

FEATURE ARTICLE

“Officers of Character”: What it Means, Why We Need it, and How We Mandate it

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ABSTRACT

Our nation requires that service academies “develop officers of character.” But the term “character” seems shrouded in ambiguity and is thus dubiously enforceable. What is character? Moreover, in a society ruled by law, perhaps this clarion call to character is unnecessary. Perhaps assiduously specified posited law alone is sufficient to bring about society’s desired ends—character, then, is not needed. But if character is needed in a nation’s officers, it would seem fitting for that nation to mandate “officers of character.” If needed, does our nation have such a mandate, and if so, how is it manifested? I will address these questions in three parts. First, character is (1) deep and (2) inextricably linked to virtue. Centuries of classic moral philosophy inform this understanding. Second, character is needed because posited law can be (1) wrong, (2) absent, (3) underspecified, or (4) applied by wily scoundrels. Third, our nation does, in fact, mandate character. This is appropriate, in light of the fact that character is needed. This character mandate manifests (1) legally, (2) ethically, and (3) from common sense.

Keywords: Character, Character Education, Military Officers, Virtue Ethics

There are times when a nation mandates that its citizens have character. Military officers are one such example; the nation rightly demands “officers of character” both formally and informally. In this essay, I will do three things. First, I will briefly establish what is meant by “character.” Second, I will argue that demanding character is, indeed,

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a requirement that is *necessary*—for an officer’s mere external compliance with posited law will not suffice. With these two foundational prerequisite points established, I will then move to my third and final point: a character mandate exists. This mandate is manifested legally, ethically, and by common sense.

What Is Meant by “Character”?

First, some definitions are in order. What is meant by character? If the state is seeking—nay, requiring—that some outcome be produced, then that outcome must be both definable and identifiable—at least to some reasonable, feasible extent. In short, we must answer, “What are we trying to get and how will we know when we get it?” Much can be said on this topic, of course. For now, I will limit my analysis to that which most saliently concerns this mandate to instill character. The core of the classic literature concerning moral virtue notes two virtually undisputed things. First, that character is not superficial. It involves the whole, integrated, person. Second, character is inextricable from virtuous activity. Virtuous activity both *inculcates* character (by way of habit) and also serves to *indicate* the presence of good moral character.

Character Is Deep

Character is not superficial. Character is deep and enduring; it is an essential part of one’s personhood, what some modern moral philosophers have described as “robust” (Doris, 2002). We find clear instances of this concept throughout the classic canon. To name a few: Plato writes of a courageous warrior trained so as to be “dyed in the wool” courageous (Plato, 2011, p. 137). His courage is so deeply instilled as to be inseparable as wool fiber is inseparable from the dye that saturates it. The point Plato is making is that one becomes genuinely courageous when the (mere) attribute cannot be washed away. The courage has become part of the person—a metaphorical dye that saturates every fiber of their being. “Courageous” is who they *are*—or rather,

who they have become. As such, we can say that that person, indeed, has a courageous *character*.

Aristotle also distinguishes merely superficial attributes from true, deep, character. Both Aristotle and Aquinas explain the crucial difference between “incontinence,” (mere) “continence,” and the (*bona fide*) “virtue” of temperance (Aristotle, 2011, pp. 316–317, 322; Aquinas, *ST II-II*, q. 155, 156). The *incontinent* person knows the right action, but fails to do it—they give in to the temptation to do wrong. The *continent* person also knows the right action. But, in contrast to the incontinent person, they utilize self-discipline and dogged commitment and successfully resist the temptation. The continent person is victorious in the struggle...but, crucially, there is a struggle.

But the truly virtuous person is notably different. The truly virtuous person *delights* in living virtuously. There is no struggle.¹ And this desire and delight to act with virtue is not ephemeral, subject to the vicissitudes of emotion. Rather, it exists “from a firm and unchanging state” (Aristotle, 2011, p. 268). Such a state, Aristotle notes, is indicative that the person has become truly virtuous; they have developed beyond mere continence. The desired action is performed easily because *who they are* makes it so. For the genuinely virtuous person, it is easy to live a genuinely virtuous life. If one was only superficially “virtuous,” behaving with virtue would be a struggle (thus indicating continence—which is still more praiseworthy than vice or incontinence—but not virtue). Action aligned with *who one is* is easy—for one is swimming with the current of their very selfhood. Aristotle’s discernment between continence and virtue illustrates that traits that are deeply embedded are natural and easy to manifest. That which is deeply

¹ To apply this concept to the virtue of temperance and, say, a box of donuts: the incontinent person gorges themselves on the donuts. The continent person doggedly resists. But the truly virtuous (in this case, temperate) person has no desire to gorge themselves on donuts in the first place—they actually enjoy eating in wise, healthful moderation.

embedded is *who one is*—their character. Character, as our most prominent philosophers understood it, is not superficial—it is deep.

