



Leadership, Community, and Virtue

By JAMES H. TONER

James MacGregor Burns has stated that “Leadership over human beings is exercised when persons with certain motives and purposes mobilize . . . institutional, political, psychological, and other resources so as to arouse, engage, and satisfy the motives of followers.”¹ Although he is an acclaimed scholar, this proposition, though not erroneous, seems somehow incomplete, colorless, and impotent. But if Burns’s grasp of leadership is inadequate, one can peruse hundreds of works in search of a definition of leadership without finding a wholly satisfying explanation. Augustine of Hippo, the fifth century philosopher and Father of the Church, noted that one knows what *time* is until asked to define it. *Leadership* may resist definition in the same way.

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Terms which have the greatest meaning for us—love, faith, honor, and justice—invariably withstand simple (or even complex) definition. But can one really comprehend something without being able to define it? Thus I offer this succinct definition: leadership is the ability to inspire appropriate action beyond the expectable.² While this denotation is unlikely to find its way into the academic literature on the subject, it serves as a point of departure for looking at leadership.

If some action or conduct is routine, ordinary, and predictable—that is, expectable in every

leadership inspires *appropriate* conduct *beyond the expectable*

sense—leadership is very likely unnecessary. It is in the nature of leadership to offer something *beyond the expectable*. If a group of people may be

expected, for instance, to achieve a desirable outcome regardless of leadership, one might fairly assume that, with effective leadership, the same group might be able to achieve even greater things. Thus, leadership contributes to success on the margins—it is value added. One might think of it as yeast that has a positive catalytic effect.

For example, the motto of the U.S. Army Infantry School at Fort Benning is “Follow Me!” It is an effective credo, capturing in two words the essence of leadership: the infantry leader, exerting the power of his own will and influence, enables a squad or platoon to do things that they would be unlikely to do absent his direction. But most of this is pretty self evident. If leaders are effective, they get results not otherwise calculated in and from people.

Most definitions of leadership contain synonyms. One thesaurus gives direction, guidance, instruction, administration, authority, command, control, domination, superiority, and supremacy, which are all very useful terms. But nouns dodge a very critical adjectival question: How do we separate good leadership from bad? Returning to the analysis offered by Burns, one finds that his dissection of the subject (at least in the brief quotation cited above) is value-neutral. My definition suggests that leadership inspires: a positive, productive influence. Another denotation, “to guide or control by divine influence,” reveals that the infinitive is intended almost exclusively to convey something affirmative and beneficial. While one might refer to Hitler as having *inspired* Germans in the 1930s, as having been *charismatic* (which originally meant a spiritual or divine gift), using such terms in the context of Nazi Germany is wrong. Bennis and Nanus correctly point out that “Managers are people who do things right and leaders are people who do the right thing.”³ Use of the adjective *right* is of paramount importance.

The definition proposed herein emphasizes that leaders inspire *appropriate* (correct, fitting, suitable, rightful) conduct. Leadership that promotes *inappropriate* (incorrect or wrongful) conduct may be tyranny, despotism, or dictatorship, but it is not genuine leadership, which one takes to be a positive influence. The dictionary states that to lead is “to go before or with to show the way.” One must again acknowledge that “the way” can be harmful—such as when gang leaders incite followers to violence and crime—though a fair reading seems to suggest something constructive as well as hopeful. Therefore leadership inspires *appropriate* conduct *beyond the expectable*. That is, I contend, what leadership does. But if that is *what* leadership does, *how* does it do it?

How Leadership Works

Over the course of decades, military professionals have rightly insisted that leaders inspire appropriate conduct beyond the expectable by appealing to duty, honor, and country—and refusing to lie, cheat, and steal. Yet these venerable concepts, which have encouraged thousands of leaders to do what they ought to even in times of peril and crisis, are vague. Strong adjurations to virtue and admonitions against vice are necessarily indistinct. The ancient Greeks told us that exceptions to broad rules might sometimes have to be granted. *Equity* means fairness. Aristotle taught that equity could mean the rectification (correction) of the law when law was deficient by reason of its universality. That is, if rules and regulations apply to everyone, a law might well be wrong when it applies to someone under certain circumstances. It is wrong to steal. But what of taking a loaf of bread to feed a starving family? Can there be mitigating or extenuating circumstances? Can the injunctions of duty, honor, and country always teach what we want them to? If soldiers, sailors, airmen, or marines inscribe *duty, honor, country* on their hearts, will they lead appropriately?

