

The Four Stages of Moral Development in Military Leadersⁱ

Joseph J. Thomas
Lakefield Family Foundation
Distinguished Military Professor of Leadership
United States Naval Academy
(410) 293-6548, jjthomas@usna.edu

ABSTRACT

The development of the moral element of leadership is very often ignored in the training and education of military officers—non-commissioned, staff non-commissioned, and commissioned. This is partly due to the lack of understanding of the developmental stages in the career of a service member.

Of the three dimensions of leadership—moral, physical and intellectual—the most difficult to harvest is moral development. The physical attributes of leadership—courage, bearing, endurance, and even appearance, can be cultivated through disciplined training. The intellectual aspect of leadership can be cultivated through intensive study of human nature, crisis management, leadership and managerial technique, philosophy, logic, and so on.

The moral aspect of leadership—personally understanding, embracing, and inculcating ethical conduct in others is far more difficult to develop in leaders and can be far more time consuming. In spite of decades of highly publicized moral/ethical failures on the part of its military members, the DoD has not achieved a satisfactory method for addressing the moral development of service men and women.

Pronouncements from DoD leadership have been common. Then-Secretary of the Navy, Gordon England, published an “All Navy/All Marine Corps” message entitled “Expectation of Ethical Conduct,” in which he stated that “it is essential that all Department of the Navy personnel adhere to the highest standards of integrity and ethical conduct. The American people put their trust in us and none of us can betray that trust. The standards of conduct are designed to ensure that we retain the trust of the American people.”ⁱⁱ Secretary England limited the scope of his comments to matters of personal monetary gain, such as use of government resources, the acceptance of gifts, financial interests, and the seeking of future employment. However, ethics regarding personal financial gain are but one issue in the far broader category of military ethics.

If ethics is a system of moral values and morals are principles of right and wrong in behavior, then moral development is the quest to learn right from wrong. This quest is

not simple, yet there are some who grasp its lessons intuitively. This quest is not brief, yet there are those who negotiate it quickly. This quest can be broken down into four discernable “stages.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The four stages of moral development in leaders are compliance, moral understanding, moral maturity, and moral ambition. These stages are not new. The Roman Centurian moved along a similar path from *obsequium* (obedience to orders, compliance with directives) to *fides* (faith in the organizations and institutions that generate those orders and directives) to *integritas* (wholeness, completeness, integrity). To accomplish this they worked hard to develop their leaders through a variety of means designed to create *prudentia* (knowledge gleaned from experience) and *sapientia* (knowledge gleaned from focused, scientific study).^{iv}

Compliance

Compliance is more about simple behavior modification than it is about some deeper, existential understanding of the role of the leader and the meaning of life. Every moral development program, whether it is associated with acculturating an individual to the military service, a religious order, or a new family, begins with an expectation that behavior may indeed have to be modified. Because the regimented demands of military life are so drastically different from life in the civilian world, this first step—fashioning a soldier, sailor or Marine capable of complying with critical orders quickly and unflinching—is typically quite harsh. The more demanding and exacting the organization, the more demanding and exacting this introduction. Thucydides words of 404 BCE apply equally today, "We must remember that one man is much the same as another, and that he is best who is trained in the severest school."^v

For those with a background and preparation suited to the new calling, achieving compliance may be a minimally intrusive process. For those requiring serious behavior modification, the paradigm shift may be long and painful. Some willingly comply with a new set of rules, standards, and beliefs. Some fight the process and are incapable of ever living “within the system.” Some avoid complete compliance and still manage to succeed within the organization—with both negative and positive results.^{vi}

Certain military cultures such as that of the Spartans prized compliance above nearly every other attribute. The Spartan child was reared with extreme measures to ensure his compliance to standards of martial expectations. In fact the life of a male Spartan, with few exceptions, revolved around the spoken and unspoken beliefs of his military culture.^{vii}

Obedience at its pinnacle guarantees order, function, and accomplishment, but as an end-state it is dangerous. Those who stop developing at the obedience level run a risk of becoming unthinking, blind followers. The next level, moral understanding, is a healthy outgrowth from compliance in that it is assertive rather than passive. It requires the individual to think and reason.

Moral Understanding

The leap between compliance and understanding is never made by some individuals. For reasons of attitude or intellect, some are incapable of reflection on the purpose of rules, standards, and beliefs. Others simply reject the concepts underlying those organizational rules and standards. The most important transitory step from the role of follower to that of leader is the step from compliance to moral understanding.^{viii}

America's cultural pluralism compounds this challenge. The contemporary popularity of relativism—the belief there is no right or wrong, only a variety of ways to “look at” things—has created a generation unwilling to make **value judgments**, a process demanded of military leaders. Moral understanding implies that we make numerous and complex value judgments about the foundational principles that underlie established rules and standards. These judgments precede ethical decisions which in turn precede ethical conduct, which itself precedes ethical leadership.

Moral understanding at its pinnacle ensures cohesion and clarity. The greatest challenge to leaders is clarifying their expectations to their subordinates. The second challenge is to ensure that those expectations are in constant agreement with the mission and overall organizational principles. Thus, moral leadership is the unending quest to establish understanding—on the part of the leader and his or her subordinates. This understanding is revisited and refreshed regularly and through this process matures into a thorough and more complete understanding.

