

# DOES GOOD LEADERSHIP REQUIRE GOOD CHARACTER?

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The best hope we have that, in a military crisis or moral crisis or legal crisis or business crisis or political crisis or medical crisis or any other human crisis, the “right” decision will be made is if a person of decent moral character is the decision-maker. Even having that condition satisfied is no guarantee that the “right” decision will, in fact, be made because even moral heroes make mistakes – but it really is the best hope we have.

Return for a moment to that disastrous and shameful episode in the Vietnam War on a March day in 1968, in a small hamlet sometimes referred to as “Pinkville,” carried out by the platoon of U.S. Army soldiers tasked with “sweeping” this supposed haven for the Viet Cong soldiers who were thought to have laid the claymore mines which had killed members of the Charlie Company the previous week. My Lai 4 was one of five hamlets composing the village of My Lai and assigned to Charlie Company as part of a major offensive through the region. Second Lieutenant William Calley, the lieutenant in charge of one of the platoons in the company, was very young, very inexperienced, and not prepared for this leadership responsibility.

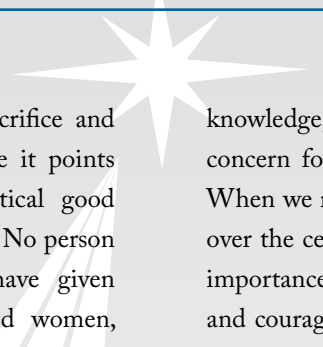
Calley’s platoon soon had complete control of the hamlet. They had found no males of military age and no weapons. They did, however, have over 400 prisoners: old men, women, children, and babies! The lieutenant ordered his men to herd these civilian prisoners into the roadside ditches and to shoot every one of them!

This infamous footnote to the Vietnam War did not become widely known until several months after it had occurred. It is clearly one of the most disastrous and humiliating stains on the reputation of U.S. fighting forces. His own soldiers knew the lieutenant’s order was immoral and illegal. One soldier shot himself in the foot to take himself out of the action rather than follow that order. Another emptied his M-16 rifle into the air. Another challenged the lieutenant’s order directly and was threatened by the lieutenant with the lieutenant’s M-16. All but a small number of the villagers were killed – approximately 15 were rescued by an American helicopter crew who held the lieutenant at bay with a machine gun while the few living villagers were airlifted from the devastating killing area.

Why retell this aberration in the behavior of a military whose history is replete with morally

## BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

One of the most esteemed military ethicists in America, Dr. Malham M. Wakin, Brigadier General (Retired) is Professor Emeritus of the U.S. Air Force Academy where he was the head of the Philosophy Department for over 30 years. He has published four books and countless essays and articles on ethics and related subjects.



noble and courageous acts of self-sacrifice and heroism in numerous wars? Because it points the way to understanding how critical good moral character is to good leadership. No person of decent moral character could have given the order to destroy those unarmed women, children, and babies! Interestingly enough, our plethora of books on leadership over the years seemingly takes for granted that the purposes of leaders will always be noble ones and need little examination. Most definitions of leadership we find in very excellent manuals and scholarly books focus on the attributes of *effective* leaders and seldom highlight how critical the attributes of good moral character are to the development of *good* leaders. Effective leaders are said to be capable of inspiring loyalty and obedience in their followers. They are assumed to be courageous and competent. We seldom find, even in the best of the leadership manuals, a focus on the *moral* dimensions of *good* rather than merely *effective* leadership. *Good* leaders have a moral purpose in addition to all of the other qualities that inspire trust and confidence. Hitler, after all, was an extremely effective leader but he cannot be judged to have been a good leader because he lacked that crucial moral dimension of good character. He led his many followers to do very evil things.

*Good* leaders can be described as having both competence (those skills that may include practical wisdom, persuasiveness, technical

knowledge, decisiveness, inspiration, caring concern for followers, etc.) and good *character*. When we review the texts of the military writers over the centuries we find great emphasis on the importance of the virtues of loyalty, obedience, and courage and this is appropriate. But leaders are unlikely to develop the loyalty and obedience in their followers if they do not themselves possess the kind of good character that stems from a demonstrated moral integrity that is constant and characteristic of their behavior. In a crisis, subordinates will rarely follow leaders they do not trust and they rarely give their trust to leaders believed to be selfish, greedy, and pursuing glory, promotions, good assignments, etc. In a very importance sense, then, integrity is the moral virtue that is foundational – it is first in the hierarchy of critical leadership virtues since without it, generating loyalty and obedience may be impossible. We trust leaders whom we believe are honest and truthful and who keep their promises. We don't trust leaders who clearly lack integrity and in a life-threatening crisis; we may not follow them.