We know how critical the notion of duty must be to soldiers who exist—and leaders who lead—in order to accomplish the mission. Soldiers go into harm’s way—they risk life and limb—to get the job done. They are, properly, taught to say “yes sir” or “yes ma’am” when given an order—and to execute that order promptly and efficiently. At the U.S. Military Academy, cadets are taught to say “No excuse, sir” when confronted with their shortcomings. Results matter, and complaints are impermissible about why the orders or magnitude of the job precluded success in the assignment. “Duty,” said Robert E. Lee, “is the sublimest word in the English language.”

But we also know, since the post-World War II war crimes tribunals, that devotion to duty is not enough. Orders occasionally must be questioned. The notion that only the superior officer responds to questions of propriety is gone, as it should be. Every soldier is responsible for the orders that he or she issues—or follows. Blind obedience is wrong. There may well be a duty not to be dutiful. Duty is not the highest good of the soldier.

Honor sometimes seems so rare that I shrink from writing that honor itself is not enough, for what is meant can be terribly mistaken. In the film *A Few Good Men*, a young Marine NCO regards unit, Corps, God, and country—one presumes in that order—as his source of honor. The story presents two twisted, grotesque leaders, a lieutenant and a colonel, with a sense of “honor” that is warped beyond recognition. A twisted sense of honor may be worse than no honor at all. At the Naval Academy, midshipmen recently

order. Integrity is the most important responsibility of command.”⁴ *Legal* orders must be obeyed. Leaders inspire *appropriate* conduct.

We try in so many ways to soften the language, but the soldier’s job is to kill and prepare to kill, to die and prepare to die. The Code of Conduct is very clear about the ultimate obligation of the soldier, whose very life may be put in danger to accomplish the mission. Officers are never to endanger the lives of their soldiers for light reasons; but never must they shrink from the terrible responsibility of accepting risks, even mortal danger, for their troops and themselves if necessary. The military may well be involved in operations other than war, but the first responsibility of the Armed Forces is to win the Nation’s wars. When a choice must be made between troop safety and mission accomplishment, the duty of the soldier must be mission first.

The infantry lieutenant forever has the responsibility of pointing at one soldier and saying, “Smith, point man!” None but the cavalier, however, would say such things carelessly. There must be no question that genuine concern for the welfare of soldiers (or patients, pupils, clients, or customers) is key to leadership. What the leader gives to followers is very likely to be returned. But for the military leader, concern for troops cannot replace devotion to duty; and devotion to duty cannot replace fidelity to a high sense of honor. The trinity of *principle, purpose, and people* thus complements the idea of honor, duty, country(men).⁵ The highest obligation of a soldier must be to honor, and then to duty, and then to countrymen. If any leader mistakes the proper order—putting, say, people ahead of principle and thus implicitly condoning cheating at the Naval Academy—he or she cannot inspire appropriate conduct. The leadership offered will be defective and dangerous.

But we have said that principle can be misunderstood. How can leaders be educated to understand the proper order of principle (honor), purpose (duty), and people (countrymen)? Since the ancient Greeks, educators have sought to inculcate wisdom and virtue into students, frequently without success. Indeed, in many if not most universities and colleges today, even discussion of trying to teach “wisdom and virtue” will terrify professors and, in particular, administrators. “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” has been transmuted into “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you flee.” *Whose* version of “wisdom” shall we teach? *Whose* notions of “virtue” shall we inculcate? In a multicultural society, does any public university have the right to teach “wisdom and virtue?”

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cheated on an exam and subsequently covered up for one another, contending that loyalty to one’s buddies was higher than loyalty to the honor concept at Annapolis. That notion may hold sway among members of a street gang but cannot be allowed to take root in an institution educating commissioned officers. Honor of this sort is not the highest good of the soldier.

Country—a short term for patriotism—is a desirable quality to most Americans. We react with sorrow and anger to a traitor who sells out his homeland for greed and personal debauchery. We expect the Armed Forces to represent our country well. Every day soldiers don the uniform of the United States, and they should understand that wearing it is a privilege and responsibility. But patriotism can be carried to extremes, and history is replete with cases of those whose first loyalty to their homeland resulted in evil. Religious people, for example, cannot value loyalty to country ahead of faithfulness to God. Patriotism is a valuable sentiment and a worthy conviction, but it is not the highest good of the soldier.

But if the watchwords and creed of “duty, honor, country” are not enough to tell us how to be leaders—and which values to exalt—who do we consult? This is not to offer a new formula to West Point but to suggest, for purposes of instruction, a new ordering of “duty, honor, country.”

