



Address to USAFA Cadet Wing
12 Nov 2024
Arnold Hall, USAFA
Secretary of the Air Force Frank Kendall

War, Leadership, and Respect

I'm going to address three topics today; war, leadership and respect.

When the Cold War ended, I had some hope that war as a central part of human history was going out of fashion. I was wrong. If there is one constant in the few thousand-year history of recorded human civilization, it is that wars continue to occur. After all this time, we humans have not been able to agree that there are better ways to resolve our differences than to kill each other. I do not expect that to change during your careers.

You may already have heard the assertion that the nature of war does not change, but that the character of war changes constantly. One thing that does not change is that wars involve the application of violence to compel the behavior of others, or to destroy them. You may not have thought about it this way, but you have chosen a profession that at its heart is about the threat of and the efficient application of violence. As officers, you will be entrusted by the nation to control and use violence, and to do so only under lawful orders. That is an awesome responsibility.

- Different generations have different experiences with war, and it shapes those generations significantly. My parents' lives were shaped by World War II, and their experiences strongly influenced me. My father was already in the Navy when Pearl Harbor occurred. He spent most of WW II on a destroyer in the Pacific and ended it on convoy duty in the North Atlantic. My father died of a heart attack when he was 43. He probably had some form of PTSD, long before this name was given to the trauma associated with the experience of combat.



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- Vietnam and the Cold War shaped my generation. I graduated from West Point as the war in Vietnam was ending. Upper classmen that I had known were killed in Vietnam, especially from the classes of 68 and 69, including my regimental commander when I was a sophomore. My plebe gymnastics instructor, a fine officer who had gone out of his way to help me get through that course, was killed in Vietnam shortly after he left the Academy. When I graduated, I received an award that had been created by the family of an engineering professor killed in Vietnam a few years earlier. After Vietnam, we thought we'd never get involved in a counterinsurgency again. We were wrong, as the years after 9/11 proved.
- For the first 20 years of my career, I was a participant in the Cold War. I served on the inner German border, waiting for a Soviet invasion that could have come at any time. Later, I led research and development programs designed to keep ahead of the Soviets. Near the end of the Cold War, I became the senior career civilian responsible for all Department of Defense research and development of the DOD's tactical warfare programs.
- Somehow, we limited the Cold War to regional or proxy wars, including Korea and Vietnam and the so-called wars of national liberation sponsored by the Soviet Union. We managed to avoid a large-scale direct conventional conflict or a nuclear war, but with no margin for error. Very recently, a senior military leader, not from the Department of the Air Force, expressed the opinion to me that we didn't have to worry about China or Russia too much because nuclear powers had never gone to war with other nuclear powers, and therefore would not do so in the future. To me, this is very dangerous thinking. One of my childhood memories is of the



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Cuban Missile Crisis, in which we came dangerously close to nuclear conflict. We also discovered after the Cold War there had been other occasions when we were closer to nuclear conflict than we had realized, much closer. When the Cold War ended, I hoped that the collapse of the Soviet Union meant the end of the threat of nuclear conflict. I was naive. The threat of nuclear war has returned, in what may be even more dangerous forms.

- As memory of the only use of nuclear weapons in history disappears, and as the high awareness of nuclear threats of the Cold War fades, the danger and risk of a miscalculation is increasing. Very recently, the potential for nuclear weapon use became as real as I've ever experienced. There is public evidence that as Russia faced reversals in Ukraine and as its control of Crimea seemed at risk, Russia seriously considered using nuclear weapons. There have also been public reports that Russia may be close to stationing nuclear anti-satellite weapons in space, deployed in position and ready to detonate. I personally view this as equally unacceptable as the stationing of weapons in Cuba in the 1960s was. Meanwhile, the risk of increased nuclear proliferation, and with it the risk of nuclear use, has grown. Russia is only increasing its reliance on nuclear weapons, as it has for the last few decades, and China is now building a nuclear arsenal comparable to the United States and Russia. I'm afraid my generation and the ones between yours and mine have failed to remove this threat. You will have to serve and live under a nuclear threat. You will have the task of preventing the greatest imaginable catastrophe in human history.
- My generation also experienced the First Gulf War. The First Gulf War demonstrated the value of the investments in technology



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and operational concepts that I had been part of executing. The United States surprised even itself with the battlefield performance of the technologies we had created to compete with the massed armor of the Soviet Union. Stealth, precision munitions, wide area surveillance sensors, and networked forces, employed in sound operational concepts and within organizations tailored to their use, were as revolutionary as the introduction of Blitzkrieg had been some 40 years before. The fact of wars, and that they involve the application of violence do not change, but technology, and how it is employed, changes dramatically.

