group Center for Operation Barbarossa. There, he succeeded in rallying officers against Hitler. When, in May 1941, Hitler

issued his infamous *Kommissarbefehl* (guerrillas and Soviet political agents were to be shot instantly; German soldiers who violated rules of humanitarian law were not subjects of prosecution), Tresckow went to see Field Marshal Bock, his commander. On the way, he said to Gersdorff: "Remember this hour! If we do not succeed in convincing Field Marshal Bock to do everything within his might to urge Hitler to take back this order, then Germany has definitively lost its honor. Further generations will not blame Hitler alone, but you and me, too."²² Tresckow did not convince Bock to protest to Hitler personally. In Tresckow's words: "As long as I am the Ia of the Army Group Center, no political agent nor prisoner will be shot."²³ And he lived according to his principles. When Tresckow learned about the massacre of Borissow, where thousands of Jews had been killed by commando groups of the SS, he appealed again passionately to Field Marshal Bock: "Never may such a thing happen again! Therefore we must act now. We have the power in Russia!"²⁴ In December 1941, Tresckow said to one of his officers: "I would like to show the German people a film with the title 'Germany at the end of the war.' Then perhaps people would be alarmed and would realize where we are heading. People would agree with me that the superior warlord (Hitler) must disappear. But since we cannot show this movie people will create the legend of the 'stab in the back' whenever we will act against Hitler."²⁵

Tresckow tried to convince his superiors (Bock, Manstein, Kluge) to take action.²⁶ He implored Manstein to stop the dishonorable blind obedience and to accept his military and political responsibility for action.²⁷ In April 1943, he said to his wife: "I cannot understand how people can still call themselves Christians and not be furious adversaries of Hitler's regime."²⁸ And on the occasion of his sons confirmation, he said to all the invited guests: "One may not separate the concept of freedom from Prussianism. True Prussianism means a synthesis of obligation and freedom. Without this combination, Prussianism

threatens to become soulless service and narrow-minded dogmatism.”²⁹

When, in June 1944, Stauffenberg asked Tresckow, through Lehdorff, if the assassination of Hitler should still be undertaken, Tresckow answered: “It must be done *coute que coute* [cost what it will]. If it fails you must act in Berlin as well. It is no longer a question of feasibility but to show to the world and to history that the German resistance dared to make the last step.”³⁰

Colonel Claus Count Schenk von Stauffenberg was born in 1907.³¹ After his final school examination in 1926, he started his military career with the 17th Bamberg Cavalry Regiment. In 1936, he was posted to the War Academy. Like Tresckow, he was among the very best officers of his year group. Later, he served as a staff officer during the occupation of the Sudetenland and in General Hoepner’s headquarters in Poland.

Stauffenberg can be called a Hitler sympathizer in the 1930s. Like the vast majority of the officer corps, he welcomed conscription, rearmament, and the annulment of the Versailles Treaty. However, he judged the *Reichskristallnacht* as a disgrace to his country. After the campaign in the West, he was assigned to the German Army High Command and often visited the Russian front. In 1942, he came to believe that the war was lost because of bad leadership. He recognized bitterly the fickleness of senior officers, who told Stauffenberg that they would speak openly to Hitler but never dared to do so. He soon became terrified by reports of the brutal treatment of civilians in Russia, the killing of thousands of Jews, and the deaths of so many POWs in the prison camps. In the summer of 1942, he said: “Hitler is a fool and a criminal! We must put an end to this society!”³² Stauffenberg referred to Thomas von Aquin, who said tyrannicide was a legal and honored act under certain circumstances: “He who sheds the blood and the goods of the people to become famous is not a king but a tyrant.”³³ Like

Tresckow, he was unsuccessful in his attempts to incite the generals to action. He admitted that his wish to join the front (North Africa, where he lost an eye and seven fingers) was like an escape. Coming back from the hospital, he was convinced that "now that the generals have failed the colonels must act themselves, as General Staff officers we are responsible to save Germany."³⁴

Claus von Stauffenberg was a strong personality who impressed many people from the first time they met him.³⁵ General Ulrich de Maizière, *Generalinspekteur der Bundeswehr* (chief of staff of the German Armed Forces) in the 1960s, worked in Stauffenberg's office during the early years of the war:

Never again did I experience a young General Staff officer who had a position of trust like Stauffenberg at the age of thirty-five. He could listen and counsel. I often went to see him and ask his advice. General Halder often ordered Major (General Staff) Stauffenberg to brief him personally, skipping the whole chain of command. Stauffenberg was highly educated and deeply rooted in Christian faith. Seldom have I met a person who could laugh as refreshingly as he did. We, the younger officers, were persuaded that Stauffenberg was meant to climb to the highest ranks in the Army.³⁶

It is interesting, in this context, to quote former German World War II Minister of War Production Albert Speer's opinion of Stauffenberg:

As (General) Schmundt (Hitler's Chief Adjutant) explained to me, Stauffenberg was considered one of the most dynamic and competent officers in the German Army . . . In spite of his war injuries, Stauffenberg had preserved a youthful charm; he was curiously poetic and at the same time precise, thus showing the marks of the two major and seemingly incompatible educational influences upon him: the circle around the poet Stefan George and the General Staff. After the deed which will forever be associated with his name, I often reflected upon his personality and found no phrase more fitting for him than this one of Hölderlin (German poet): "An extremely unnatural and paradoxical character unless one sees him in the midst of those

circumstances which imposed so strict a form upon his gentle spirit."³⁷

Shortly before 20 July 1944, Stauffenberg said: "It is time to act. But he who dares must be conscious about the fact that he will be a traitor to German history. If he refrains from doing it, he will be a traitor to his own consciousness."³⁸

Summary

Beck, Tresckow, and Stauffenberg: two generations, three personalities, three different stories and approaches to disobedience and conspiracy, but similar in their motives.

General Beck, with insights into Hitler's war plans, soon was in opposition to them. Guderian reproached Beck for having been too conservative to realize the importance of tank warfare.³⁹ This is the purely military way of thinking. Beck, a general and a statesman in the true Clausewitzian sense, realized that this machinery was primarily a tool for the offense and led to war. Beck's life is straight-lined. At first, he tried to convince his superiors, talked to them, and wrote memorandums against the "road to war." Then, he hoped to bring all the generals together for a strong demonstration of protest. Only after these failures did Beck resign in protest. Later, he agreed to arrest Hitler and bring him to court. During the war, he became the spiritual center of the resistance, highly respected by all civilian and military men of like minds.

General Tresckow, on his part, learned the evil of the regime through Hitler's actions to consolidate power in 1934 and later. He tried to speak to the generals to whom he had access. Only after he was convinced that they remained loyal to Hitler, despite their partial disapproval, did he take action on his own. The attempted assassinations of 1943 were almost a "private war" of Tresckow's friends in Army Group Center, though they had acted in accordance with the conspirators in

Berlin. However, they had no plans on how to proceed after a successful attempt on Hitler's life. Only Operation Valkyrie, a combined effort by Stauffenberg and Tresckow, set the stage for the proposed actions necessary after the death of the dictator.

Colonel Stauffenberg joined the resistance in 1942, relatively late. Leadership failures and the war crimes persuaded him that Germany's problems were Hitler's fault. Once sure of his belief, he acted with dynamism and determinism.