Taken properly, the highest virtue of a soldier, and hence his leader, is honor—authentic, not warped. Things done in the line of duty that violate a proper awareness of honor tarnish the shield and disgrace the uniform. Genuine honor is based on integrity. As a former service chief put it, “Any order to compromise integrity is not a lawful



U.S. Marine Corps (R.J. Ficker)

Specific questions of campus politics can be left to faculties in Tuscaloosa, Ann Arbor, and Tempe—until graduates of those institutions pin on the gold bars of second lieutenant or ensign. Once commissioned, those young leaders *must* know how to order principle, purpose, and people, for there is the fountain of leadership. Personal background, even educational experience, may be at odds with the views, values, and verities which have sustained the Armed Forces for more than two hundred years. How are young officers to learn the time-tested truths of military leadership? How are they to master what “principle” and “honor” are about? How are they to discover what “purpose” and “duty” really mean? How are they to grasp what taking care of people demands? Experience in the workplace or the streets is hardly enough. An education—at Alabama, William and Mary, Holy Cross, even Annapolis, it seems—is not enough. This is certainly not to impugn any institution; nor is it anti-intellectual, intended to denigrate higher education. Rather, the point is that leaders today need a socialization, maturation, and seasoning beyond the academic expertise represented by degrees. That socialization process is the responsibility of each service.

The Source of Integrity

To lead well—to inspire appropriate action beyond the expectable—leaders must have both wisdom and virtue, customary products of long experience and worthwhile education. As obvious

as it is, one can forget that the colonels of the future are the lieutenants of today. If the lieutenants are poorly educated, we must expect misfits and malcontents among colonels within a generation. Leaders educated by Federal service academies, ROTC, and OCS/OTS are likely to have the raw intelligence to *become*—I do not say to *be*—good leaders. But they will require the seasoning, experience, conditioning, and mentoring of their profession in order to mature into the kinds of leaders the Nation wants and very much needs.

In one word, leaders will learn virtue (and thus be able to inspire appropriate conduct) by being *responsable*. I have not misspelled the word *responsible*; I mean “*responsable*”—being able to respond. Leaders must know what to respond to. If they respond first to opportunities for success and advancement, they will be careerists but not professionals. If they misunderstand the order of principle, purpose, and people, they will make the kinds of mistakes referred to earlier. Leaders must be able to respond to the chief challenge of leadership: *being technically and tactically and ethically proficient*.

It is obvious that good leaders must know their profession. Competence in soldierly skill is fundamental. But competence without character is an invitation only to masterful despotism. And character consists in “responsability”—that is, being able to respond to challenge and crisis in a manner based on integrity. Here we have at last come to the chief difficulty in almost all writing



DOD (R.D. Ward)

on the ethics of leadership. It requires little study, after all, to say that good leaders are men and women of integrity. But what is integrity? I offer the simple definition that it is “responsability.” Those with integrity respond to crisis and challenge as their profession would urge. In moments

of indecision, leaders with integrity respond to the silent promptings and the unspoken guidance of those who have gone before; in moral and military emergency, leaders find unvoiced counsel in the

history of their services and biographies of the champions of yesteryear.

Leaders are never alone. They walk in the shadow of great lieutenants. Each service has rites and rituals, trappings and traditions, customs and conventions, that disclose volumes on what is done and must be done, what is not done and must never be done. Leaders soon perpetuate a community of service. Those who went before—and served well and nobly—admonish, instruct, and counsel young leaders who are prudent enough to listen. Heroic murals and statues, customs, uniforms, and reveille and taps—all these things faithfully teach new leaders that they have entered a

profession. In making decisions, leaders are responding not just to present circumstances but to standards set in the past, and aspirations and opportunities of the future. As professionals, leaders profess faith in comrades. They are *responsable*—that is, able to respond—to those comrades.

Alasdair MacIntyre of Notre Dame, perhaps our foremost moral philosopher, observed that “I inherit from the past of my family, my city, my tribe, my nation, a variety of debts, inheritances, rightful expectations, and obligations. These constitute the given of my life, my moral starting point. This is in part what gives my life its own moral particularity.”⁶ It is this inheritance, this sense of community, from which we derive a sense of purpose and ethical orientation. It is to this feeling of oneness, bonding, and confraternity that we are responsible. This brotherhood is found in Paul’s letter to the Romans: “What I wish is that we may be mutually encouraged by our common faith.” That feeling was described by Walter Lippmann when he wrote that there is a sense of community which, “though so insubstantial to our senses binds, in Burke’s words, a man to his country with ‘ties which though light as air, are as strong as links of iron.’ That is why young men die in battle for their country’s sake and why old men plant trees they will never sit under.”⁷ In his farewell at West Point, Douglas MacArthur made much the same point: “The long, gray line has never failed us. Were you to do so, a million ghosts in olive drab, in brown khaki, in blue and gray would rise from their white crosses. . . .”⁸

A simple definition of *integrity* tells us that it means “the quality or state of being complete; unbroken condition; wholeness; entirety.” In the sense that an integer is a whole number and not a fraction, integrity suggests community. Young leaders who absorb the sense of wholeness and of tradition and of common faith which writers from Paul of Tarsus to Lippmann and MacArthur have believed and taught thus ground their moral educations in virtue; they begin to know how to order *appropriate* conduct and how to conduct themselves wisely.