- For the United States, the First Gulf War led to a sense of entitlement and complacency. The Soviet threat was gone, and the conventional forces of the US military were so vastly superior to anything else on the planet that no one could conceivably challenge us. Unfortunately, China did not accept this premise and set about creating a military that could do just that – challenge the American ability to project power. Simultaneously, China is also now attempting to neutralize the larger American nuclear arsenal by creating a comparable arsenal of its own. China, and a hostile Russia that is heavily reliant on nuclear weapons, are the principle threats your generation must face.
- Following 9/11, an event that occurred before almost all of you were born, the United States embarked on a 20-year campaign against terrorist groups and managed to enter into two prolonged counter insurgency campaigns. All of the Air Force and Space Force leaders in uniform today are from the generation that was shaped by this experience.
- I have been working for the last three and a half years, to get the Department of the Air Force ready for the next war we may have



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to fight. My most fundamental objective has been to instill a sense of urgency about the need to prepare. There is no time to lose. I often quote Douglas McArthur who said that military failure can almost always be described in two words, “too late.” Shortly after I took office, I directed everyone in the DAF Headquarters to write down a short sentence on a sticky note and to post it on their monitors where they could read it every time they looked at the screen. I am giving you that order today. Your note should read as follows: War with China or Russia is not unlikely, it can happen at any time.

- Those words were chosen carefully. War is not inevitable. The Cold War demonstrates that some wars can be successfully deterred, but all of human history demonstrates that wars can and will happen. Today we face a China that has been working for decades to develop and field a range of systems designed to defeat the United States in the Western Pacific. China intends to dominate in space, in cyberspace, and in the air. We are in a race for technological superiority in fielded systems and we are not moving fast enough. China regards control of Taiwan and the South China sea as high national priorities that it sees as its inherent historical right. Russia has repeatedly demonstrated its willingness to use force against its neighbors. Deterrence will remain our goal, under any administration, but deterrence will not succeed unless we demonstrate that we are ready for war. If we are not in fact ready for war we will be defeated. Your job will be to help ensure deterrence is successful, and if it fails, to achieve victory, which brings us to the subject of leadership.
- You may well have to lead in combat in a type of conflict with which we have no modern experience in the Air Force or Space



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Force or in the American military in general. You can expect our bases, especially those in theater, to be under heavy fire, from a variety of sources. You can expect to have to deal with casualties. You can expect all of our aircraft to be engaged while in the air, including tankers and transports, and to take losses on a scale not seen since World War II. You can expect all of our spacecraft to be attacked, in any orbital regime. Even at bases in the United States, you can expect attacks of various types, especially cyber attacks. You will have to lead Airman and Guardians under the most stressful of operational environments. While you are here at the Academy you should do everything you can to prepare yourself to lead. Leading is always hard. Leading in combat requires the character to both know and do the right thing, the commitment to the country and the mission to put both above all else, the connection to your team to lead effectively, and most of all the courage to move forward under any circumstance. If you're going into the Space Force you should be familiar with those words; character, commitment, connection, and courage. They are the Space Force core values.

- The purpose of the Air Force Academy is to produce leaders of character, skilled military professionals, for the Air Force and Space Force. Learning to lead is the central goal of everything you do here: military training, athletics and academics. The likelihood that you will have to lead in combat is high. The nation's military academies would not be worth the investment if they did not produce exceptional leaders, ready on day one. You may have seen the letter that General Allvin, General Saltzman and I sent to Lt Gen Bauernfeind directing that he make major changes at USAFA. Those changes are designed to ensure that USAFA



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graduates are as ready to lead as possible immediately upon graduation and commissioning.