We note that Beck, Tresckow, and Stauffenberg became critical of Hitler's regime by the time they had almost complete access to the data available and a broader overview of the events. For Beck, this must have occurred between 1935 and 1937, when Hitler's war plans assumed a definite form; for Tresckow, it was probably in 1941 and for Stauffenberg 1942. These men shared several things in common. First, they were all outstanding soldiers and general staff officers, and they each belonged to the best of their year groups. Most probably, they were all aware of their responsibility as an elite and were inclined to serve the German people, rather than a dictatorial government. In their opinion, Hitler led the German people into a war that was disastrous and dishonorable. In order to save their country and their own souls, they had to remove the criminal government. Second, they had received a broad education, encompassing not only military knowledge but music, literature, and studies of foreign culture and languages. Beck's participation in the *Mittwochsgesellschaft* (a civilian club of academics that met every Wednesday on an informal basis), Tresckow's travel around the world, and Stauffenberg's link to the Stefan George circle support this statement. Third, and perhaps most important, their religious background must be mentioned. They were all Christians and driven by moral and religious impulses.⁴⁰ They took an oath to Hitler, the "legal" head of the Third Reich; but there was no doubt that they felt

bound to a higher oath—their conscience, which was based on Christianity, humanism, legality, and freedom. Fourth, they remained faithful to their military tradition (“true Prussianism”), their people, their heritage, and above all, to their conscience. They were ready to give their lives to uphold their principles. Truly, they are examples of integrity and moral courage.

Other Examples

Now I want to look at other examples of disobedience, cases that will give an overview of disobedience in twentieth-century military history and lead us to further analysis.

World War I

On 16 August 1914, General François, commander of the German I Corps, was ordered to halt his advance beyond Gumbinnen in East Prussia by his commander in chief, General von Prittwitz. François indignantly protested by telephone that the earlier he engaged the Russians, the less risk to German territory. Prittwitz dispatched a written order again prohibiting further advance. François ignored it. The Battle of Gumbinnen was indecisive, since François broke off the action; however, the Russians had been badly handled.⁴¹ On 25 August, François refused to attack because his artillery was not yet ready, causing Ludendorff to become high tempered. Nevertheless, the German victory at Tannenberg was, to a certain degree, due to François’ merit.⁴²

General Pilcher, commander of a British division, was ordered to carry out an attack on Mametz Wood in the summer of 1916. He did not attack according to the plan and was sent home: “If I had obeyed the corps order more literally, I should

have lost another two or three thousand men and achieved no more. It is very easy to sit a few miles in the rear, and get the credit for allowing men to be killed in an undertaking foredoomed to failure, but the part did not appeal to me and my protests against these useless attacks were not well received."⁴³

Ernst Jünger, fighting on the Western Front, refused to make a frontal attack with his company because he was convinced that the same objective could be attained later while turning the enemy's left flank and with less casualties. The outcome proved him right.⁴⁴

Captain Renouart refused the order to select a man from his company for court-martial. The order was issued by the corps commander because an attack had failed on the Western Front. Renouart responded: "As an officer acting in a judicial capacity I would be guilty of dereliction of duty by bringing charges which I knew to be false. As a Christian I cannot take a step which could brand me a murderer in my own eyes as well as in those of God and my fellow-men."⁴⁵ Renouart sent a message back to his regimental commander: "I have the honor to report that I am unable to comply with your instructions because there is no member of my company against whom charges of cowardice in the face of the enemy can either be made or be found tenable."⁴⁶

Between the Wars

General William ("Billy") Mitchell, a thinker about the future of air power, was second in command of the U.S. Army Air Service. When he complained about the neglect of aviation, he was exiled by the Coolidge administration to Texas. In September 1925, after some accidents involving Army airplanes, Mitchell gave a statement to the press: "These accidents are the results of the incompetency, the criminal

negligence, and the almost treasonable administration of our national defense by the Navy and the War Department.”⁴⁷

Inevitably, Mitchell was court-martialed with “disorders and neglects to the prejudice of good order and military discipline, . . . conduct of a nature to bring discredit upon the military service.”⁴⁸ He was convicted and sentenced to suspension from rank, command, pay, and allowances for five years. His response was to resign.

General Sir Percy Hobart, the British exponent of armored warfare—with only support from General (retired) J. F. C. Fuller—was in constant opposition to the other British generals who stubbornly clung to outmoded technology and techniques. At the first convenient opportunity, the “difficult” Hobart, with his forcefully argued “heresies,” was shunted off to a backwater area in Egypt.⁴⁹

World War II

Captain Heinz Karst, commander of a German tank battalion during the Russian campaign, received orders from his division commander to attack a Russian village and to kill all the women. This order was based on reports saying that wounded German soldiers left behind before the retreat had been mutilated by female Soviet partisans. The Germans took the village and found their comrades dead and mutilated. They also found women trying to save their belongings. Karst decided to let the women go because he could not prove their guilt. Later, he informed his commanding general, who accepted his decision.⁵⁰

General Erich Hoepner, commander of 4th Tank Army (Army Group Center) in Russia, decided to withdraw XX Corps on 8 January 1942, despite Hitler’s strict refusal to authorize any further retreat. In the farewell address to his staff, he said: “I’m relieved as Commander of 4th Tank Army

because I disobeyed an order of the Führer. Since my youth I have felt bound to the Army and the German soldier. My decisions [nonetheless] were always based on the feeling of being responsible to a higher God . . . ”⁵¹

William Douglas Home, a British officer, found himself facing a major moral issue in 1944. The German commander at Le Havre had approached the British, asking permission to evacuate a large number of French civilians from the city. There was apparently ample time to do so, since the British attack was not scheduled to go in for several days. But permission was refused. Home, along with other officers of his regiment, was ordered to take part in the operation. In Home’s own words: “Faced with what I considered to be an immoral order, I must either obey it and abandon what I had conceived to be the humanitarian fight that I had waged so long—thus proving myself afraid to practice what I preached—or I must disobey it and face the unknown fate that would be mine.”⁵²

Home refused to take part in the assault, in which incidentally some 12,000 civilians were killed as a result of air bombardment. He sat down and wrote a letter to the press. Ironically, on the day his letter appeared in print, the German commander of Calais requested and received permission to evacuate French civilians from the battle area. Nevertheless, Home’s letter to the press brought him before a court-martial, which found him guilty of disobeying a military order—not of refusing to take part in the offense but of writing to the press without permission. Home was cashiered and sentenced to twelve months in prison.

At about the same time, in Germany, the unknown son of a peasant wrote a last letter to his parents: “Dear Parents! We are sentenced to death, me and Gustav G. We did not sign for the SS. We would rather die than be conscience-stricken with the atrocities of the SS.”⁵³

Algerian War

In April 1961, General Maurice Challe, together with three other general officers, started a revolt against the president of France, Charles de Gaulle, who was about to negotiate with the insurgent Front de la Libération Nationale (FLN) and to hold general elections for the independence of Algeria. General Challe felt that honor and conscience left him no alternative, because he had—in the name of de Gaulle—promised to the Harkis, the Moslems loyal to the French, that France would never abandon them. General Challe was court-martialed and spent five years in prison.⁵⁴

Vietnam

My Lai also had its heroes: a junior officer tried to stop the massacre, standing between the Vietnamese villagers and his fellow Americans; a soldier shot himself in the foot in order to escape the scene; and others refused to participate and ran away.⁵⁵

According to Savage and Gabriel, no general officers and only a few colonels or lieutenant colonels chose to resign as a matter of ethical conviction during the Vietnam War. Protests, resignations, or early retirements of officers occurred at lower levels but only rarely.⁵⁶

However, the example of Vice Admiral James B. Stockdale, a senior prisoner of war for several years in North Vietnam, is worth mentioning: “‘Good morning,’ says the interrogator. ‘You look well. I have your first assignment for you. We want to provide the American criminals with news from U.S. newspapers, but we Vietnamese have an accent that makes us difficult to understand on the camp radio. You will read these American articles into the tape recorder and they will be played at noon today.’”

