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ABCs of Leadership

George Lee Butler, Gen (ret), USAF
USAFA, Class of 1961

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JCLD@usafa.edu

Phone: 719-333-4904

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ABCs of Leadership

George Lee Butler, Gen (ret), USAF
USAFA, Class of 1961

This is a slightly modified lecture that I gave to newly selected Strategic Air Command (SAC) squadron commanders at the opening of a two-day orientation course at my headquarters. The purpose was to introduce them to staff members and for me to instruct them face-to-face. That lesson was titled, "The ABCs of Command," and focused on the demands that came with their new role, most importantly, the authority to render punishment. Later, I made the below presentation to cadets where I changed the focus to leadership writ large since many of them might never command, or, as was my experience, would serve for many years before earning that privilege.

As I survey this large and somewhat less than enthusiastic audience, I would guess two things: first, that given the ungodly hour your attendance this morning is not voluntary (audible groans, signifying agreement). Second, most of you are seniors with only a few weeks to graduation and freedom from four years of indentured servitude (cheers, signifying strong agreement). That being the case, which I surmised it would be after talking with my cadet hosts long into the evening, my remarks will be devoted to the single most important question you have to confront in the closing days of your studies: How well are you prepared for leadership in the real Air Force, that is, how well have you absorbed the core lessons of this institution? In my view, the Academy has no reason to exist other than to provide each of you the instruction and experience essential

to leadership and the motivation to serve your nation at the highest levels of responsibility.

For those of you fortunate enough to have been given meaningful leadership positions during this past year, I suspect you have had enough experience to begin to gauge your capacities in this regard. Others of you have the more difficult task of imagining how you will respond as leaders based on observation and study. In my case, I was doubly fortunate as a senior cadet back in the 1960-61 era. Not only was I a squadron commander for two consecutive semesters, but I also had the benefit of an Air Officer Commanding who understood his role perfectly—give us cadets every opportunity to lead at every level of rank within 13th Squadron, intervening only if we failed to meet his high expectations.

My first meeting with Major William Alexander Patch was on the morning on the first day of academics in the fall of 1960. I had arrived back at the Academy late the night before and found his note waiting on my desk: "Lee, you are my squadron commander. See me in my office at 0700 with your plan for staffing the unit's key positions, your goal for the year, and how you intend to lead." As you can imagine, that occupied me the rest of a very short night, but I had my brief ready at the appointed hour. I put on his desk a list of who I wanted in every spot in the chain of command and on my staff. When he signaled he had approved it, I said, "Sir, my goal is to win Honor

Squadron (now called the Outstanding Squadron) by an uncontested margin. I intend to do that first, by insisting that each member of 13th Squadron treats every other member with dignity and respect, especially with regard to our Fourth Classmen who are our most motivated group; second, by setting and maintaining the high standards across the board—academics, military training, and athletics; and third, I am going to lead from the front. I will do my level best to be the best scholar, leader, and athlete in the squadron."

Major Patch wholeheartedly concurred with my strategy and then asked me for specifics. I then walked him through the tactics, that is, my plan to ensure that every single cadet was involved in some extracurricular activity, that tutors were available in every subject to assist those in need of an academic leg up, that our athletic talent was optimally deployed across the entire slate of intercollegiate and intramural competition in order to maximize our score in this element of the Honor Squadron scoring and so forth. By the time I finished, he was fully on board. Patch rarely came to the squadron area. He and I communicated through a notebook delivered to me at night and sent back to him at first light. The bottom line? We won Honor Squadron by a wide margin come late May of 1961, and took the trophy four times in the next five years, a record yet to be equaled.

Clearly, we were on to a winning formula, and that is exactly what I want to share with you for the next forty minutes. If you doubt its relevance to the real Air Force, then hear this: after graduating in June of 1961, my next opportunity to command was in 1982, over twenty years later, as the commander of two B-52 bomb wings in Strategic Air Command, spending a year in each of the successive tours. In those extremely responsible and demanding positions, I employed exactly the same leadership

principles that guided my actions as 13th Squadron Commander, and they served me equally well in two entirely different circumstances.

