

Character and the Warrior Ethos

Character development is the key to successful leadership
by Col Todd Desgrosseilliers

The 19th-century British Army officer William Francis Butler tells us that a nation that makes a great distinction between its scholars and its warriors will have its laws made by cowards and its wars fought by fools.¹ The U.S. Constitution requires subordination of our military to our Nation's elected civilian and appointed leaders, yet the same Constitution also established a strong connection between our Nation's military and civilian leadership. As military leaders, we retain the moral obligation of Butler's great distinction by developing our character, building our warrior ethos, and binding our leadership to our respective oaths of office.

Character, intellect, and integrity form the foundation for leadership for warriors and statesmen alike. Character is higher than intellect, yet intellect and experience combine to form the fabric of wisdom and its primary virtue—prudence. Integrity is the intellectual virtue that binds character to action and through it to our warrior ethos. Our character and our virtues define who we are—our ethos restores and preserves our excellences.

We inherited the word “ethos” from the ancient Greeks. For them ethos meant “an accustomed place” or “instinct to seek an accustomed place,” and was first applied to animals.² Homer used it to describe the place where the Greek warriors retired their horses after their frightened careening against Trojan chariots, their teams, and armor-clad warriors in fierce battles. Whilst in this accustomed place, horses remained at ease. This was possible because they knew each other through the cama-

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radierie gained during their travel to Troy, from the cohesion earned training before the battles, through the virtue displayed by fighting together, and by returning together to their secure and accustomed place. Through their trials they were familiar to one another, therefore the ethos sustained and reinforced their integrity and character as warriors. Their ethos protected their character, enabled their resilience, and restored their ability to fight another day.

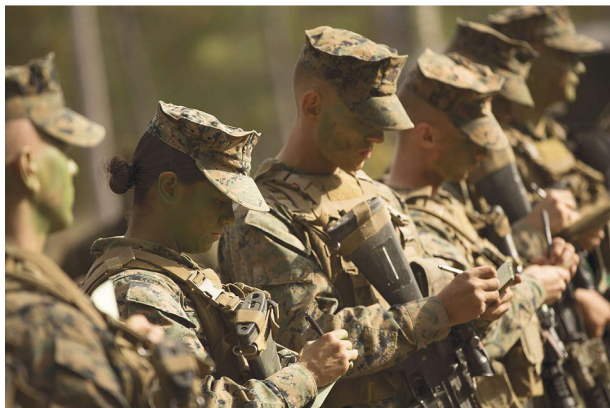
Three hundred years later and by the time of Herodotus, the word “ethos”

came to mean “that which generates the sense of custom, habit, usage, practice,” social skills we should learn from childhood on how to interact with one another—with civility.³ By 350 B.C., Aristotle embraced the concept so completely it fit easily into his purely practical discourse on ethics, the *Nicomachean Ethics*.⁴

In this timeless philosophical work, Aristotle built a practical understanding of ethos as character—seen through the lens of friendships. In *Ethics*, Aristotle penned several chapters on friendship, of which he articulated three distinct types: friendships of pleasure, friendships of utility, and friendships of character. His main point remained that different types of friendships exist, and they are all important for various reasons. He pointed out that the highest,



Daily interaction, discipline, and activity build appropriate habits. (Photo by Cpl Charles Santamaria.)



Character, intellect, and integrity. (Photo by CW02 Paul S. Mancuso.)

and rarest, types of friendships are those of character. These binding relationships form between two people who wish to develop each other's character through a virtue ethic.⁵

Friendships of character, he claimed, remained essential to living a happy, fulfilling, and virtuous life. His idea of character is rooted in the Greek word "eudemonia," or well-being that is not a consequence of virtuous action; rather virtue is inherent in the action itself. Therefore, our character is what we do by habit and our character's virtues are consequences of these habits. Aristotle asks us to develop habits of thought and action that enable us to manage our emotional life with wisdom. When leaders adopt a virtue ethic, they develop character in their subordinates and form habits that lead to moral outcomes.⁶

Homer explored this theme as well. When Odysseus departed Ithaca for Troy, embarking upon what he knew would be a long period away from home, he expected his son Telemachus to learn virtuous bravery even though Telemachus remained distant from the Trojan War's great battles and its epic challenges. In Odysseus' household there existed only one person he trusted to develop his son's character during his deployment to combat. This person was one of his servants—Mentor.

Mentors play an important role in leadership development. All leaders need mentors and all leaders should serve as mentors to others as well. Mentors help us understand how organizations function and how we succeed in it. They also play a key role in developing emotional intelligence in their protégés.⁷ Mentors are essential for balanced leadership in any successful organization. When we mentor each other, we serve the Greek idea of well-being, and through this relationship we develop friendships of character.