'No.'

'What do you mean, no. The camp regulations require that you obey all orders. You must do it. My superior has decreed that you shall do it.'

'I refuse.'

'You can't refuse. You must obey the laws of the country. You are a criminal. If you refuse, you will be severely punished. Shall I call the guard and have him punish you? I think you remember the punishment, and that you cannot overcome it. What do you say?'

'I say nothing. The problem is not mine, it is yours. It's up to you.'⁵⁷

Greece, 1973

Early on 25 May 1973, to the astonishment of British, American, Italian, and other naval commanders, the Greek destroyer *Velos* abandoned a NATO exercise, her radio messages affirming continued fidelity to the western bloc but also vowing to "restore democracy to Greece." The destroyer, led by Captain Nicholas Pappas, made for the fishing port of Fiumicino, Italy, where two officers went ashore and tried to telephone their exiled king, who was living on the outskirts of Rome. Italian authorities intervened and surrounded the *Velos* with police boats. Italy sent the ship back to Greece and granted asylum to Pappas and the other officers. Soon, events in Greece led to a return of democracy. Pappas later was promoted to the rank of admiral.⁵⁸

Soviet Union, 1975

On 7 November 1975, Lieutenant Commander Valery Sablin seized the *Storozhevoy*, a Soviet missile frigate, and

locked up the captain of the ship and other officers. Sablin's plan was to take the ship from the Gulf of Riga north into the Gulf of Finland and to Leningrad, from where he would, by radio and television, recount the sins and hypocrisy of the Soviet system and demand reforms. However, one of the nonconspirators freed himself and sent a radio message to naval authorities in Riga. When the *Storozhevoy* cleared the mouth of the Gulf of Riga, she did so with ten bomber and reconnaissance aircraft and nine warships in pursuit. Sablin realized the futility of resistance and surrendered. He was arrested, tried before a military court in May 1976, and executed on 3 August 1976. Sablin, in a farewell letter to his parents, wrote: "I am convinced that a revolutionary consciousness will catch fire among our people."⁵⁹

Lebanon, 1982

On 27 July 1982, Colonel Eli Geva had asked to be released from the command of his brigade to participate in the war as a simple soldier. He did this to protest a planned military move conquering Beirut. Geva claimed that, as a commander, he could neither accept responsibility for the civilian casualties likely to be caused nor face the prospect of justifying the action to the families of those in his unit who would be killed. Geva was discharged from his command and barred from the Israel Defense Forces.⁶⁰

Iraq, 1990

About 100 officers of the Iraqi Armed Forces refused to take part in the invasion of Kuwait. They were executed.⁶¹

Analysis

Classifications

My enumeration of examples of disobedience is far from complete. Perhaps the first thing that we find is that, whether a general or a soldier, there are many such lonely heroes, for disobedience demands the courage to be alone.

The attempt to classify the many examples of disobedience gives the following results.

Disobedience on Different Levels. On the strategic level, there were the conspirators against Hitler, Mitchell, Challe, and the 100 Iraqi officers; on the operational level, there were Pilcher, Hoepner, and François; on the tactical level, Karst and Geva; and on the very personal level, the peasant-soldier, the officer and the soldiers rejecting the shooting of innocents at My Lai, and Stockdale. (However, there are good reasons to classify every case of disobedience as a case on the personal level.)

Disobedience in an Authoritarian State and in a Democracy. There are cases of disobedience both in authoritarian states (the conspirators against Hitler, Pappas, Sablin, and the 100 Iraqi officers) and in democracies (Mitchell, Challe, and Geva).

Disobedience with Different Risks. In some cases, the objectors face severe punishment or even immediate death (the peasant soldier, Stockdale, Sablin, and the Iraqi officers), while others may "only" be discharged or court-martialed (Pilcher, Home, and Challe). One may argue that mental suffering could be an even greater test of moral courage than death itself; however, the cases show that most of the disobedient men were prepared to follow the dictates of their conscience and their convictions, at the same time risking career and public dishonor. Only very few were honored for disobedience during their own lifetime, for instance, Pappas.

Disobedience in Wartime. In general, there are two kinds of disobedience: one based on morals and conscience, another on tactical circumstances and on military knowledge. Conscientious disobedience leads to resignation or active resistance (Beck and Geva), while the latter tends more to independent actions, followed either by success (François and Jünger) or defeat and discharge (Pilcher).

Disobedience in Peacetime. In democracies, the causes for disagreement and disobedience are mostly upon doctrinal issues rather than questions of morality (Mitchell and Hobart). In authoritarian states, disobedient officers ask for changes in politics (Pappas and Sablin).

The Legitimacy and Morality of Disobedience

First, I would like to emphasize that the great majority of the serious German-speaking lawyers and historians acknowledge the legitimacy and morality of the conspirators against Hitler.⁶² Hitler was a dictator, who only in the very beginning of his Third Reich tried to legitimize his brutal rulership, asking for the people's approval in a referendum. During the years of the Third Reich, the inhumanity of Nazi Germany became more and more evident. Germany, the birthplace of Kant, Goethe, and Beethoven, from 1933–45, was an illegal and immoral state. Resistance against Hitler was justified. Fabian von Schlabrendorff, a conspirator who was tortured by the Gestapo, said: "Obedience is the rule. However, there are cases which demand disobedience. This has been uncontested in the Prussian Army. Blind obedience has its origin with Hitler."⁶³

Professor Golo Mann, the "great old man of German history and politics," wrote that "Resistance was the Highest the German history ever achieved, if Hitler and Himmler were the Lowest."⁶⁴ The German Chancellor, Dr. Helmut Kohl, said

on the occasion of Stauffenberg's eightieth birthday in 1987: "Resistance is legitimate if its objective is to overthrow a reign of terror and to establish a just regime."⁶⁵

Second, I quote authors who made important comments regarding obedience and disobedience. In 1902, Rear Admiral Alfred T. Mahan, the American apostle of sea power, wrote that obedience is the cement of the (military) structure, the lifeblood of the organism.⁶⁶ He recognized special cases in which disobedience might be justified:

When a doubt arises, as it frequently does, between strict compliance with an order and the disregard of it, in whole or in part, the officer is called upon to decide a question of professional conduct. Personal judgment necessarily enters a factor, but only one of many; and, to be trusted, it needs to be judgment illuminated by professional knowledge and fortified by reflection. . . . The officer at the moment should consider himself, as he in fact is, a judge deciding upon a case liable to be called up to a superior court, before which his conclusion has no claim to respect because it is his personal opinion, but only so far as it is supported by the evidence before him. There is, of course, the necessary reservation that the final judgment upon himself, for his professional conduct as involved in his decision, will be rendered upon the facts accessible to him, and not upon those not then to be known, though afterwards apparent.⁶⁷