Character Is Inextricable From Virtuous Activity

Second, character is inextricable from virtuous activity. Virtuous activity, by definition, is activity done in accordance with a virtue—so we must identify virtue. While some debate surrounds just which traits are worthy of acceptance into the “virtue canon,” the Cardinal Virtues enjoy undisputed acceptance. The Cardinal Virtues are prudence (sometimes translated as practical wisdom), justice, courage (fortitude), and temperance (self-control). Character, then, is inextricable from activity in accordance with these Cardinal (and other) Virtues.

This character-virtue marriage manifests in two ways. First, virtue is what inculcates character. One becomes a virtuous person by habituating virtuous action. This, of course, requires first defining virtuous action. Happily, many virtue theorists provide vigorous definitions. For present purposes, a cursory overview will suffice: Aristotle advises that virtue is a mean between two extremes. This mean is best discerned by engaging reason and wise counsel. The salient point here is that virtue, and the character that will come of it, is conspicuous; *it can be found*, if only the seeker is willing to look. Moreover, habituating virtuous activity is a choice. It is well within the locus of control of the agent. Any willing agent, then, can choose to behave virtuously ... again and again, until the habit forms their character. So, the relevant takeaways gleaned from two millennia of virtue theory are (1) virtue is knowable, (2) one can choose to habituate virtuous action, and (3) habit forms character.

Character is inextricable from virtuous activity in a second way: the latter *indicates* the former. Though character is a deeply internal condition, it has external manifestations: virtuous activity. Such external manifes-

tations are visible to, and thus potentially assessable by, others. Of course, the extent to which an external action *accurately* manifests an internal mindset is debatable; consider the begrudging gift-giver who smiles through gritted teeth. This is not the virtue of generosity, even if an onlooker mistakenly identifies it as such. It is not immediately obvious that *genuine* virtue can ever be *truly and fully* known by anyone other than the agent herself, for the mindset with which one performs an action informs whether mere continence or *bona fide* virtue is in play. And this crucial internal mindset is simply not privy to an onlooker. (Moreover, even *self-analysis* is suspect, for self-deception and self-delusion are surely ubiquitous gremlins.) Despite these unavoidable drawbacks, still, we have, for all reasonable purposes, a feasible harbinger of good moral character: the exhibition of virtuous activity.

So, character is both (1) deep and (2) inextricable from virtuous activity. At present, I will limit my claims to these two. Much more could be said regarding both, of course, but my purpose today is only to establish an understanding of what we are looking for when we say “officer of character.” From (1), we know that genuine character is “dyed in the wool.” If virtuous action is easily shaken from a person, then the person never truly possessed “virtue” to begin with—at best it was continence turned incontinent. From (2), we know that virtue both *establishes* and *indicates* good moral character.

The Character Mandate Is Needed

So, we have a reasonable way to understand, identify, and inculcate good character. But what of it? An opponent might question if developing “officers of character” is really necessary. After all, laws are already written and passed for the very purpose of forbidding, mandating, or incentivizing behavior. What a society desires or forbids is simply *stated outright*. This is posited law. Citizens choose to comply or face some form of consequence. This is straightforward. And it is the hallmark of a society ruled by law.

Where, then, is the alleged impetus to introduce—and even go so far as to *mandate*—this concept of character? A challenger will surely note that the term “character” seems riddled with subjectivity and ambiguity and therefore is of questionable enforceability. This opponent might go on to say that military officers, despite being a specific subcategory of society, are for the most part in the same boat as the nations’ general citizenry: laws exist, and the military officer is to follow them. Granted, military officers might face *some* unique situations not shared by civil society. But this uniqueness is already accounted for in a commensurately unique code of laws: the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ). There is, then, no need to even *consider* character, much less to *mandate* it.