- One thing about war that does not change over time is the importance of leadership to success. You will be talking about and debating leadership styles throughout your careers. I expect you have already started this process as you observe the leadership styles and techniques of all those around you. It's easy to criticize and be cynical. Soon, you will be the ones being observed and criticized.
- Leadership makes a difference, and the quality of American leadership is an important advantage for the United States. We have the best non-commissioned enlisted leaders on the planet; far superior to our potential adversaries. You will be expected to lead those NCOs and others as soon as you graduate. As a young lieutenant and a small unit leader many years ago, I made the observation that while all of the officers I served with had been through similar or even identical training in leadership, some of us applied that training well and others did not. My conclusion was that what set the effective leaders apart was courage, the courage to do the right thing. If your priority is to be liked, if your priority is to avoid risk, if your priority is to protect your career first, if your priority is to avoid criticism, you will not be an effective leader. You have to have the courage to do the right thing. But first you have to decide what the right thing is.
- One of my favorite scenes from the movies is in the film "The Insider" which was made in 1999 and stars Russell Crowe and Al Pacino. You might consider it a classic movie. I on the other hand think of movies from the 1930s and 1940s as classics. But I digress. In "The Insider" Russell Crowe plays a tobacco company



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executive who is pressured by a journalist played by Al Pacino to tell the truth about the tobacco industry to the public. In the scene I'm referring to, Crowe's character is pacing back and forth trying to decide whether to tell the truth or not, given the impact it will have on himself and especially his family. Should he risk the welfare of his family to expose the efforts by the tobacco industry to hide the addiction and sickness caused by tobacco use. Finally, Pacino's character, who has run out of patience, asks him what's making the decision so hard. Crowe's answer is that he "can't seem to find the criteria to decide." He is trying to decide what moral or guiding principle should govern his choice. As leaders, I can guarantee you that you will have the occasion to answer that question for yourselves many times.

- The first step is realizing that there is even a question to answer. I think many people default to narrow self-interest without conscious thought. Those people are not leaders of character, and if you are going to be a leader of character, you need to start asking yourselves that question and answering it now. The easy choice based on the wrong principle, or more commonly no principle at all, will not serve you well as leaders. There is a danger that we all face of having our principles eroded until they vanish completely. Your principles and your standards are not what you say or even believe they are; they are revealed by what you actually do when confronted with a real choice that may have a negative impact on you. It's easy to have principles when they are free and don't extract a cost. One of my favorite leadership axioms is that your standards are not what you say, but what you accept. Now, while you are cadets, you need to decide what principles and standards will guide you as you make choices as you are leading the Airmen and Guardians under your authority. In the Cadet Prayer from West



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Point, that I once had to memorize, there is a line that reads, “help me to choose the harder right instead of the easier wrong.” Effective leadership often involves choosing the harder right; and that takes courage.

- Effective leadership embodies the Air Force core values. “Integrity first, service before self, and excellence in all we do” is a great set of guiding principles to start with. If you are going to be a leader of character, you need to take these values seriously and have the courage to act in accordance with them.
- How will you know you have led well? One answer is when you discover that you have the ability to empower and motivate people to achieve things they did not know they could accomplish. For me, that is the reward for effective leadership, the satisfaction of knowing that your leadership empowered people to do more than they knew they could accomplish. As leaders you will have succeeded when the people you lead find out that they are more capable than they thought they were because of what you inspired them to do. You won’t know you’ve achieved this until you’ve done it. When you have accomplished it, you will know it, and so will those you lead and those around you. Which brings us to the topic of respect.
- I think of respect as existing in layers. The first layer of respect you owe is to yourself and your sense of who you are. If you don’t have that, you cannot be an effective leader. When you approach the end of your careers, as I am now, the best gift you can have given yourself over the course of your life and career is the ability to look in the mirror as you approach the end of your life and say honestly, I did the right things for the right reasons. Doing the right things for the right reasons, and getting others to follow you, is the



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essence of effective leadership. Unlike events that cannot be predicted or facts that cannot be altered, this is also completely under your own control.

- As Cadets and officers, you are expected to show respect for the values and institutions of our country, and as leaders to ensure that others do the same. The oath that you have taken as Cadets, and that you are likely to take again at different stages of your career, is your promise to support and defend the Constitution, the most basic and foundational law of our country. The rule of law is the heart and soul of America. Without it, we are just another nation state competing for power. Without the rights guaranteed to all Americans in the Constitution, we cannot have the shared freedom and opportunity that you are pledged to defend. Recently, on Veteran's Day at Arlington Cemetery, I heard President Biden, as I have many times before, repeat that America stands for an idea, the idea that all men (and women) are created equal. That idea is the central feature of the Constitution. As President Biden said, "we haven't always lived up to that idea", but we have never stopped striving for it, and when necessary, fighting for it. For all members of the military, respect for what America stands for isn't just a phrase – it's what you have committed to fight and if necessary give your lives for. When you first put on an American uniform, the cloth of our nation, you incurred an obligation to respect and live up to the oath that you took and to do so every day as you lead the young men and women America's parents have entrusted to your leadership
- The third layer extends to the people you lead. One of the attributes that your experience at USAFA is intended to develop in you is respect for the people you will lead and the people on your



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own team. As an officer, treating others, but especially those you lead with respect, and importantly, ensuring that others do the same, is a basic requirement.