For Samuel P. Huntington, professor of government at Harvard University in 1957, the supreme military virtue is obedience: "When the military man receives a legal order from an authorized superior, he does not argue, he does not hesitate, he does not substitute his own views, he obeys instantly."⁶⁸ Huntington goes on to say that the limits of obedience arise in two separate connections. The first concerns the relation between military obedience and professional competence; the author concludes that professional competence must be the final criterion. The second concerns the conflict between the military value of obedience and nonmilitary values. Two things are important to highlight. Huntington declares that the superior political wisdom of the statesman must be accepted as

a fact: "If the statesman decides upon war which the soldier knows can only lead to national catastrophe, the soldier, after presenting his opinion, must fall to and make the best of a bad situation."⁶⁹ Consequently, Huntington blames the German officers who joined the resistance to Hitler, believing that it is not the function of military officers to decide questions of war and peace. Huntington resolves the conflict between military obedience and morality by saying that "except in the most extreme instances it is reasonable to expect that he [the officer] will adhere to the professional ethic and obey. Only rarely will the military man be justified in following the dictates of private conscience against the dual demand of military obedience and state welfare."⁷⁰

Michael Walzer, professor of social science at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, points out that the soldier's obedience can be criminal, for when he violates the rules of war, superior orders are no defense. According to Walzer, the only way to avoid killing prisoners and innocents is to act morally by disobeying orders; he agrees, however, that disobedience is not an easy thing to do: "To disobey is to breach that elemental accord, to claim a moral separateness (or a moral superiority), to challenge one's fellows, perhaps even to intensify the dangers they face."⁷¹ Walzer's final conclusions are worth mentioning:

Mostly morality is tested only by the ordinary pressures of military conflict. Mostly it is possible, even when it isn't easy, to live by the requirements of injustice. And mostly the judgments we make of what soldiers and statesmen do are singular and clearcut; with whatever hesitation, we say yes or no, we say right or wrong . . . That dualism makes us uneasy; the world of war is not fully comprehensible, let alone a morally satisfactory place. And yet it cannot be escaped, short of an universal order in which the existence of nations and peoples could never be threatened.⁷²

Nico Keijzer, a lawyer and former officer in the Royal Netherlands Navy, writes in his dissertation that "the ideal type of legally binding order is an order which is given by a person

who is legally permitted to do so to a person who is legally bound to comply with the orders given by that person.”⁷³ Keijzer describes the following limitations to the duty to obey:

- (1) An order is nonexistent and cannot be legally binding, if it does not reach its addressee or does not make clear what is the action that its recipient should perform.
- (2) Impossibility. Nobody is required to do the impossible.
- (3) Violation of a legal norm.
- (4) Conscientious objections do not, in principle, absolve the recipient of an order from the legal duty to obey.⁷⁴

According to Malham M. Wakin, a teacher of philosophy at the U.S. Air Force Academy, obedience to orders is not merely a functional expedient for military men; it involves, at the same time, a moral commitment. Wakin admits that there are limits to military obedience that are not easy to determine, precisely because obedience is so critical to the military function.⁷⁵ The author quotes Senator Hughes in the Senate hearings in 1974 regarding the nominations for promotion of general officers, two of whom were accused of ordering falsified reports of bombing strikes that violated the written rules of engagement:

The integrity of our command and control structure, both within the military and under civilian authority, depends upon men of the highest character, whose obedience to our laws and the Constitution is unquestioned. If we choose to reward these men with promotions, what will the consequences be? . . . Will the officers down the line include that loyalty and obedience within one's service are more important than adherence to the higher principles of law and civilian control of the military?⁷⁶

Wakin concludes that if one is torn between obedience to an order and fulfillment of another moral obligation, he or she must judge which is the higher obligation in those circumstances. Universal obligations (like loyalty and obedience, integrity and moral courage) are neither absolute

nor relative. They bind all human beings in analogous sets of circumstances, but they may conflict.

For G. F. G. Stanley, former professor of Canadian studies at Mount Allison University, the old doctrine of absolute obedience to superior orders is now pretty much discredited. To plead superior orders, one must show an excusable ignorance of their illegality. Stanley further depicts that disobedience should be limited to what is unquestionably an injustice; an immoral command presents a dilemma to the soldier, who will act in the way his moral principles demand: "The paths of loyalty lead to the grave as frequently as those of disloyalty lead to glory. It all depends upon loyalty to whom and to what."⁷⁷

R. M. Hare, a British philosopher and author of many books and articles on ethics, in his essay, "Can I Be Blamed for Obeying Orders," comes to the conclusion that "we must never lose sight of the distinction between what we are told to do and what we ought to do. There is a point beyond which we cannot get rid of our own moral responsibilities by laying them on the shoulders of a superior."⁷⁸

Harold M. Hyman, professor of history at Rice University, analyzing where the ultimate allegiance of the officer lies—to country, conscience, or Constitution—concludes that in ultimate situations, soldiers have a duty to say "no" to immoral or illegal orders.⁷⁹

Anthony E. Hartle, professor of philosophy at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, writes that military professionals must consider and weigh the significance of their actions in terms of the general moral principles, which derive from the basic values of society:⁸⁰

Though duty prevails for the military professional obedience to orders may be questionable when strong evidence exists that certain actions will not be in the interests of the security of state. Such questioning is itself based upon the requirements of the duty

principle, because duty for the American military professional is not simply a commitment to subordinate personal and other interests to those of national security. The commitment of the American military officer is to maintain a particular value structure within American society.⁸¹

Certainty in moral judgment is seldom attained in the complex situations which need the structure of moral evaluation sketched here. When a subordinate is certain that the moral judgment of a superior is wrong from a professional point of view, he or she is professionally obligated to take action.⁸²

Summarizing all the comments about the legitimacy and the morality of disobedience, one thing is quite easily said: there is no *vade mecum* for what is right or wrong, when exactly to say "yes" or "no." Nonetheless, aside from mere stereotypes, a simple guide in case of a questionable order can be given. If a legal and moral order has been issued by an authorized superior and should be followed, or if it is questionable whether an order is either legally or morally defective, the recipient of the order, if he does not fear immediate danger to his health or life, should follow a three-step process.

Phase of Inquiry. First, he asks himself about the rightness of the specific order and judges it with his conscious and higher principles.

Phase of Communication. Then, if the recipient concludes that "something is wrong," he calls his superior's attention to the doubtful point. Depending upon the reaction of the superior, the recipient has to decide whether to obey or to disobey. Discussions with the spouse or a close friend may be helpful, depending on the situation and the time available.

Phase of Moral Courage. This marks the time of decision: do I want to obey and maybe later feel bad because I did not dare to do what appeared right to me? Or do I want to disobey and risk a lot of inconveniences? In my opinion, it is important to come to this phase and to analyze a sensitive issue