I offer four refutations to this line of thinking. Posited law, at times, will not suffice because the present situation could be such that (1) the law is morally repugnant, (2) the law is absent, (3) the law is underspecified, or (4) the officer is wily and could maneuver around the law. The first three situations are similar in that the law is found wanting in some way. In these situations (and, surely others), the officer has only their character to fall back on. Moreover, even in situations when extant posited law *is* morally good, present, and sufficiently specified, it is *still* one’s character that informs *why* they abide lawfully (or not) in the first place. This latter topic is certainly worthy of much discussion, but tabled for today. In the case of the fourth refutation, even in the presence of good, present, and specified law, a “wily officer” can find ways to creatively subvert the law for nefarious purposes. The following examples will help to illustrate these four refutations.

One: Character Is Needed Because Posited Law Is Sometimes Morally Repugnant

First, sometimes the posited law is “just wrong”—or, more specifically, “morally repugnant.” By “law,” I mean the broad category of regulatory guidance, rules of engagement, operations orders, and the like. So long as

such guidance is binding upon the member in some formal sense, and non-compliance would warrant sanction, then such guidance shares with posited law aspects relevant for my purposes. In the interest of brevity, then, I will use the term “law” to encompass these many forms of written guidance with which compliance is mandatory.

The most obvious examples of law being wrong are cases of state-inflicted genocide. Sadly, there are many instances of this in recent history (Powers, 2002). To note just one example, in 1935 the German Parliament passed the “Reich Citizenship Law” and the “Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honor” (Ball, 1999, pp. 36–44; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2019). These formed the legal basis for the Nazi’s further persecution and genocidal ambitions.

Similarly, in the 1990s, states inflicted genocide in Rwanda and the Balkans. Both occasions included people groups who published and circulated plans and propaganda that catalyzed atrocities (Human Rights Watch, 2006). An opponent might state that these cases are not clear-cut examples of a *law* that has been passed that is wrong (Powers, 2002, pp. 338–339). Rather, they are cases where angry powerful *factions* wreaked wicked havoc. This is bad, of course, but it is not bad *law*. In response, first I note that the plans and propaganda circulated shared many aspects of law—they were intentionally written by a collaborating group, endorsed by a majority of citizens and enforceable (although by illegitimate means). Second, I would respond that whether the wickedness is catalyzed by law or by an angry faction is beside the main point. Both cases require the opposer to possess stalwart noble character.

Additionally, good moral character is required to *recognize* that such genocide-inducing laws (or powerful popular factions) are, in fact, wrong and that the morally correct action is to *swim upstream* against that law and the society that produced it. This is hard, of course. But as the Nuremburg Trials formalized, an appeal to

law and/or formal guidance from an authority (“I was just following orders”) is no excuse (Nuremburg Principle IV, see Ball, 1999, p. 87). Something deeper than law, deeper than formal guidance, deeper than superiors’ orders exists. And this deeper thing ought to recognize “crimes against humanity” when it sees it. This deeper thing is character. As Nuremburg codified, character is needed, because sometimes the law is *just wrong*.

Two: Character is Needed Because Law is Sometimes Absent

Second, good moral character is required because sometimes law is absent. For example, cyber warfare has emerged as a new, novel form of aggression. And given its novelty, cyberwarfare has been met with a “virtual policy vacuum” (Dipert, 2010, p. 385). Randall Dipert further notes that “most legal frameworks do not clearly apply to many instances of cyberwarfare, and cyberwarfare involves aspects of damage or harm that are typically not addressed by law, such as harm to the functioning of information and other systems that might not harm physical objects or persons” (p. 395). What, then, is the moral warfighter (or policymaker) to do? The only thing she can do: fall back on that which is ubiquitously present—her character. In the clear absence of formal, authoritative guidance, character alone remains to inform decisions. This is true even if a decision-maker consults other, non-judicial forces of potential persuasion—majority opinion, say, or *de facto* cultural practice. Even in the presence of such unofficial influences, the decision-maker’s chosen way forward will ultimately be informed by their character. Character matters. And when law is absent, character matters all the more.

Three: Character Is Needed Because Law Is Sometimes Underspecified

Third, good character is required because sometimes the law is underspecified. Underspecification is rarely a problem for law that governs that which is straightforward and frequently occurring. This is because law-makers can alter and add laws to account for changes

in society, for unexpected situations, and for loopholes that become exposed and need closing. Tax code is a good example of this. Filing taxes is a common practice: it occurs annually for millions of citizens. These millions of citizens encompass diverse and thus potentially uncommon financial situations, but tax law has had plenty of time and occasion to evolve to address such needs. Thus, one would be hard-pressed to describe tax law as underspecified—the sheer quantity of tax law attests to the level of meticulous detail therein. And such specificity leaves—purposely—no room to wiggle. Consider that the term “creative accountant” implies that one must be operating outside the law, for assiduous stipulation within the law has removed any possibility of licit creativity. We see that straightforward and frequently occurring situations make for law that is sufficiently specified.

