

PROFILE IN LEADERSHIP

Professional Perseverance: Changing Service Culture the Ben Davis Way

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Recently celebrated for his outstanding airmanship and combat leadership in two feature films, *Red Tails* (2012) and *The Tuskegee Airmen* (2002), General Benjamin O Davis, Jr. also deserves recognition as an agent of change for United States Air Force service culture. Building upon his World War II exploits as commander of the 99th Pursuit Squadron and the 332nd Fighter Group, Davis earned the reputation of a model leader who balanced strict military discipline with an understanding of the social, cultural, and psychological needs of his troops. Displaying professionalism, perseverance, and fortitude in all his actions, Davis proved an exemplary, genuine “lead by example” role model worth studying.

Following World War II, then Lieutenant Colonel Davis advanced through assignments at Air University and as a staff officer in the Fighter Directorate of the Air Staff — where he established the world-renowned Thunderbirds aerial demonstration team. Later in his career, he served as an overseas deployment commander of the 51st Fighter Interceptor Wing at Suwon Air Base, South Korea, where the unit earned accolades from the Air Force Inspector General. Unlike his command of all African-American units in the pre-1948 segregated Air Force, Davis’ later career demonstrated excellence in leading racially integrated units in the still-early days of desegregation. Recognizing his success, the Air Force promoted Davis to Brigadier General on October 27, 1954, (USAF Biography, 2021) becoming the first African-American to earn Air Force General Officer rank and continuing his father’s legacy with the senior Davis being the first African-American to rise to general in the U.S. Army.

In July 1955, Davis was appointed Vice Commander of the 13th Air Force, headquartered at Clark Air Base, Philippines and concurrently, Commander of Air Task Force 13 (Provisional) posted to Taipei, Republic of China (ROC), now known as Taiwan, where he served until April 1957. Far from a routine or backwater position, General Davis entered arguably the hottest zone of the Cold War at this time. Along with Berlin, the Taiwan Straits represented both a flashpoint for a major war with the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and an ideological inflection point for the Cold War in Asia. This largely overlooked assignment required considerable political, diplomatic, social, and managerial talents that demonstrated Davis’s acumen. It also served as a case study of Davis as a change agent for Air Force service culture.

With the Korean armistice only two years old, Americans understood the dangers of either a resurgence of Korean fighting or a broader war with “Red” China. Unlike Berlin, where the risk of World War III was real, but theoretical; many Americans had recently battled the People’s Liberation Army along the 38th Parallel. Without doubt, the Taiwan Straits represented a grave military and political challenge.

Placing General Davis’ assignment in context, Mao Tse-tung’s Chinese Communists established the People’s Republic of China (PRC), and commonly referred to as Communist China or Red China at the time, in 1949, following a twenty-two year civil war.¹[The PRC had forced Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist forces to Taiwan and a string of offshore islands. Mao viewed Taiwan as an integral part of China, and believed that the Chinese Revolution would not be complete without its subjugation. On the other hand, Chiang did not accept Mao’s 1949 triumph as final and hoped to use Formosa (as Taiwan/Taipei was known at the time) and two off-shore islands, Quemoy and Matsu, to rally anti-Communist forces and for launching a Nationalist return to the mainland. Initially hesitant, the Truman Administration provided Chiang limited military and diplomatic support, but the Eisenhower Administration viewed the Republic of China as a bastion of freedom on a continent “going Red” and a test of loyalty to a valued World War II ally. Influenced by Christian missionaries and the influential, English-speaking Madame Chiang Kai-shek, many Americans viewed Nationalist China with affection. Hence, the “China Lobby” within the US Congress emerged as a major player in American domestic politics.

On the ideological plane, the Taiwan Straits crisis (1954) proved an inflection point in the East-West

1 The PRC’s *pin yin* transliteration system uses Mao Zedong and Jiang Jieshi respectively. Taiwan uses the older Wade-Giles system that also matches the sources of the 1950s. For consistency, I have used the Wade-Giles spellings.]

struggle for Asia. In 1954-55, Chinese Communist propaganda pointed to the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in Vietnam as proof of communism’s rise, the decline of the West, and portrayed the PRC as an ally of anti-colonial, anti-capitalist forces in Asia. Both the Soviets and Chinese Communists considered Asian and African nationalism a unique Cold War opportunity. As an example, the PRC, highlighted American racial inequity and racist attitudes toward people of color as an ideological weapon in its propaganda (Bradley, 2007; Kort, 1998; Jian (2001).