Given this kind of thinking, and given the often repeated call to develop “leaders of character,” we naturally ask – “How do we do that?” If we teach a really good course in ethics in our curriculum will that make our students persons of good character? Will mere knowledge of the good make us good persons? This is a classical

question as old as Socrates and a question to which most experienced parents can readily provide a negative answer.

Most practical philosophers, and parents, and schoolteachers will point out that there is no shortcut to developing integrity which is commonly viewed as the foundation of good character. It can only be acquired through consistent practice until it becomes habitual, until it becomes part of who we are. Like the applied skills in any venture or sport, knowledge alone does not suffice. One has to practice until the skill develops and then continue to practice until it becomes a habit.

Parents and teachers and bosses and leaders of every description may develop opportunities for their children and students and followers to practice the moral virtues like integrity, loyalty, courage, selflessness, even obedience, but only the individuals themselves can make those virtues into consistent habits. Alcoholics, drug addicts, habitual criminals can all give evidence to what happens to those who practice the harmful behavior traits. So practice is necessary, but we must practice the right behaviors if we wish to acquire the moral virtues previously mentioned. But leaders of every description can influence the development of the desired virtues through rewards and punishments but most especially by the example that they themselves provide and by the training experiences they institute to attempt to inculcate good character traits.

Would there have been a “My Lai Massacre” if the platoon leader had been a person of good character? Would there have been a corporate disaster at Enron if the executive leaders had been persons of good character? Would there have been a devastating Ponzi scheme monetary debacle if Bernie Madoff had been a person of decent moral character? How are we training the persons who have the potential to move into positions of leadership in all of our professions and corporations? Are we preparing them to become merely *effective* leaders or are we truly focusing on developing leaders of good character?

As a concluding thought I would like to share with our readers a number of brief reflections on the importance of good character to good leadership that seem to ring true.

From General Matthew B. Ridgway:

During a critical phase of the Battle of the Bulge, when I commanded the 18th Airborne Corps, another corps commander just entering the fight next to me remarked: “I’m glad to have you on my flank. It’s character that counts.” I had long known him and I knew what he meant. I replied: “That goes for me too.” There was no amplification. None was necessary. Each knew the other would stick however great the pressure; would extend help before it was asked, if he could; and would tell the truth, seek no self-glory, and everlastingly

keep his word. Such feeling breeds confidence and success.

Again from General Ridgway:

Character is the bedrock on which the whole edifice of leadership rests. It is the prime element for which every profession, every corporation, every industry, searches in evaluating a member of its organization. With it, the full worth of an individual can be developed. Without it – particularly in the military profession – failure in peace, disaster in war, or at best, *mediocrity in both* will result [emphasis in original].

From Warren Bennis: “The leader is responsible for the set of ethics or norms that govern the behavior of people in the organization.”

From Max DePree: “Integrity in all things precedes all else. The open demonstration of integrity is essential; followers must be wholeheartedly convinced of their leaders’ integrity.”

From Larry Donnithorne: “Character is a prerequisite for greatness ... Leaders of character create organizations of character.”

From George Washington: “I hope I shall always possess firmness and virtue enough to maintain the most enviable of all titles: the character of an honest man.”

From Teddy Roosevelt: “A sound body is good. A sound mind is better. But a strong and clean character is better than either.”

From Melvin R. Laird: “No intellectual brilliance and no technical capacity will be enough to qualify one for military leadership unless it is combined with qualities of character that inspire other men to give forth their best effort in a common cause.”

From Ralph Waldo Emerson: “Don’t say things. What you are stands over you, the while and thunders so that I cannot hear what you say to the contrary.” Or, in simpler terms, “Who you are speaks so loudly, I can’t hear what you’re saying.”

And finally, from General John D. Ryan, former Chief of Staff of the Air Force:

Integrity – which includes full and accurate disclosure – is the key to military service. ... we may not compromise our integrity, our truthfulness...integrity is the most important responsibility of command...any order to compromise your integrity is not a lawful order. Integrity can be ordered but it can only be achieved by encouragement and example.