But war is neither straightforward nor frequently occurring. As such, the laws that govern war are prone to be riddled with frustrating underspecificity. One can expect the military decision-maker to encounter new, novel situations for which extant UCMJ, Rules of Engagement (ROEs), Operating Instructions, and the like do not address. To illustrate this point, recall the famed “Lone Survivor” case. In 2005, four Navy SEALs were on a mission to surveil, capture, and/or kill Ben Sharmak, a Taliban leader. Unfortunately, the team had no choice but to surveil from locations that offered poor concealment. A herd of goats and three shepherds happened upon the team. It was unclear if the shepherds were Taliban or not; there was evidence to support either conclusion. The team was left with the difficult decision of what to do with the shepherds. They had no rope or other gear to constrain them. Killing them seemed morally dubious, but if released, the shepherds could alert area Taliban who would likely return *en masse* to kill the SEALs. Frustratingly, radio problems prevented garnering guidance from Higher Headquarters (Rubel & Lucas, 2011, pp. 39–42; Sandel, 2009, pp. 24–27).

This situation involved an unlikely—and terrible—concatenation of circumstances. Extant formal guidance was unable to answer the question, “What should I do with possibly-but-not-assuredly-nefarious-Taliban shepherds who, if left alive, will undoubtedly doom this crucial mission and likely return to kill us?” Though Lieutenant Murphy did discuss the situation with his team members, he alone was the decision authority. As such, it was his character, ultimately, that would advise him. Indeed, sometimes law is underspecified. In such situations, it is necessary to have a military leader with good character, because their character will inform their decision. The character mandate is needed.

Four: Character Is Needed Because Wily Officers Exist
I offer a fourth and final reason why the character mandate is needed. Posited law will not suffice because a wily enough officer will simply maneuver around it. The old adage, “You cannot legislate morality” is, at the end of the day, true. If someone does not want to act in accordance with good character, they will find a way to do so. With enough motivation and creative gerrymandering, the wily officer can further nefarious ends and yet still remain within the letter of the law. This is to be technically lawful but morally impermissible. Such situations may be rare, of course, especially if law is wisely crafted and assiduously nuanced. But a sufficiently motivated scoundrel will simply rise to the challenge with commensurately deft maneuvering—if for no other reason than to prove that he can. Law, indeed, is a poor substitute for good moral character. Posited law does not suffice to bring about the ends desired and achieved by good moral decision-making. Good moral character is needed.

Consider the following example. When running for President of the United States, Bill Clinton was asked if he had used recreational drugs. He responded that he had never broken the antidrug laws of his country or state. In fact, he had tried marijuana in the United Kingdom, a location that is—factually—neither his country nor state (Sandel, 2009, pp. 134–135). Moreover, Clin-

ton’s infamous equivocation concerning the meaning of “sexual relations” underscores the fact that a person is capable of maneuvering in creative ways so as to avoid stipulated law and its attendant consequences. Yet, by Clinton’s lawyer’s own admission, Clinton “deceived the American people” and his actions were “wrong” and “blameworthy” (Sandel, 2009, p. 136). This is a paradigmatic example that illustrates that wily people exist and so character is indeed needed.

In conclusion, we find that posited law does not suffice—good moral character is needed. This is because law can be outright wrong, as with genocidal policies. Law can be absent, as in the case of emerging technologies. Law can be underspecified, as in “worst case” scenarios like Lone Survivor. And officers can be wily and creative to accomplish malicious ends despite remaining within the technical bounds of the law. A character mandate is most certainly needed.

A Character Mandate Does Exist

The character mandate is most assuredly needed. I hope to have convinced the reader that this point is true and relatively non-controversial. Let us follow this line of thinking into the practical realm: if “officers of character” is a thing that is “assuredly needed,” then the nation ought to recognize this in some way(s). To only “recommend” officers of character is not strong enough. A “mandate”—something with teeth—is fitting. It is appropriate, then, that the nation does mandate “officers of character.” We find this mandate manifested in three ways. First, legally: the UCMJ and other official guidance mandates officers of character. This legal path enjoys enforceability. Second and third, the nation’s character mandate manifests in what I call broadly “ethical” and “common sense” thinking.