And so now I am going to spell those principles out for you in exactly the manner as I taught them to my subordinate commanders when I was running not only a bomb wing, but as commander-in-chief of the nation's strategic nuclear forces. I touched on some of them in recounting my response to Major Patch's question, "How do you intend to lead?" Now I am going to put those elements in a broader context that I call, the ABCs of Leadership. And, in order to give you bit of extra incentive to stay with me at 0815, I am providing you right upfront a guarantee: if you absorb the nine elements arrayed in the three basic categories outlined on this slide, spend time to fully get their import, measure yourself against the skills and values they imply, and begin to employ them at every opportunity no matter how small the task, you will succeed in whatever leadership role you are given at any level of rank and responsibility:

Abilities

- Competence: Earn Your Authority
- Communication: Connect With Your People
- Control: Keep Your Emotions in Check

Behaviors

- Charge into Problems: Run Toward the Fire
- Call It Like It Is: Set and Maintain Standards
- Create the Vision: Lead from the Front

Characteristics

- Courage: Never Give Up—or In
- Compassion: Treat People with Dignity and Respect
- Character: Never Compromise Your Integrity



There are fifty-nine words on this slide, including the A-B-C denomination of the three elements of leadership. Note that the operative words are all active verbs and that they all begin with the letter "C." I have kept the format simple and direct, because when I give this lecture to my commanders, I expect them to memorize this outline word for word. That is because I want them to make these prescriptions second nature, as they are with me. I do not need notes to give this talk, nor do I rely on the slide—I live it. I spent years perfecting the content and disciplining myself to meet its prescriptions. That is precisely what I expect of my commanders because they are my surrogates in the field. As the first link in the chain of command, they set the tone for my entire organization, arrayed on dozens of bases around the world. And, as you may imagine, I select them with the greatest care, along with my wing and numbered air force commanders. They have the best and most important duty our profession has to offer.

Now, before we talk about each of these nine elements, I want to look at them collectively. Note, for example, that each one, to some degree, is challenging for the average person. Some, such as public speaking, rank near the top of the list of things that respondents say strike fear into their hearts, and from what I see almost daily, effective writing appears to be a lost art. Much the same could be said about the discipline required to master a complex skill, or staying composed in stressful situations, dealing with problems head-on, grading objectively or thinking strategically, getting through difficult times or circumstances no matter the pain or exhaustion, being unfailingly courteous and kind, or staying true to yourself whatever the temptation of penalty incurred. All of that said, my message this morning is that for the leaders in my employ, I expect them to meet all of these standards, and to a degree well beyond what I expect of someone who is not in a command or supervisory position.

Second, note that until you arrive at the eighth of the nine bullets, there is nothing to distinguish the humane qualities of leadership; the first seven skills or attributes could be, and have been exhibited by the most savage leaders in recorded history, as well as the most benevolent. That is why I have put Compassion and Character last on the menu; they deserve the most attention and thought.

ABILITIES

Happily, most of the other capability and behavioral norms are fairly self-explanatory. **Competence**, for example means exactly what it says, which is that the leader must be expert, and preferably, the most expert person in his or her unit with respect to the tasks or mission at hand. That is the down payment on earning the authority that is assigned the leadership position by law or regulation. That is why so many of our skill sets require such long apprenticeship, especially in the flying business where becoming say, a flight leader qualified to take a wing-man into combat, is a matter of years, much less a wing commander with the experience to direct the operation of several squadrons of priceless aircraft and crew members in a remote, hostile environment. I can assure you that in the nuclear weapons arena, I place a very high premium on experience and a long record of flawless performance.

Communication is an equally important skill for any leader; that is how you connect with your people, not only through the spoken or written word, but also through the nonverbal cues that subordinates pay careful attention to. For example, how well do you listen? Do you pay strict attention when people are trying to convey something difficult? How skilled are you at understanding subtext, that is, the real meaning often masked by timidity and uncertainty in the presence of the boss? I will have more to say about establishing lines of communication when we get to Compassion and Character, but at this juncture, my takeaway for you is that if you are

not yet a reasonably polished speaker and adept at putting your thoughts and desires in writing, there are tools and venues to achieve those skills while you are still a junior officer. Don't expect to be promoted without them, because that is one of the criteria on your effectiveness report.

Control, as in Self-Control, is inseparable from Competence and Communication as a foundation of effective leadership. In my observation, it is also the most difficult to master of the three Abilities. Sad to say, I have known 20 year old airmen with more emotional maturity than any number of very senior officers I have worked for and with. Erratic, unpredictable leaders generate stress and anxiety; their hair-trigger tempers and defensive reactions make them unapproachable, obviating open, honest communication and poisoning the work environment. Conversely, maintaining an even temperament, a calm steady demeanor, breeds confidence and respect; it allows people to do their best work, to make problems known, and to take initiative without fear of undue criticism. Adults are no different than children in this regard. As we will talk about shortly, every one of us prizes our dignity and wants to be treated with respect.

BEHAVIORS

Charge into Problems: Herein lies the truest test of ownership, of accepting responsibility for a mission and relishing the accountability that comes with it. I always pay the closest of attention to how my commanders respond when the fur flies, when things go off the rails, when the unexpected strikes. I dealt with two Class A mishaps as a wing commander, that is, an accident that causes major damage in dollar terms and/or loss of life. In both cases, the event came completely out of the blue, on an otherwise calm and cloudless morning. The first cost the lives of the ten souls on board when their B-52 crashed in a merciless fireball just off the end of my runway. The other resulted in a wing being torn

off a B-52 on my parking ramp and tens of thousands of gallons of volatile jet fuel spewing into a teeming sea of activity. Both required, of course, immediate notifications up the chain of command, managing the flow of information to my base personnel and the local media, putting response teams on site—and, most important, consoling the families and loved ones. This was truly a case of running toward the fire, making the disasters mine. President Truman's desk plate said it all: "The Buck Stops Here."