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The idea of ethos continued to evolve into "manners, customs, personal disposition, character," and then became what we today call "moral character."⁸ This distinction is important to the U.S. Constitution's ideals because its intellectual fulcrum—per Madisonian and Hamiltonian logic in *The Federalist*—was moral integrity.⁹ This idea became an intellectual virtue essential to a people about to be governed by the

brilliantly original documents founded upon moral reason: the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution.^{10 11}

Additional intellectual overlays informed judgments at a particular 18th-century Philadelphia Convention that arrived through the reigning genius of David Hume's *A Treatise on Human Nature* and Adam Smith's *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*.^{12 13} Their political order and its corresponding free and capitalist market depended upon moral intuition and temperance. It also demanded personal conduct that induced trust, promoted legal order, and upheld respect for property. This idea appealed to the political science of a particular group of Continental Americans—our Founding Fathers. Their collective wisdom and character outlined our Republic, and, as American citizens, our warrior ethos must always represent this lineage.

Our Nation represents liberty to the world, a universal concept that claims itself as an unalienable right along with "life," "the pursuit of happiness," and "equality"—bestowed upon mankind as an element of being human. In our view, we create governments to preserve our liberty, and our government derives its just power from the peoples' consent. Thus, our government's power is twice limited through both ends and means.

Liberty is freedom with responsibility and accountability. As a virtue, liberty concerns itself with the societal situation where something or someone reduces coercion of some by others as much as possible. This means that as authentic leaders bound by an oath, we must restrain our leadership's ends and means as well. Authentic leadership must represent the twice-limited balance of power outlined in our Constitution. Through this idea, all leaders remain primarily responsible and accountable for their decisions, the decisions of their subordinate leaders, and the results of both actions—as well as to and for those they lead. This ethic protects us from the corrupting influence of power and keeps us loyal to our oath of office. This personal accountability enables our ethos and our

character to distinguish our excellences and to preserve our Nation's liberty.

Who we are shapes how we think and through this forms our actions. We are United States Marines, uniform in character and discipline. We become Marines through a deliberate process that ensures that every Marine is *in essence* a rifleman. Our training and education transform us all into our Nation's ethical warriors—United States Marines with deep roots in an exemplary naval heritage. Our amphibious nature fosters an aggressive, offensive, expeditionary mindset. However, every individual Marine must forge his own expeditionary mindset that associates personal character, experience, and training *intrinsically* with personal education, imagination, and values blending "expeditionary" with "mindset" into his warrior ethos.

The NCO provides the steel structure, the training and the discipline that form the Marine Corps' backbone. The

SNCOs advise, lead, and mentor the officers while they develop the NCOs. The officers teach, coach, and mentor the team to develop understanding of what we will accomplish with it. Together, our leadership's character and ethos weave mental agility, resilience, self-reliance, and ethics into our daily activities. As leaders, the daily interaction, discipline, and activity of leading builds the ethos that ensures we all develop appropriate habits of thought and habits of action. This forms the character of our leadership as a corps of Marines that ensures victory—with honor.

Finally, it is possible for what we do in this life to echo through eternity. This eternal possibility rests upon authentic, disciplined, educated, and inspirational leadership that establishes and enforces our values while enabling our ability to apply meaning to ritual and tradition. This opportunity only exists if reinforced by leaders who focus on character development in the most essential element in the Marine Corps—the individual Marine. The Marine Corps' success depends upon leaders selflessly weaving an intricate web of friendships of character throughout it. The character of our leadership and our ethos must connect with our Constitution's ideals, our oath of office, and with what our Marines value most in life—being warriors. Our character and our virtues define who we are as leaders; our warrior ethos restores and preserves our excellences as a corps of Marines. This understanding must represent a single thread from the Commandant of the Marine Corps to the most junior private.

Notes

1. Butler, William Frances, *Charles George Gordon*, BiblioLife, New York, 2008.
2. Liddell, H.G., and R. Scott, *The Greek-English Lexicon*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, England, 1996, p. 766.
3. Herodotus, *The Histories*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1997, pp. 223–302.

4. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Prometheus Books, New York, 1987, pp. 253–88.

5. Toner, James, *Morals Under the Gun*, The University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, KY, 2000, pp. 148 and 192. The book's author defines "virtue ethics" (also known as "aretic ethics" from the Greek "arête," meaning "excellence or virtue") as "less concerned with doing things as with becoming someone." The four cardinal virtues—prudence, courage, temperance, and justice—are ideal virtues to form our moral compass, as they are also included in our Nation's founding documents—the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution.

6. The author defines "morality" as "a concern between the difference of right and wrong; good and bad and moral outcomes as results that are right or good according to an ethic." The ethic is the process that enables leaders to recognize this difference and to choose good and right outcomes.

7. Goleman, Daniel, *Emotional Intelligence—Why it can matter more than IQ*, Bantam Books, Inc., New York, 1995. In this book Daniel Goleman identified five components of emotional intelligence: self-awareness, self-regulation, internal motivation, empathy, and social skills. Mentors play an important role to help develop these emotional intelligence components in their protégés.

8. Liddell and Scott, p. 766.

9. Hamilton, Alexander, John Jay, and James Madison, *The Federalist*, The Franklin Library, Pennsylvania, 1977, pp. 25–29.

10. *The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States of America*, Cato Institute, Washington, DC, 2002, pp. 9–16.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 17–58.

12. Hume, David, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, NuVision Publications, LLC, South Dakota, 2008, pp. 325–404.

13. Smith, Adam, *An Inquiry into the Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Book IV, a public domain book, Kindle edition, 2013.



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