Legally

The character mandate exists in legal form. By this I mean posited law, as well as written formal guidance and authoritative instructions. In the interest of efficiency,

I will limit my analysis to only one branch of the U.S. Armed Forces, the Air Force.

The U.S. Air Force mandates character in the guidance given in Air Force Instruction (AFI) 1-1, *Air Force Standards* (USAF, 2023). This document applies to all Air Force personnel and outlines conduct standards in many diverse realms. It is wide in breadth though shallow in depth. Because this is an AFI, the document “has teeth”—non-compliance is punitive. The first line of this (as with any) instruction reads: “Compliance with this publication is mandatory.” Lest the reader overlook it, this sentence is emboldened and in all capital letters. Additionally, the publication goes on to explain, “This instruction is directive in nature and failure to adhere to the standards set out in this instruction can form the basis for adverse action under UCMJ. An example would be a dereliction of duty offense under Article 92” (AFI 1-1, p. 1). Finally, AFI 1-1 takes primacy of place as a foundational document, as indicated by the content therein and also reflected in the titular numerical prominence. This document itself, specifically, speaks to the authority of AFIs, generally. This might be disputed as a self-referencing circular logic (a document says “documents have authority,” which is true because the document, in all its authority, says so). But nonetheless, the authors aim to leave no room for ambiguity:

The Secretary of the Air Force approves the promulgation of all Air Force Instructions (AFIs). Unless expressly stated otherwise in a particular instruction, or a waiver has been granted by the appropriate authority, all Airmen must follow AFIs. AFIs do not provide optional guidance, and failure to comply with AFIs can result in disciplinary action. (AFI 1-1, paragraph 1.9)

Indeed, the content of this document is, without question, enforceable.

So, what then is the content that is so enforceable, and how does it apply to servicemembers’ character? Among

many other things, this document does directly speak to the character of the servicemember. It lauds integrity as one of the Core Values and explains, “Integrity is a character trait” (AFI 1-1, para 1.3). Integrity, Air Force Standards explains, is “the willingness to do what is right even when no one is looking. It is the ‘moral compass’—the inner voice; the voice of self-control; the basis for the trust that is essential in today’s military” (para 1.2). Recall that the classical understanding of character regards character as deep, not superficial. So, too, *Air Force Standards* describes integrity as “the inner voice” and the “moral compass.” These are not superficial entities. The Air Force is not mandating mere *external compliance* to rules: do this, don’t do that. Rather, the Air Force is mandating an inner, deep, condition of the servicemember: *be* this, *don’t be* that. This AFI is mandating character.

There is more to be said on the classical understanding of character as something deep and not superficial. With this attribute of depth, one’s character cannot be “turned off or on” given a context change (though, admittedly, some scholars challenge this claim. See Doris, 2002, and Harmon, 2009, pp. 235–242). Moreover, this acknowledgment of “who you are...all the time” is reflected in the AFI’s acknowledgment that *Air Force Standards* “encompasses the actions, values and standards we live by each and every day, whether on or off duty” (AFI 1-1, para 1.1). Moreover, there are two other examples of how this document seeks to address deep character and not merely superficial compliance. First, “employees shall put forth honest effort in the performance of their duties” (para 2.3.1.5). Honest effort is an internal and largely subjective condition, known only (if by anyone) to the individual themselves. Nonetheless, *Air Force Standards* boldly regulates—mandates—this internal condition.

Second, *Air Force Standards* requires that “Our core values demand that Airmen treat others with genuine dignity, fairness, and respect at all times” (para 2.1). Mere *ostensible* respect, say, utterances of the right words unaccompanied by the right heart and motive, will not do.

The salient point here is that “honest effort” and “genuine[ness]” address *internal* conditions, not merely some parroted compliance to some externally evident behavior. Whether such a requirement is enforceable (or even knowable, as it concerns another person’s internal mental disposition) is beyond the scope of this essay. I only underscore that these non-superficial, internal entities are the stuff of character. The Air Force recognizes that and, rather unflinchingly, mandates it.