Call It Like It Is: Truth-telling and standard setting start at the top. Your people need to know what is expected of them and how they are measuring up—like you, they need to be held accountable. If they screw up, they must be called out. Conversely, outstanding performance must be recognized and rewarded. When I was the Inspector General of Strategic Air Command, I adopted the motto, "High Standards, Fairly Applied." We graded every facet of performance, from the mission per se to physical fitness to the condition of facilities. I told my three hundred team members that for every error recorded I wanted something or someone praiseworthy to be recognized, in writing, in the Inspection Report. One of the ironclad truths I distilled from my two years as the eyes and ears of the four-star general in charge of SAC is that every unit is a reflection of its commander. The parallels are almost uncanny and track across every dimension we graded, whether appearance, fitness, and discipline or competence.

Create the Vision: One of my proudest possessions is a memento given to me by my headquarters senior staff in the aftermath of a historic change in the mission of Strategic Air Command that brought the Navy's strategic missile-carrying submarines in harness with the Air Force strategic bomber and land-based missile forces. It was just a dark blue baseball cap, with the new command emblem on the front and emblazoned on the back the words, "Vision Master." This simple but thoughtful gift conveyed with marvelous brevity my role in creating the vision

of this sweeping change in mission and organization and bringing it to fruition. While you may never have the opportunity to implement change on this scale, no matter. Every unit needs a Vision Master, someone who can be both passionate about the mission and relentless in pursuing better ways to get the job done.

CHARACTERISTICS

Courage: Physical courage? Yes, to be sure. I have no doubts about any of you on that score. The determination to persevere, to carry on in the face of exhaustion and pain, you've all been there in the past four years, on the fields of friendly strife, on the obstacle course, and POW training. The military profession places a premium on strength and stamina. But here, I want to speak more to ethical courage, being true to yourself, your values and standards, holding not just yourself accountable, but your fellow cadets as well. More than that, however, I am talking about the courage of your convictions, setting things right that you know to be wrong, making the unpopular choices and decisions, standing up under fear, threats and intimidation. Here again, your people will be taking careful note, measuring you against your words and their principles, watching to see if you walk the talk, if you will march into the fire with them and for them.

Compassion: Of the nine elements of leadership on the agenda, I grew into this one last. My most comfortable persona is insular, reserved, and yes, if you haven't guessed, judgmental. On the Myers-Briggs Personality Type Indicator, I am a strong INTJ, that is, introverted, intuitive, thinking, judging. I like to have matters settled and move on. Empathy was clearly not my strong suit, which means I was even farther away from compassion, which to me means acting on empathetic feelings, getting personally involved in resolving people problems and their consequences. While compassion is not essential to leadership, it brings your effectiveness to

an entirely new level, one that not only builds bonds but makes people want to follow you into the jaws of hell. Because compassion is so closely linked to persona, and therefore to both genetic disposition and upbringing, I hold my commanders to a less demanding but nonetheless imperative standard: treating people with decency and respect.

Character: No surprise that I have saved this discussion to the end of my lesson, because it is the decisive factor, the measure that gets prospective commanders through the door for further consideration. When we say that someone is "a person of character," we are getting at the core values I have in mind when I judge leadership potential or worth. Those values are 1) professional competence, because that speaks to discipline, experience and ability; 2) honor and ethics, two sides of the same coin that speaks to trust and dependability; and 3) morality, the soul of integrity, the trait that ensures decency, that shields against temptation, that prizes tolerance. Character is what allows me to sleep better, knowing that my commanders have the welfare of their people – my people – foremost in their concern. That is why the Cadet Honor Code is at the heart of the Academy training, why we teach ethics, and why we insist on your best behavior and performance.

Because here we train leaders. And in that quest, I bid you Godspeed.

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The Journal of Character and Leadership Development (JCLD) is dedicated to bringing together the expert views of scholars and leaders who care about both character and leadership, and to the integration of these vitally-important concepts.

JCLD is produced at the U.S. Air Force Academy. It is motivated by, but not exclusively concerned with, preparation of cadets to lead as officers of character in service to our Nation.

Combining quality, peer-reviewed scholarship and the experiential perspectives of leaders at all levels, JCLD aims to enhance intellectual understanding and empower real-world development of the effective, character-based leadership that both individuals and organizations need to succeed in a complex and demanding world.



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JCLD@usafa.edu



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