As vital as honor is, another concept of compelling importance is *shame*, the feeling that by inappropriate words and actions, one has disappointed the best of his community. Shame is the belief that, by failure of moral or physical courage, one has proven unworthy of the tradition he or she is expected to uphold and exalt. The shamed one is thus unable to look professional colleagues squarely in the eye and implicitly say, “I took this action because, in my best

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judgment, it was right." Actions and words that produce shame are ordinarily wrong. They destroy the wholeness (past, present, future) of a profession and devastate the bonding, community, and sense of unity of those whose deeds built the integrity of that profession.

Integrity, then, is about wholeness and community and having sufficient piety and decency to know when one ought to be ashamed of betraying it. Every leadership decision but the most mundane involves ethical judgment. Therefore, every significant leadership decision is potentially "transforming," leadership that occurs when we "engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality."⁹ Good leaders do not simply want their followers *to do something*; good leaders want their followers *to be somebody*. The repetition of appropriate action develops the kinds of habits which help us act as we should. In doing the right thing, leaders set examples, build purposeful organizations, create and enhance community, inculcate virtue because they are wise, and are wise because they are virtuous. "Good leaders," Malham Wakin observed, "are good teachers."¹⁰ Teachers do more than transmit ideas; they practice a kind of transforming leadership, educating students, soldiers, and patients. Good leaders show their subordinates "the way."

James Bond Stockdale, a prisoner of war in Vietnam for eight years, contends that good leaders "need to be moralists—not just poseurs who . . . exhort men to be good, but thinkers who elucidate what the good is. This requires first and foremost a clear idea of right and wrong and the integrity to stand behind your assessment of any situation."¹¹ Good ethics must be *taught* by good leaders; and good ethics is *caught* from good leaders who inspire appropriate conduct beyond the expectable. Leaders learn from the past, are responsible in the present, and plan for the future. They know their principles, purposes, and people; and their sense of community and their pride of profession endow their actions and orders with mature judgment. In such mature, settled judgment will be found the union of leadership and virtue, of effective command and wise conscience.

JFQ

NOTES

¹ In a book by the same name (New York: Harper Colophon, 1978), Burns defines leadership as "inducing followers to act for certain goals that represent the values and the motivations . . . of both leaders and followers" (p. 19).

² James H. Toner, *The Sword and the Cross* (New York: Praeger, 1992), p. 49; and *The American Military Ethic* (New York: Praeger, 1992), p. 54.

³ Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus, *Leaders: The Strategists for Taking Charge* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), p. 21. But their next sentence totally misses the point: "The difference may be summarized as activities of vision and judgment—effectiveness versus . . . efficiency."

⁴ John D. Ryan, quoted in *War, Morality, and the Military Profession*, 2^d ed., edited by Malham Wakin (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1986), p. 180.

⁵ See my book *True Faith and Allegiance: The Burden of Military Ethics* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1995), chapter 4, for more detail.

⁶ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2^d ed. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), p. 220.

⁷ Walter Lippmann, *Essays in the Public Philosophy* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1955), p. 36.

⁸ "Duty, Honor, and Country," *Vital Speeches of the Day*, vol. 28, no. 17 (June 15, 1962), p. 520. The power of this valedictory is not denied; but "duty, honor, country," though valuable and venerable as rhetoric, is not an amulet that guarantees good leadership.

⁹ Burns, *Leadership*, p. 20. His other type of leadership is "transactional," which means "one person tak[ing] the initiative in making contact with others for the purpose of an exchange of valued things."

¹⁰ Malham W. Wakin, "Foreword," in *Military Leadership: In Pursuit of Excellence*, edited by R. L. Taylor and W. E. Rosenbach (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1984), p. xiv.

¹¹ See James Bond Stockdale, "Educating Leaders," in *Military Leadership: In Pursuit of Excellence*, edited by R. L. Taylor and W. E. Rosenbach (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1984), p. 67. See also Roger H. Nye, *The Challenge of Command* (Wayne, N.J.: Avery, 1986).