In addition to AFI 1-1, character is mandated in the UCMJ.² The UCMJ is applicable to all branches of service. A conspicuous account of mandated character is found in Article 133, “Actions Unbecoming of an Officer and a Gentleman.” The explanation notes that “the term ‘gentleman’ connotes failings in an officer’s personal character, regardless of gender” (Manual for Courts-Martial, 2019, p. IV-134). Note the explicit reference to personal character. Additionally, the “nature of the offense” description further clarifies:

Conduct violative of this article is action or behavior in an official capacity which, in dishonoring or disgracing the person as an officer, seriously compromises the officer’s character as a gentleman, or action or behavior in an unofficial capacity which, in dishonoring or disgracing the officer personally, seriously compromises the person’s standing as an officer. (Emerson, 2003, pp. 9–16).

The law goes on to list examples: “acts of dishonesty, unfair dealing, indecency, indecorum, lawlessness, injustice, or cruelty.” I draw attention to the fact that the law applies to acts/omissions done in both an *official* and an *unofficial* capacity. This aligns with the concept of character as being something deep, an essential part of one’s being and thus not able to be compartmentalized when

one happens to be off duty. If one claims a “character” trait while on, but not off duty, then that trait is not, in fact, indicative of their true character. For example, one cannot claim their character is honest under the justification, “I’m honest as the day is long while at work...it just so happens that at home I’m unfaithful to my spouse.” This person’s trait of honesty is evidently mutable and ephemeral—which, by definition, is discordant with true character. As noted previously, character is deep and virtue-infused.

The second thing to notice about Article 133 is that the “nature of offense” description actually recognizes the “officer’s *character* as a gentleman.” In so stating, the UCMJ recognizes that character exists and an offense against character is significant and rebarbative. Moreover, the nature of Article 133 is “catch all”—posited law may not satisfactorily encompass all actions that are expected of the military officer (the law can be wrong, absent, and/or underspecified, as noted earlier). But Article 133 exists to ensure the high standard of character can nonetheless remain enforced. The Air Force undoubtedly recognizes that officers must have good character and it is enforceable by way of AFI 1-1 and the UCMJ.

Third, in addition to Article 133, the UCMJ mandates character in that it appeals to prudence. Prudence is a virtue—and an undisputed Cardinal Virtue at that. The four Cardinal Virtues are so categorized (from *cardo*, Latin for “hinge”) because all other virtues depend on them: prudence, justice, courage, self-control. As such, prudence is a crucial component of good character formation. Given that the Air Force recognizes that character matters, it is unsurprising, then, that the UCMJ appeals to the “reasonable, prudent person” in determining the grounds for six offenses and defenses (MCM, 2019).³ This is a blatant and

2 The US Constitution, Article I, Section 8, states that “Congress shall have power...To make Rules for the Government and Regulation of the land and naval Forces;” This is the justification of the UCMJ. See James Madison, et al. (2020). *The Constitution of the United States*. Washington, DC: National Archives. <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcript>

3 The six offenses/defenses that employ a “prudent” person are: apprehension (page II-20), use of force in self-defense (II-129), frisking (III-13), dereliction of duty (IV-28), negligence (IV-62), and “mistake of fact as to [sexual] consent.” (A21-5). See 2019 Manual for Courts-Martial.

unhesitating stipulation that the military member is expected to be “reasonable and prudent.” Indeed, character (or at least the one virtue of prudence) is mandated by the law.

Fourth, we find a mandate for character in the mission statement of the USAF Academy (USAF A). That mission is, “To educate, train, and inspire men and women to become officers of character motivated to lead the United States Air and Space Force in service to our nation.”⁴ As one might expect, the Academy goes on to note that a component of fulfilling that mission is “developing character and leadership.” In 2015, the Academy published the institution’s strategic goals. The first goal is to “Focus institutional efforts on character and leadership development” (USAF A Strategic Plan, 2015). Here we see that the concept of character is unapologetically central to the entire mission of this military service academy.

Moreover, USAFA has an entire Center for Character and Leadership Development⁵ dedicated to achieving the goal of developing officers of character. This Center enjoys considerable resource support with both staff and budget. This is a testament that the Air Force considers the character development of future officers with due gravitas and of prime importance. Additionally, the Center produces a peer-reviewed journal that “aims to enhance intellectual understanding and empower development of effective, character-based leadership.”⁶ All this is evidence that the character mandate found in the Academy’s mission is taken seriously.

Ethically

The U.S. Armed Forces exist in service to the nation. In both the Oath of Enlistment and the Oath of Office, the servicemember pledges to “support and defend the Constitution...against all enemies, foreign and domestic” (*America’s Air Force, A Profession of Arms*,

2015). This service often manifests in national defense and/or support of U.S. interests around the globe. The Constitution, of course, ultimately vests power in the American voter. In this way, then, service to the nation is recognized formally, if not already widely recognized culturally.