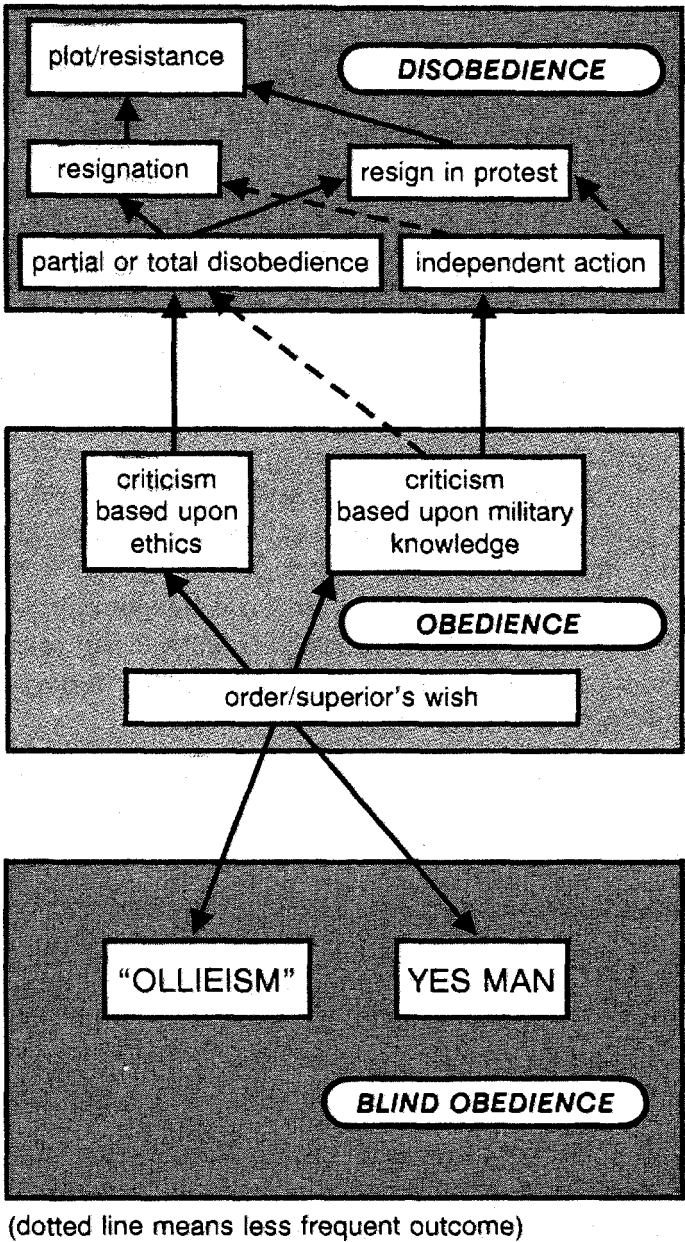


Figure 1. The relationship of obedience to disobedience and blind obedience

thoroughly, make a decision, and stick to it; this shows the responsible human being inside the uniform. The outcome will not be clear right from the beginning. We may not know exactly whether “yes” or “no” will be right. Victory or defeat, glory or humiliation, self-confidence or self-contempt are sometimes not easily discernible.

*The Relationship of Obedience to Disobedience
and Blind Obedience*

Obedience is the normal case. Orders or wishes of superiors are to be followed as long as they are legal and moral. But obedience includes criticism. The examples of disobedience in twentieth-century military history and their analysis show that between the “yes”/can do (obedience) and the “no”/cannot do (disobedience), only a few moments may elapse. Nonetheless, a critical thought process occurs based upon ethical and/or military knowledge. The verbal expression of disagreement is part of this chain of reasoning or its result. It is not yet a statement of disobedience or of disloyalty.⁸³ Only the action determines a person’s obedience or disobedience.

Disobedience, when it occurs, is based either upon ethical or military knowledge. A resignation, a resigning in protest, and resistance are more commonly due to ethical, rather than to purely military, reasons.

Blind obedience can be subdivided into “ollieism,” a subordinate acting illegally or unethically to get a job done because he wants to please his boss,⁸⁴ and that of the “yes man,” who—like Keitel and Jodl—the classical pair of “nodding donkeys”⁸⁵ are men who do whatever their superiors want, without further questioning (see figure 1).

III. APPLICATION: LESSONS TO BE LEARNED FOR TODAY'S OFFICER

The Challenge

General Franks, walking on the battlefield of Operation Desert Storm with soldiers of VII Corps, asked a company commander how long his part in the battle lasted. The answer was twenty-three minutes.⁸⁶ Sometimes, we prepare a lifetime for the possibility of only a few minutes of combat. Therefore, the army in peacetime is especially challenged. Today's training, education, and command climate⁸⁷ determine an officer's performance in hour X.

In my opinion, there are basically two kinds of challenge. First is the integration of ethical issues in training programs. Every soldier must know that he could face ethical conflicts in war. The officer's duty is to teach his subordinates the basic rules of the law of land warfare and to make them aware of the moral issues involved. Case studies, discussions in staff colleges, officer professional development courses, and short sketches during field training exercises for the troops have positive learning effects. The value of the training, however, depends on the personal commitment of the senior leaders. It may sound an easy task, but in reality, daily routine and busy schedules often result in a neglect of ethical training. Second, we must accept that there are more moral issues in daily military life than we normally think. These cases have a lot to do with questionable orders and the command climate. In order to illustrate my point, I present three cases that occurred in the last two years. They are from personal experience or are accounts of other officers. It does not matter which country is involved; they could have happened in any peacetime army.

Case A: Training with Simulations

During an exercise for a division commander and his staff, the exercise director, a general, asked the operator, a lieutenant colonel, to change the weather conditions so that the opposing force could use its air power for a limited amount of time. The training audience, incidentally, was not informed of this change. The outcome of the exercise was significantly different because of the air strike of the opposing force.

Case B: Housing

A new garrison commander arrived. He did not like the location of the fireplace in his dwelling. The commander asked the engineers to move the fireplace to another room and to list it under "renovation." The company commander of the engineers did the job.

Case C: A Conversation and Its Consequences

The new battalion commander was not a role model. He was supposed to be involved in extramarital affairs and did not seem to care about the training. Rumors were going around. A company commander took heart and talked to his boss. The battalion commander, however, accused him of disloyalty and threatened him with a bad evaluation.

Case A prompts us to feel that something is wrong. It is unfair to change the conditions for one opponent but not for the other. Case B describes an illegal act. We are interested. Why, in both cases, did not the subordinate officers speak up and talk about their concerns? Why did they not disobey? The answer may be, at least partly, found in case C. The fear of risking a reprimand, a negative evaluation, or losing one's career is obviously a concern, especially in a time when armies

are under constant budget restrictions and are forced to downsize their manpower. The fear is legitimate. Why should a subordinate argue with his commander upon "minor" moral questions? If he does not do what he is told, another officer will make it happen anyway! On the other hand, can someone live with the fact that an order is unfair, illegal, or morally defective? Can he still consider himself sincere in his own convictions? Is there a difference between courage in combat and peacetime?

General Matthew B. Ridgway told us that it is hard to tell a superior he is wrong. Yet it is the correct course of action, because to say nothing is to violate one's personal honor code, which therefore not only abridges one's sense of integrity, it also degrades one's effectiveness both as a leader and as a follower.⁸⁸ John C. Bahnsen and Robert W. Cone say that the true leader "must also possess the integrity and moral character to do the harder right instead of the easier wrong. This may sometimes mean taking unpopular or controversial stands that result in damage to one's own career. Quality of service, not length, is the measure that should be used to evaluate a soldier's career."⁸⁹

General Harold K. Johnson, the Army's deputy chief of staff for operations during the Vietnam years and later Army chief of staff, responded to the question, "If you had your life to live over again, what would you do differently?"

I remember the day I was ready to go over to the Oval Office and give my four stars to the President and tell him, "You have refused to tell the country they cannot fight a war without mobilization; you have required me to send men into battle with little hope of their ultimate victory; and you have forced us in the military to violate almost every one of the principles of war in Vietnam. Therefore, I resign and will hold a press conference after I walk out of your door." — I made the typical mistake of believing I could do more for my country and the Army if I stayed in than if I got out. I am going now to my grave with that burden of lapse of moral courage on my back.⁹⁰

What about the superiors in the three cases? The superiors' behavior reflect doubtful short-term and egoistic objectives that may be partly personality driven, partly motivated by a lack of professional ethical education. Who is responsible for their education, selection to their present rank, and their actual command climate?