Militarily, the PRC viewed US-ROC mutual defense treaty talks as a threat and mobilized forces along the coast across from Nationalist-controlled islands. On September 3, 1954, the People’s Liberation Army bombarded Quemoy and Matsu with 5,000 artillery shells. Two days later, President Eisenhower sent three aircraft carriers to defend the Taiwan Straits, while the ROC Air Force attacked Communist positions using American-supplied F-84 fighters. After three tense weeks, the situation subsided to an extent. The U.S. did not find any military value in Nationalist control of islands immediately offshore from the Chinese mainland and tried to persuade Chiang Kai-shek to withdraw forces to less vulnerable positions. Reluctantly, Chiang withdrew garrisons from the Tachen islands, which Communist forces quickly seized, but remained adamant for possession of Quemoy and Matsu. On December 2, 1954, the U.S. signed a Mutual Defense Treaty with the Republic of China and by January 28, 1955, the U.S. Congress and Senate passed the Taiwan Straits Resolution authorizing the President to employ U.S. forces if necessary to protect Nationalist China (Bradley, 2007; Futrell, 1989.

Into this geopolitical maelstrom entered Brigadier General Davis. When he arrived in Taipei, he learned that Air Task Force 13 (Provisional) (ATF 13) consisted of two officers and seven airmen (Davis, 1991). In his memoir, Davis succinctly described the peril:

The situation in 1955 also held the potential for disaster, but for reasons known to the Communist Chinese we were permitted to develop our strength to the point that we could defend the island. When I assumed command the enemy had the initiative and the air capability to seriously threaten our ability to defend Taiwan. We needed to take several actions immediately . . . (Davis, 1991, p. 217; Bradley, 2007, p. 90)

Formally, Davis faced a sophisticated three-part mission:

1. Maintain assigned or attached forces and facilities in a state of readiness permitting immediate offensive or defensive tactical operations in defense of Taiwan and the Pescadores.
2. Assume operational control of designated Air Force units and coordinate . . . administrative and logistic support.
3. Organize, train, and maintain on Taiwan, ATF 13 [a command and control function] capable of employing designated operational forces immediately...capable of independent action... (History, 1955, pp. 11-12; Bradley, 2007, p. 100)

Informally, ATF 13 acted as a joint force coordinating with the U.S. Army and Navy, as well as a combined or coalition force responsible for training Republic of China Air Force units and combined Chinese-American training, and as a warfighting command and a de facto diplomatic representative of the U.S. government to Nationalist China. Facing Davis' fledgling command, PLA Army Air Force units numbered over two thousand MiG jet fighters, several hundred IL-28 light jet bombers, and approximately 200 Tu-4s (the Soviet equivalent of the U.S. B-29 bomber) with five new airfields across the Taiwan Straits (Davis, 1991; Bradley, 2007).

How did Davis manage these seemingly insurmountable tasks? With perseverance, with professionalism, and with humility. Unlike many American attachés or defense liaisons of his era, Davis considered his Nationalist Chinese counterparts as valuable allies with valid perspectives and significant resources. He immediately worked to establish close personal ties with leading Chinese authorities. Specifically, Davis paid courtesy calls and followed up with appropriate meetings with Chiang Kai-shek, Chiang Ching-kuo — Chiang's son and later president of Nationalist China, General Wan Shu-ming (known as "Tiger" Wang) and Commanding General of the ROC Air Force, and General Huang Jen-ling, Commanding General of the Chinese Combined Services Forces, along with other officials of the ROC's Foreign Affairs Service Division (Bradley, 2007; Davis, 1991; Gropman, 1987). Equally important, Davis developed extensive ties with the mayors of Taiwanese cities, civil leaders, and cultural organizations. In all discussions, he listened and treated the Chinese leaders as equals, avoiding the all too common "Ugly American" attitude of the time.