- A report almost two years ago about the extremely high incidence of sexual assault and nonconsensual sexual contact here at USAFA drew my intense attention to the Academy. More recent data shows some improvement, but not enough. There are very few acts one person can commit on another that are more disrespectful than sexual assault. It reduces the victim to an object with no inherent value other than the gratification of the assailant. It can have lasting traumatic effects on the victim. I know this because I've represented the victims of sexual assault in court. I've heard their stories, and I've seen their enduring pain. Some of the victims whose stories I've heard are Cadets at USAFA. As a citizen and an American taxpayer, I feel that if we are going to have sexual assault at high rates at USAFA, there is no justification to support such a school with our taxes. This has to change.

- What does this have to do with war and leadership? Everything. As officers, you will have the responsibility to lead and earn the respect of everyone on your team, regardless of gender. You will be responsible, not just for your own conduct, but for that of everyone under your authority. You cannot do that effectively if you tolerate a climate in which sexual assault or sexual harassment occurs. You will not just be responsible for your own conduct, but also for creating and sustaining a command culture in which sexual innuendo, off color jokes, and denigrating treatment are not tolerated. Our teams throughout the military depend on unit cohesion and trust to be effective. A climate in which sexual harassment or assault can occur will not have unit cohesion and



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trust. It's well known that when soldiers go into battle, their greatest motivation to perform well is the fear that they will let their teammates down. You can't build that type of trust and devotion in an organization that permits disrespectful treatment based on gender or any other attribute. 'One team, one fight' has been my mantra for the past three and a half years. Make it yours as you learn how to build teams and lead effectively.

- The most recent data shows that the efforts to address sexual harassment and assault at USAFA, largely through the "let's be clear" campaign have produced significant improvement. Cutting the rate of sexual assault at USAFA may be progress, but it is still unacceptably high. When I was first briefed on the earlier data, my reaction was that the Cadets who are doing this are doing it because they want to, and they expect to get away with it. Later investigations revealed a third contributor. The leadership climate at USAFA was not effectively setting and enforcing the standard for sexual conduct more generally, including tolerance for demeaning and disrespectful comments and actions in general. No one expects young men and women to live like monks, but once you put on the uniform of an Air Force Academy cadet, we expect you to treat your teammates, all of them, with respect. In my opinion it comes down to something very simple; Don't touch someone without their permission. Secretary of the Army Christine Wormuth recommended a book to me that makes that point very well. Its title is "Can I Kiss You" and it's by Michael Domitrz. It's premise is simple; a straightforward question is more respectful, more romantic, and more likely to be appreciated and responded to than what once upon a time we called "making a pass." Now, I'm standing up here at multiples of your age giving you dating advice. That feels a little weird to me too, but based on what I've learned



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some of you could use the advice. Treat your teammates with the respect they deserve, and as leaders act to ensure that others do also.

- Another closely related guiding principle related to respect that I believe in is that you should act in a way that will or would earn you the respect of the people that you respect the most. I have long measured myself against that standard. You will have the opportunity here and as you enter active duty to see many styles of leadership. You have the opportunity now to get to know officers and NCOs who may fit this description of being people you want to be respected by the most. As you go on in your career there will be many more, at all levels of the chain of command. Pick out the ones you admire and seek out their advice.

- The time you have here at USAFA is precious. It is your opportunity to develop the leadership skills and attributes that will carry you through your career, however long you serve the nation and in whatever capacity. This is where you should learn not just how to lead, but what it means to be a leader of character. The Superintendent is in the process of making some changes. You're not expected to like them all, but they are designed to ensure, as Lt Gen Baurenfiend was directed by myself and the Service Chiefs, that you are prepared to lead on day one. War is not inevitable, but as your new sticky will say, "war is not unlikely and can occur at any time." We believe in you. Don't let us down. Don't let your country down. Earn our respect.

- Semper Supra,
- Fly fight and win,
- One team, one fight