One thing appears clear. The superior is responsible for his own development and his command climate. The command philosophy may be very helpful to set the stage in the beginning of his command. However, daily military life soon brings to light whether a commander is approachable or not. A survey at the U.S. Army War College in 1986 showed only two out of five generals were approachable. Insecurity and, to a lesser degree, arrogance are given as reasons for the significant number of general officers who are not at all approachable.⁹¹ The "closed door general" does not get all the information he needs, and he certainly does not get the bad news. Superiors who are not approachable can hardly build a command climate that fosters critical thinking.

In addition, we hold the superiors' leaders also responsible. Either they are responsible for selecting them for command or do not care about their present command climate. Senior officers also need counsel?

Ethical dilemmas can occur every day. In order to cope with these challenges, we must establish a goal and focus on the necessary education.

The Goal

The diagram presented earlier (see figure) shows that obedience is not reduced to a simple "yes" or "can do," even if there is not an immediate danger for one's life (it is hard to be critical and to disobey with a gun at one's head!). Basically, there are two kinds of criticism: criticism based upon ethical

considerations and criticism based upon military knowledge. Every officer must understand that having critical thoughts and speaking up properly to one's superior does not mean to disobey. It is, even more, his duty to analyze carefully a given order in relation to his ethics and military knowledge. All his moral background, experience, wisdom, and inner soul shall determine this analytical process. This analysis may take a matter of minutes, hours, or even days—for every person and every dilemma is much different. The result is either to speak up or submit. Even when the superior resists his objection, the officer has two alternatives: to obey or disobey. As we already know, there is no way to say in advance which way is the better way. To obey seems to be much easier, to disobey certainly is the lonelier and harder path.

FM 22-103 does not emphasize the principle of critical obedience. The regulations refer to criticism as follows: "Leaders see problems as challenges rather than obstacles. Leaders accept just criticism and admit mistakes; they encourage others to do likewise."⁹² What is "just" criticism? Here, in my opinion, is the crux. Too often, we perceive criticism as a negative statement. That is the wrong attitude. We should take every criticism seriously, whatever message it contains. Criticism stands at the beginning of every improvement. The British General J. F. C. Fuller wrote more than fifty years ago about the value of criticism: "The old are often suspicious of the young and do not welcome criticism, yet without criticism, both destructive and constructive, there can be no progress. As I have already mentioned, the easiest course to adopt is to lay down rules and regulations which must be implicitly obeyed; yet chance knows no compulsion, and such rules and regulations are apt to cramp intelligence and originality."⁹³

Field Marshal Erich von Manstein said to Colonel Claus Graf Stauffenberg: "Criticism is the salt of obedience!"⁹⁴ This definition of obedience contrasts, fortunately, with blind

obedience—which can be defined as either a selfish philosophy to please one's boss or the easiest way to omit thinking and avoid trouble. Critical obedience, an inherent part of obedience, also differs from disobedience in the sense that the disobedient officer, having left the common path with his superior, has decided to follow his own orders.

Critical obedience does not stand alone in our societies. It has its counterpart in critical citizenship—the appropriate approach to our modern, multidimensional, and often confusing civilization. As Stephen Nathanson, professor of political philosophy at Northeastern University points out:

The ideal of critical citizenship seems to get things right. People do have a moral obligation to support just laws and just institutions. We do not, however, have an obligation to support unjust laws and unjust institutions. From that, it follows that we need to think critically about the laws and institutions under which we live. Our support of them can be genuine without being uncritical and unquestioning. We need to be appreciative of the good that political systems can create, while remaining aware that not all political systems are good and that even good political systems can give rise to unjust laws and evil policies.⁹⁵

The Education

An officer's education is two-fold: it encompasses the informal process of self-development and the formal training within the military institutions.

Xenophon, student of Socrates and famous for his historical and philosophical work, talked about voluntary obedience and how to become a role model:

People obey gladly somebody who is in a better position to look after their well-being than they can do it themselves. Sick people call for the doctor who can cure them, and passengers on sea trust their helmsman because he knows the way. A good leader acquires everything that can be learned, like he does with tactics. What he cannot learn and foresee thanks to his intellect he may experience from the gods. So he will do what's right.⁹⁶

Xenophon tells us that the superior's example determines whether his subordinates obey or not. In order to become a role model,⁹⁷ the officer needs to learn as long as he lives; not everything, however, can be learned, so he also must trust his moral judgment.

The military institutions, of course, accompany and enhance the individual learning process. Staff colleges are essential in making officers aware of the interrelationships between leadership, command climate, and critical obedience. The study of great commanders is an appropriate tool as the following quotation about Abraham Lincoln's leadership style demonstrates:

Lincoln essentially treated his subordinates as equals; they were colleagues in a joint effort. He had enough confidence in himself that he was not threatened by skillful generals or able cabinet officials. Rather than surround himself with "yes" men, he associated with people who really knew their business, people from whom he could learn something, whether they were antagonistic or not. An often overlooked component of leadership is the ability to learn from people and experiences, from success and failures. The best leaders never stop learning. They possess a special capacity to be taught by those with whom they come into contact. In essence, this ongoing accumulation of knowledge prepares the organization for change.⁹⁸

Modern adult education also promotes critical thinking: reading (as a means of stimulating critical thinking), participating in the arts, thinking, writing, discussing, and acting in practical situations are valuable strategies. Also, conducting workshops, analyzing case studies, and participating in informal networks can play an important role in the development of critical thinking. Teaching is also a very important tool for disseminating the knowledge base and for promoting leadership principles. Do we still emphasize teaching? We should. Mark A. Stoler, professor of history at the University of Vermont, stresses what an outstanding teacher General George C. Marshall was: "At the end of his second year at Leavenworth,

his performance was again considered outstanding . . . The board unanimously selected him as one of five class members to remain as an instructor, though he would be outranked by all of his students . . . He was a brilliant success, . . . ”⁹⁹ Certainly Marshall is worth emulating.

Recent publications for businessmen stress the value of criticism, because quality work is impossible where people are afraid to tell the truth.¹⁰⁰

In the same light, the existing training programs for enhancing interpersonal communications and promoting good command climates in the military are essential preconditions for promoting critical obedience. Unfortunately, most of these programs are taught only once, shortly before an officer gets promoted to a senior officer's rank. Instead, these programs must begin early in an officer's career and then be reinforced in intermediate-level and senior-level professional military courses.¹⁰¹ Are tactics only taught once? Of course not. We should apply a similar procedure for promoting critical obedience.

The Senior Officer's Responsibility

The higher the rank, the more responsibility an officer has. The senior officer is not only responsible for his own professionalism but for the climate of his command. He also takes part in the selection of junior officers for higher functions. In addition, he mentors and guides his immediate subordinates. These important tasks have a lot to do with coaching and counseling.

Senior officers have even more responsibilities, but not more time. We know how stressful the life of a senior officer can be. However, the senior officer may not rely on written reports or casual acquaintances only. The senior commander has to go out and become familiar with a certain command

climate, known in a soldier's slang as "the air that a staff breathes" or "the smoke of a training exercise." If the senior leader tries to find out the atmosphere which a subordinate leader is responsible for, he will see where a shoe pinches and will know how to coach the persons in charge. Senior officers, thanks to their immense experience as soldiers and their professional knowledge as officers, often have a very good sense for the "temperature" of a command climate. The command climate is crucial for a prosperous relationship between a superior and subordinates. It is the center of gravity for the senior officer's coaching, counseling, grading, and selecting of subordinate leaders and sets the stage for critical obedience.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Obedience to orders is a high military virtue, without which an army is merely a mob.¹⁰² The reliability achieved through obedience is an essential characteristic of effective military operations; however, obedience is not absolute. Orders must be based upon law and morality. Soldiers are obligated to disobey illegal or immoral orders.