Throughout his autobiography, Davis described the impressive efforts of his wife Agatha, who forged ties to Taiwanese schools, hospitals, orphanages, and civic groups. In many ways, she served as an effective ambassador for the United States. Through these many personal and professional associations, Davis learned to understand China's culture and perspective. Most of all, he learned patience. His willingness to work with the Nationalist Chinese and to maintain long-term friendships paid great dividends. Upon completion of Davis's mission, Gen Laurence S. Kuter, Commander of Pacific Air Forces (PACAF) observed that Davis possessed the ability to "tactfully criticize at the right time and places," and to say no to the Chinese when their requests did not match U.S. interests, but in a respectful, culturally acceptable way (Gropman, 1987, p. 249).

During his tour, the ATF 13 built a genuine warfighting capability. USAF aircraft and units rotated through Chinese air bases; the Air Force established a Joint Operations Center; U.S. personnel trained Chinese airmen in flight operations and maintenance; and planned and executed a number of coalition training exercises. Additionally, Davis' command established both formal training and operational plans. Although he viewed the Chinese Air Defense System as still flawed due to shortages of qualified communications and radar technicians, Davis acknowledged great strides in Nationalist Chinese capability (Bradley, 2007). By the end of his tour in early 1957, ATF 13 also featured pre-positioned stocks of USAF equipment and the creation of Ching Chuan Kang (CCK) Air Base (Moody & Trest, 1997).

The test of Davis' effectiveness emerged in the Second Taiwan Straits Crisis of 1958. In August 1958, the People's Republic of China resumed massive shelling of Quemoy and Matsu, assembled significant land and air forces, and announced the imminent invasion of these important Nationalist outposts. Although no longer personally commanded by Davis, the command and control structure, air defense network, and USAF-trained Nationalist Chinese pilots performed brilliantly. Six U.S. Navy carriers, 53 supporting ships, and 100 top-line USAF F-100 and F-104 fighters deployed to augment the ROC Air Force. Three days of aerial battles resulted in 33 Communist aircraft shot down at a cost of only four Nationalist planes. The effectiveness of the US-ROC coalition efforts made an impact. The PRC backed down.

In sum, persistence, professionalism, cultural sensitivity, and leadership marked the career of Davis. During World War II, Davis earned respect as a skilled combat aviator and leader. In the Taiwan Straits crises, Davis gained additional praise as a politician, diplomat, administrator, planner, and innovator. Without calling attention to race, Davis' actions, performance,

and professionalism defeated regressive, negative forces through sheer competency and excellence. In doing so, he acted as an agent of change and shaped a new and improved Air Force service culture. Davis led by example in word and deed. Moreover, in a genuine Cold War crisis in Asia, Davis answered the military, diplomatic, and ideological challenge of the Communists with aplomb. His presence and competence countered communist racist propaganda in a subtle, effective way. Perhaps the most impressive accolade occurred many years later when General Bryce Poe visited the Republic of China, Nationalist Chinese officers stated simply that assigning Davis to Taiwan was the "smartest thing the United States could have done" (Gropman, 1987, p. 249).

Finally, returning to the title of this article, what do we mean by change the "Ben Davis way"? Five elements emerge:

1. Be genuine. Say what you mean, be what you say; but do it in a tactful, culturally sensitive way.
2. Be aware. Know who you are and know your people. Explore cultures not your own. Respect and learn about others, especially when overseas.
3. Be excellent. Set high standards and learn from them, personally and professionally. Excellent transcends cultural obstacles.
4. Be a team player. Davis' most important friend, confidant, sounding board, and ambassador was his wife Agatha, who improved the Davis and by association, the American team.
5. Be an American. Davis loved our country and the ideals it stands for . . . his lifelong quest was to rectify the cultural attitudes where some white citizens did not treat people of color as Americans. Stand up for the values embodied in our flag.

To close, students of history will recognize two passages from one of the most famous speeches in history, Pericles' funeral oration, where the ancient Greek leader lauds what it means to be an Athenian citizen:

“Make up your minds that happiness depends on being free and freedom depends on being courageous.”

“When you realize her greatness, then reflect that what made her great was men with a spirit of adventure, men who knew their duty, men who were ashamed to fall below a certain standard (Thucydides, 1972, pp. 149-150).”

Substitute “American” in those phrases and you capture the essence of General Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., a patriot in the true sense of the word and a defender of the higher standard. In the Taiwan Straits crisis, Davis answered the military and political challenges of a perilous time. His professional perseverance also set an example for cultural sensitivity that improved U.S.-Taiwanese relations. Finally, Davis proved a genuine “lead by example” role model who improved Air Force service culture.

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