Additionally, the American citizenry (by way of Congress) authorizes its military in terms of funding⁷ and manning.⁸ Military service to civilian control is further recognized in that the Commander in Chief is not a military member, but an elected civilian president. Any authority that the military has, then, is authorized by and in service to the American citizen. In turn, America asks the military to justly apply force—even, at times, and in accordance with lawful authority, to take life. This is a grave and sobering responsibility.

It is fitting, then, that America’s military—especially its leaders—have character. Trust between the appliers of force and the authorizers of force is crucial, lest the tenuous arrangement digress into mayhem and chaos. Former Air Force Chief of Staff General Charles Gabriel expressed this concept succinctly: “Integrity is the fundamental premise for military service in a free society. Without integrity, the moral pillars of our military strength, public trust, and self-respect are lost” (*The Challenge of Leadership and Command*, 2006). Much more could be said on this topic, of course. But I think the point is sufficiently established by simply noting: given that the American citizens authorize, fund, staff, empower, and trust their military, it is obviously fitting that that military be deserving of that trust. And the person who deserves that trust is the person who possesses character (as defined by deep, robust habituation of virtue). Such broad realizations among society establish that a character mandate exists, and it exists for ethical reasons.

4 <https://www.usafa.edu/about/mission/>

5 <https://www.usafa.edu/character/>

6 <https://www.jclausafa.org>

7 Congress gives the power to raise and support an army, but such appropriations are limited to 2 years. See *US Constitution*, Article 1, Section 8, Clause 12.

8 Congress approves certain appointments and promotions.

From Common Sense

As a final point, requiring military officers to have character aligns with common sense. It is reasonable to infer that military officers have some form of training and experience in leading people toward a common goal. This skill may exist in varying degrees of course, but we can assume some leadership ability is present. Second, it is also reasonable to expect that the officers have some sort of training in the application of force. This, too, exists in varying degrees—the infantry or artillery leader’s skills are notably different from that of, say, the finance officer or Judge Advocate. But leadership ability and weapons, together with malicious character make for a dangerous trifecta. As of this writing, a military coup is occurring in Myanmar, rendering the government inoperable and in a state of emergency (Cuddy, 2021). An analysis of the legitimacy of the alleged military takeover (ostensibly due to a disputed election) is beyond the scope of this short example. I only note that if a military force is going to be running a country, and that force is without civilian control or any other form of power-limiting authority, one hopes—ardently—that those with both power and guns also have character. And with such an enticing lure of unchecked power, it is all the more important that this good moral character is thoroughly habituated and runs deep. Indeed, the Cardinal Virtues of prudence, justice, courage, and self-control seem crucially needed here. The same analysis would apply to any revolution or other non-peaceful change of power—of which human history has no dearth.

Moreover, we can reflect on common sense and note that character seems all the more crucial when one considers the implications of modern technology and social media. The Internet enables information to flow to and from (almost) any person or agency. Consider that information—and, crucially, *misinformation*—can be shared effortlessly and instantaneously. While some agencies may perform due diligence to vet information before they spread it (by way of fact-checking, etc.), it is all too easy for an irresponsible or misled person to disseminate

false information. Moreover, social media, which is both prevalent and addictive, provides an easy venue to propagate “memes.” A meme often takes a complex, multi-faceted social/political issue and reduces it to a comic picture and short caption. Such a drastic oversimplification is academically irresponsible at best and, at worst, serves as kerosene to the public’s tinderbox of incensed divisiveness. A society inflamed with angry divisiveness is fertile ground for violence—violence that military officers might have a role in, either as a lawful force to restore order ... or as vigilantes, themselves caught up in the masses’ tsunami of impetuous, unreflective calls to action. All the more reason to have those with leadership and weapons steeped in prudence, justice, courage, and self-control. Our military officers should have character, and it is common sense to mandate such.

Conclusion

This essay concerned the concept of “officers of character.” I drew on seminal moral philosophers and offered that “character” is defined as something (1) deep and (2) inextricably linked to virtue. Second, I argued that “officers of character” are needed because law can be morally repugnant, absent, underspecified, or wielded by a wily scoundrel. It is entirely appropriate, then, that our nation does, in fact, mandate character. We find this character mandate manifests legally, ethically, and from common sense.

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