Do we always and instantly see that a given order is illegal or immoral? No, at least not in all cases. If we sense that "something could be wrong," we should follow a three-step process: (1) a phase of inquiry, when we inform ourselves about the rules and regulations; (2) a phase of communication, when we talk to the superior and tell him our concerns; and (3) a phase of moral courage, when we decide to obey or to disobey and to bear the consequences.

The complex society in which today's armed forces live and the variety of missions soldiers could have to accomplish in the future will cause many questions regarding law and morality. A critical attitude will better solve the problems the military will face than adhering to strict obedience or accepting only "just criticism." Modern leaders must take all criticism, the good and the bad news. The principle of critical obedience is not new. Generals Beck and Tresckow and Colonel Stauffenberg lived according to this principle. They can serve as our role models because they maintained integrity and moral courage till the bitter end. They did not intend to become conspirators, but Hitler's Nazi regime left them no choice.

Critical obedience (criticism is the salt of obedience) starts with ourselves. Like Abraham Lincoln, we should not fear criticism but take it as a chance to learn more about ourselves and our organization in order to do a better job. Life is a long journey of errors and failures, chances and adventures.

Criticism can help us improve our leadership style and avoid our making the same mistake again. Military institutions should enhance this learning process by giving role models the chance to teach, by encouraging critical thinking, and by making the students (our future senior leaders!) aware of how important a good command climate is for promoting critical obedience.

NOTES

1. Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*, 125.
2. Ibid., 134.
3. Ibid., 163.
4. There are some misconceptions. First, often only Stauffenberg is mentioned in connection with military resistance to Hitler. See, for example, John Keegan, *The Second World War* (New York: Viking, 1960), 394–95. Second, military authors emphasize too much the role Field Marshal Rommel and Generals Halder and Speidel played in the plot against Hitler. See, for example, Louis L. Snyder, *Hitler's German Enemies . . .* (New York: Berkley Books, 1990), 189–209, or James E. Swartz, *Military Review* (September 1992):82. Part of the “Rommel myth” is based on General Speidel’s memoirs. Speidel never played an active part in the conspiracy but simply had connections to General Stülpnagel and Lieutenant Colonel von Hofacker, who tried to convince Rommel to join the plot and to enter a separate agreement with the Western Allies. Hans Speidel, *Aus unserer Zeit* (Frankfurt/M und Berlin: Ullstein, 1990), 174. General Speidel is mentioned as an “Anti-Nazi General” and “the only survivor of the inner circle of the conspiracy” in Correlli Barnett’s *Hitler's Generals* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989), 65. In vain, we look for an essay about General Tresckow! Fortunately, there are some publications that put things right. See, for example, James P. Duffy and Vincent L. Ricci, *Target Hitler, the Plots to Kill Adolf Hitler* (Westport, CT, and London: Praeger, 1992), 9–12; Peter Hoffman, “Beck, Rommel, and the Nazis: The Dilemma of the German

- Army," *Limits of Loyalty*, edited by Edgar Denton III (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1980), 118–23; and Gerd R. Ueberschäu, "Rommel zwischen Loyalität und militärischem Widerstand," *Wehrwissenschaftliche Rundschau* (6/1980), 191–92.
5. Peter Hoffmann, *German Resistance to Hitler* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1988), 74.
 6. *Ibid.*, 81.
 7. *Ibid.*, 88.
 8. Dorothee von Meding, *Mit dem Mut des Herzens, die Frauen des 20. Juli* (Berlin: Siedler Verlag, 1992), 103–4.
 9. Hans Rothfels, *The German Opposition to Hitler* (Hinsdale, IL: Henry Regency Company, 1948), 78.
 10. For a complete biography of General Beck, see Gert Buchheit, *Ludwig Beck, ein preussischer General* (München: List Verlag, 1964).
 11. William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of The Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989), 509.
 12. Allen Welsh Dulles, *Germany's Underground* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1947), 25; and Gert Buchheit, 61–62.
 13. Hans Speidel, *Aus unserer Zeit* (Frankfurt/M und Wien, 1977), 69.
 14. Erich von Manstein, *Soldat im 20. Jahrhundert* (Koblenz: Bernard & Graefe, 1983), 51.

15. Fabian von Schlabrendorff, *Offiziere gegen Hitler* (Zürich/Wien/Koblenz, 1946), 70.
16. Hoffmann, *German Resistance to Hitler*, 75.
17. Buchheit, 350–53.
18. Hoffmann, *German Resistance to Hitler*, 128.
19. Graf J. A. Kielmansegg, "Widerstand im Dritten Reich—Eine Erinnerung zur vierzigsten Widerkehr des 20. Juli 1994," *Allgemeine Schweizerische Militärzeitung* (7/8 1984), 387.
20. For General Tresckow's biography, see Bodo Scheurig, *Henning von Tresckow, ein Preusse gegen Hitler* (Frankfurt/M und Berlin: Ullstein Verlag, 1987).
21. Ibid., 77.
22. Ibid., 115.
23. Ibid., 124–25.
24. Ibid., 126.
25. Ibid., 135–36.
26. Schlabrendorff, 114–15; Rudolf-Christoph Freiherr von Gersdorff, *Soldat im Untergang* (Frankfurt/M, Berlin, und Wien: Ullstein Verlag, 1977), 87, 133; and Peter Hoffmann, *Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg und seine Brüder* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1992), 263.
27. Scheurig, 155.
28. Ibid., 167.

29. Ibid., 167–68.
30. Ibid., 210.
31. For Colonel Stauffenberg's biography, see Wolfgang Venohr, *Stauffenberg, Symbol der Deutschen Einheit* (Frankfurt/M und Berlin: Ullstein Verlag, 1986); and Peter Hoffmann, *Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg und seine Brüder*.
32. Hoffman, *Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg und seine Brüder*, 251.
33. Eberhard Grein-Funk, *Soldat und Ethik* (EOS Verlag St. Ottilien [Deutschland], 1988), 30.
34. Hoffmann, *Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg und seine Brüder*, 302–3.
35. Helmuth James Graf von Moltke, *Briefe an Freya* (Münich: Beck, 1991), 580; and Rudolf-Christoph von Gersdorff, 144.
36. Ulrich de Maizière, *In der Pflicht: Lebensbericht eines Deutschen Soldaten im 20. Jahrhundert* (Herford/Bonn: Mittler & Sohn, 1989), 76.
37. Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich, Memoirs* (New York: Collier Books, 1981), 378.
38. Hoffmann, *Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg und seine Brüder*, 395.
39. Heinz Guderian, *Panzer Leader* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), 21–22.
40. Hans Rothfels, *German Opposition to Hitler* (Hinsdale, IL: Henry Regency Company, 1948), 161.