Moral Maturity

Prussian soldiers distinguished between loyalty, compliance, and faith in superiors and loyalty to and faith in their country. Soldiers who failed their loyalty or compliance with the directives of their immediate superiors were guilty of *hochverrat*—a form of treasonous disobedience punished with a beating. While soldiers who failed the very concepts and principles their country was based upon were guilty of *Landesverrat*—a very serious form of treason punishable by death. Their moral development demanded not only a disciplined response to immediate superiors, but also their implicit belief in, and conformity to, the expectations of their nation.^{ix}

Compliance was simply assumed in the highly disciplined world of the military class. Understanding was guaranteed in the militaristic culture of Prussia and reinforced by the rigorous training of the *kriegsacademie*. Moral maturity was pursued by leaders who discussed, revised, debated, and revisited their own moral beliefs. They weighed these beliefs against the needs and beliefs of their country at large. It was only when the morality of the Prussian officer corps began to diverge from the needs and beliefs of their nation that problems emerged. The militaristic culture that became an end in itself, rather than a tool to serve the Prussian, later German, people failed to mature.^x

Moral maturity assumes that officers remain grounded in a paradigm that regularly returns them to the source of their duty. In the American context it's the Constitutional Paradigm beginning with the US Constitution and moving through the mission, the service, the unit (or ship), the fellow-serviceman (or shipmate) and finally self. Moral maturity is not an end-state, rather, it is the product of continuous evaluation. A moral leader assesses his own beliefs, how those beliefs are manifest in his actions and the actions of his unit, and how closely aligned those actions are with the expectations of his nation, service, and mission.^{xi}

Moral Ambition

Moral ambition is the final and ultimate stage of moral development. It represents the pinnacle of self-actualization. Moral ambition is the active rather than passive pursuit of virtuous behavior not only in self, but in all members within the individual's sphere of influence. It is a quality that few are capable of achieving, for it demands reflection, willingness, courage, and constancy of purpose. In matters of day-to-day life, moral ambition may cause an individual to impact situations that are little known to others

(returning a lost wallet, aiding a stranded motorist, etc.). In certain situations, moral ambition, on the part of influential people, can change the world. In the military context, morally ambitious officers have not only determined outcomes on the battlefield, but they have changed civilization.

From the day-to-day moral stands that many take without being recognized or given credit to a Warrant Officer placing his helicopter between innocent civilians and soldiers gone out of control, to military members who have truly shaped Western Civilization, moral ambition makes day-to-day leadership an agent of profound change. Examples of moral ambition in a leader as commander-in-chief can be found in Themistocles, Cincinnatus, Churchill, or Lincoln. Biography may be the most effective method for introducing the concept of moral ambition. Examples of morally ambitious American military leaders who have changed civilization can be found in Washington, Lee, and Marshall.

Washington at Newburgh

During the winter of 1782-1783 the Continental Army was on the verge of insurrection. Soldiers and officers had not been paid by Congress, creditors and supportive politicians encouraged them to forcefully demand that all back-pay be provided immediately or “drastic measures” would be taken. It appeared that a military coup was in the offing. The conspirators assembled at Newburgh, NY (the town for which the conspiracy was named) and invited George Washington to address their assembly—many with the intention of offering him the position of “emperor” or even king. Washington saw the peril to the new Republic for what it was, a direct threat to the nation’s newly founded liberties. He diffused the situation in typical dramatic fashion.

In the process of addressing the assembled officers and promising to appeal to Congress for all that was owed, he slowly pulled a pair of spectacles from his pocket. The room fell deadly silent, for no one knew the great general required eye glasses. Even such a simple device to aid the aging Washington was treated with disbelief. As he fumbled to adjust his glasses he stated apologetically, “Gentlemen, you will permit me to put on my spectacles, for I have not only grown gray but nearly blind in the service of my country.”^{xii} The Army’s differences with their civilian masters were resolved immediately. Many in the room welled up with tears. A clear, important message had been sent by the nation’s greatest soldier—the Army was the servant protector of the people, and the people were directly represented by their elected officials. The precedent and message set by Washington assured that the country would never again come so perilously close to a military coup. American representative democracy was ensured; civilization, as we know it, was preserved.^{xiii}

Lee at Richmond

Fast forward 82 years to St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia. The nation had been recently and nearly completely destroyed by the cataclysm of civil war. The social fabric, particularly of the South, had been torn. People resented change and the agents of change. A recently-freed African American man observed the service from the rear of the church. When it was time for communion, he walked to the rail to receive alongside the church’s white parishioners. The congregation was aghast. This seemingly small matter ran completely counter to anything almost anyone in that church had experienced—or would even tolerate. The minister and other communicants were stunned and didn’t move.^{xiv}

Just then, a grandfatherly yet ramrod straight gentleman rose from a pew near the front. Robert E. Lee, the man called “the greatest soldier in the history of the English-speaking peoples” by Winston Churchill understood the situation immediately. He knelt beside the man and both received communion. In an instant a situation was diffused, and more importantly, a message was sent to the congregation, the community, and entire region that change, positive change, was inevitable.^{xv}

While Lee’s actions on that Sunday morning did not themselves end the struggle for the civil rights of African Americans, for that struggle continues today, but that message and the message of rapprochement with the laws and ideals of former enemies became the starting point for healing a nation. Lee would continue to urge his former soldiers to put away their arms and ill will toward the United States. He was, in many regards, singularly responsible for thousands of former Confederate soldiers’ (and the generations that followed) willingness to reintegrate fully into American life.

Marshall at Cambridge

Fast forward another 82 years to a podium on the campus of Harvard University, where America’s senior and arguably, most distinguished soldier was addressing an audience on America’s “proper course” at the conclusion of the bloodiest war the world had ever seen. GEN George C. Marshall, former Army Chief of Staff and current Secretary of State, did not rally the nation behind punitive measures for its recently defeated enemies. He instinctively realized that punishing and exacting revenge on Germany and Japan would only deepen political rifts and worsen human suffering. Marshall recognized an opportunity to lift former enemies and allies alike from poverty, and by so doing preserve democratic principles and free-market economies that would

stand together with the United States against the dreaded rise of yet another form of despotism and subjugation—communism.^{xvi}

Marshall's ideas were not unprecedented, but to succeed in a world poisoned by such a great cataclysm would demand every persuasive skill that could be mustered by the widely admired soldier-statesman. Marshall remained above the partisan political fray and appealed to a Congress hostile to the idea of further spending in Europe or Asia and to an American people weary of "foreign entanglements." George Marshall beseeched his countrymen to moral world leadership. He believed that by helping others, we would better guarantee our own security and well-being. His prescient ideas laid the groundwork for not just the policy of containment, but reinforced the American predilection for helping those in need.^{xvii}

The product of these actions was nothing less than the salvaging of democracy, free-market capitalism, and universal respect for human rights as the bedrock of Western Civilization. Bold, timely action, deftly taken, preserved a way of life for millions. Marshall, like his predecessors Lee and Washington, had left an invaluable legacy well beyond narrow military service. The moral ambition of military leaders can have an impact well beyond the immediate.

These great leaders, and many others among the generations who followed them in the service of the nation all seized opportunities. They were able to do so only through an advanced understanding of the morality underlying their duty. This moral ambition was the product of their development as leaders from a stage of simple compliance to one of moral understanding and moral maturity. Not all leaders have the opportunity or even ability to exercise moral ambition, but all military officers should be afforded a thorough

education in the moral aspect of leadership. The quest for moral development should be undertaken by those cognizant of its stages, aware of its implications, and respectful of our collective inherited legacy.

ⁱ With deference to Kohlberg's late 1960s/early 1970s studies on cognitive-developmental models and moral development as it relates to individual reasoning. In particular: L. Kohlberg, The Philosophy of Moral Development, (New York: Harper and Row, 1984).

ⁱⁱ Gordon England, Secretary of the Navy, Expectation of Ethical Conduct, (Washington, D.C.: ALMAR 13/04, 011900Z MAR 04).

ⁱⁱⁱ Jeffrey Pfeifer and Katherine M.B. Owens, Military Leadership and Ethics, (Ottawa: Canadian Forces Leadership Institute, 2002), 22.

^{iv} William J. Bennett, The Book of Virtues, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 726.

^v Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War (New York: Penguin Classics, 1987); quoted in Peter Tsouras, Warriors' Words: A Dictionary of Military Quotations (London: Arms and Armor Press, 1992), 443.

^{vi} Pfeifer and Owens, 6.

^{vii} Bennett, 472.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, Introduction, 4.

^{ix} *Ibid.*, 727.

^x *Ibid.*

^{xi} Paul E. Roush, "Constitutional Ethics," in Ethics for Military Leaders, (Boston: Pearson Custom Publishing, 1998), 29.

^{xii} David Higginbotham, "George Washington's Contributions to American Constitutionalism, in Papers on the Constitution," John Elsberg, ed. (Washington: Center of Military History, US Army, 1990), 11.

^{xiii} *Ibid.*

^{xiv} Stanley F. Horn, The Robert E. Lee Reader, (New York: Konecky & Konecky, 1949), 462.

^{xv} *Ibid.*

^{xvi} Mark A. Stoler, George C. Marshall: Soldier-Statesman of the American Century, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), 189.

^{xvii} *Ibid.*, 231.

Author Bio:

Dr. Joseph J. Thomas is the Lakefield Family Foundation Distinguished Military Professor of Leadership at the United States Naval Academy and past Director of the John A. Lejeune Leadership Institute, Marine Corps University. The author of numerous articles on the subjects of command and control, military training and education, and leadership, his published books include, *Leadership Education for Marines* (UMI Press, 2000), *Leadership Embodied* (The US Naval Institute Press, 2005, 2007), *Naval Leadership Capstone* (McGraw-Hill, 2006), and *Leadership Explored* (AcademX, 2007). Joe's education includes an M.S.Sc. from the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University, a M.S.S. from the US Army War College, and Ph.D. from George Mason University.