41. Barbara W. Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (New York: Bantam Books, 1989), 306–7; and Richard W. Harrison, *Fallen Stars: Eleven Studies of Twentieth Century Military Disasters*, edited by Brian Bond (London, Washington, New York: Brassey's, 1991), 18–19.
42. Tuchman, 326, 344.
43. Richard Holmes, *Acts of War: The Behavior of Men in Battle* (New York: Free Press, 1985), 320.
44. Ernst Jünger, *In Stahlgewittern* (Berlin, 1940), 272.
45. Humphrey Cobb, *Paths of Glory* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 165.
46. *Ibid.*, 166.
47. Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), 231–32.
48. *Ibid.*, 232.
49. Kenneth Mackay, "Hobart," *Churchill's Generals*, edited by John Keegan (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991), 246.
50. Ulrich Zwygart, *Menschenführung im Spiegel von Kriegserfahrungen* (Frauenfeld [Schweiz]: Huber Verlag, 1992), 34.
51. Walter Charles de Beaulieu, *Generaloberst Hoepner* (Neckargemünd: Kurt Vowinkel Verlag, 1969), 252. Field Marshal Paulus decided differently at Stalingrad, facing the question whether to obey Hitler and fight to the last bullet or to disobey and withdraw. Paulus, in a brief survey, said after World War II: "Does the fact that his

- troops are in a position that is hopeless, or threatens to become so, give a commander the right to refuse to obey orders? In the case of Stalingrad, it could by no means be asserted with certainty that our position was hopeless or even—except at the very end—that it threatened to become so. How then, could I later have demanded obedience, or even felt justified in doing so, from one of my subordinates in a situation of, in his opinion, similar danger?” Walter Görlitz, *Paulus and Stalingrad* . . . (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1974), 285.
52. G. F. G. Stanley, “Obedience to Whom? to What?” *Limits of Loyalty*, edited by Edgar Denton III (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1980), 4.
 53. Günther Weisenborn, *Der lautlose Aufstand* (Rowohlt, 1962), 111.
 54. Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 443–44.
 55. Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 310.
 56. Richard A. Gabriel and Paul L. Savage, *Crisis in Command: Mismanagement in the Army* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990), 98.
 57. James B. Stockdale, *A Vietnam Experience: Ten Years of Reflection* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Press, 1984), 127.
 58. Leonard F. Guttridge, *Mutiny: A History of Naval Insurrection* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1992), 289–90.
 59. *Ibid.*, 292–94.

60. Ruth Linn, "Conscientious Objection in Israel During the War in Lebanon," *Armed Forces and Society* 12, no. 4 (Summer 1986):496-97.
61. Martin Braun, "Planung und Verlauf der alliierten streitkräftegemeinsamen Landkriegsoperationen," *Der Golfkrieg* (Hrsg. Hartmut Zehrer) (Herford/Bonn: Mittler & Sohn, 1992), 121.
62. See Willi Schwanitz, *Ein Recht auf Widerstand?* (Bern: Schweizerisches Ost-Institut No 21, 1984), 29; and Kielmansegg, 386.
63. Schlabrendorff, 110; see also Hoffmann, *Limits of Loyalty*, 124.
64. Mann, *Deutsche Geschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Frankfurt/M, 1958), 478.
65. Helmut Kohl, "Mahnung und Verpflichtung des Deutschen Widerstandes," *Presse-und Informationsdienst der Bundesregierung* (14.11.1987), 1054.
66. Alfred T. Mahan, "The Military Rule of Obedience," *The American Military: Readings in the History of the Military in American Society*, edited by Russell F. Weigley (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1969), 41.
67. *Ibid.*, 35.
68. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (New York: Vintage Books, 1957), 73.
69. *Ibid.*, 76-77.
70. *Ibid.*, 78.

71. Walzer, 315-16.
72. Ibid., 326-27.
73. Nico Keijzer, *Military Obedience* (Netherlands: Sijthoff & Noordhoff, Alphen aan den Rijn, 1978), 280.
74. Ibid., 280-84.
75. Malham M. Wakin, ed., "The Ethics of Leadership," *War, Morality, and the Military Profession* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1981), 206-7.
76. Ibid., 208.
77. Stanley, 19.
78. R. M. Hare, "Can I Be Blamed for Obeying Orders?" *War, Morality, and the Military Profession*, edited by Malham M. Wakin (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1981), 450.
79. Harold M. Hyman, "Arms, Men and the Constitution," *Constitution* (Spring 1989):57, 61.
80. Anthony E. Hartle, *Moral Issues in Military Decision Making* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1989), 118.
81. Ibid., 121-22.
82. Ibid., 83.
83. Ibid., 148.
84. John E. Shephard, "Thomas Becket, Ollie North and You," *Military Review* (May 1991):32.
85. Speer, 244.

86. Frederick M. Franks, "Matters of the Mind and of the Heart," *Military Review* (March 1993):10.
87. "A command climate is a shared feeling, a perception among the members of a unit about what life is like. This perception is based on their understanding of how they will be treated—whether the leadership cares about them personally and professionally." U.S. Department of the Army, FM 22-103, *Leadership and Command at Senior Level* (Washington, DC, June 1987), 63.
88. James E. Swartz, "Morality: A Leadership Imperative," *Military Review* (September 1992):82.
89. John C. Bahnsen and Robert W. Cone, "Defining the American Warrior Leader," *Parameters* (December 1990): 26.
90. Hartle, 143–44.
91. Arthur W. McMaster, *General Officer Decision Making: An Inquiry into U.S. Army General Officer Approachability* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, 1986), 34.
92. U.S. Department of the Army, FM 22-103, *Leadership and Command at Senior Level*, 81.
93. J. F. C. Fuller, *Generalship, Its Diseases and Their Cure . . .* (Harrisburg, PA: Military Service Publishing Co., 1936), 88.
94. According to Field Marshal von Manstein's aide, Alexander Stahlberg, Manstein used these words in a conversation with Colonel Stauffenberg. Alexander Stahlberg, *Die verdammte Pflicht* (Frankfurt/M und Berlin: Ullstein, 1990), 270. The German Admiral Rolf Johannesson said, "Moral courage is needed anytime,

- during war and peace!" Rolf Johannesson, *Offizier in kritischer Zeit* (Herford/Bonn: Mittler & Sohn, 1989), 126.
95. Stephen Nathanson, *Should We Consent To Be Governed? A Short Introduction to Political Philosophy* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Pub. Co., 1992), 100.
 96. Fritz Wille, *Führungsgrundsätze in der Antike* (Zürich: Schulthess Verlag, 1992), 35–36.
 97. Marshal de Belle-Isle writes to his son: "Look to purifying morals but do not think that they can be established through orders. They must be taught by example and inspiration." U.S. Department of the Army, FM 22-103, *Leadership and Command at Senior Level*, 22. E. B. Sledge remembers the example of his captain in World War II: "He had a rare combination of intelligence, courage, self-confidence, and compassion that commanded our respect and admiration, . . . (he) quietly told us what to do. We loved him for it and did the best job we knew how." E. B. Sledge, *With the Old Breed at Peleliu and Okinawa* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 40.
 98. Donald T. Phillips, *Lincoln on Leadership* (New York: Warner Books, 1992), 138.
 99. Mark A. Stoler, *George C. Marshall: Soldier Statesman of the American Century* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989), 25.
 100. See Kathleen D. Ryan and Daniel K. Oestreich, *Driving Fear Out of the Workplace* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1991), 153–67.
 101. McMaster, 34.
 102. Jerold E. Brown, "Discipline: The Execution of Private Eddie D. Slovik," *Combined Arms in Battle Since 1939*,

edited by Roger J. Spiller (Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College Press, 1992), 83; and Martin E. Blumenson and James J. Stokesbury, *Masters of the Art of Command* (New York: Da Capo Paperback, 1975), 321.

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