

FROM THE PRESIDENT

*A Cause Higher than Oneself:
Leadership and the Moral Foundations
of National Security*

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*"In war, moral considerations make up three quarters
of the game: the relative balance of manpower
accounts only for the remaining quarter."*

—Napoleon I, 27 August 1808

What Napoleon believed to be the critical element of war is a factor equally critical to a nation's overall security posture. But by looking at contemporary American leadership and the foreign and defense policy culture over which it presides, one would have few clues that the "moral factor" has anything to do with the defense of our nation or the survival of American and Western civilization.

What is this moral factor? And why should we pay attention to it? In a just war, the moral factor represents the will to fight and to sacrifice for a higher cause. It is built on the soldier's sense of justice and honor and his outrage over justice denied and honor trampled. It appeals to his highest ideals of love of family, home, and country; of what is right, good, and true; and in America, of liberty and democracy.

The Marine Corps captures a key element of this in its motto: "Semper Fidelis" – "Always Faithful." Faithful to what? Faithful to God, to country, to one's spouse and family, to one's friends and

comrades-in-arms, and to the highest principles by which we should run our country and our personal lives.

To understand faithfulness, it is useful to consider its opposites. The most obvious of these—betrayal—is bad enough: treason, adultery, and all the harm such betrayals cause. But there is a relative of betrayal that is characteristic of our age and has frequent consequences similar to those of breaking faith: cynicism. Cynicism is usually marked by lack of faith or belief, whether in God, in the possibility of truth, in the existence of absolute moral standards, or ultimately, in any cause commanding loyalty that is higher than oneself and one's selfish needs. It means a disbelief in the possibility of noble motives and an attendant lack of commitment to any higher principles.

It is cynical selfishness that invariably nourishes hubris—the main characteristic of the 20th century intelligentsia and much of America's modern leadership class. Hubris is the assertion of the supremacy of man and the belief that man and human reason, and nothing higher, represent the creative intelligence of the world.

Hubris is the spirit that inspires man to dictate his own standards of right and wrong according to his

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personal, economic, or political preferences and to reject those of any higher authority. It operates at the level of the individual, where no cause is higher than oneself. It operates at the social level, where the apotheosis of man lies at the root of the 20th century's totalitarian ideologies. When there is no cause higher than oneself and no source of morals other than personal preferences, life is a struggle for power and material treasure. Where worldly cynicism prevails, it holds itself to be the universal attitude, except among the hopelessly naive whose idealism is scorned. It is for good reason why hubris was seen by the ancients as man's challenge to the gods, and why in Judeo-Christian civilization it is seen as the sin of pride—the failure to humble oneself before our Creator and His standards.

The true cynic, the man marked by hubris, has few soft spots in his heart. He cannot subordinate himself before a cause higher than himself—whether it is God, country, or family. He cannot be outraged by justice denied or honor trampled—because outrage is impossible in a cynical world of power

struggles and unscrupulous methods. And when one's heart is so calloused that outrage is impossible, then betrayal becomes all the easier. When nothing more important than selfish interests is at stake, to be faithful or not makes no difference. And with no cause higher than oneself, where does one find that commitment that sustains our security and civilization at all levels: military, political, moral, psychological, economic, and social? The lesson here is that true strength—the strength of leaders, of armies, of nations, and of civilizations—is to be found in commitment to a higher cause: in faithfulness, in idealism, in unselfishness, and ultimately in humility. In the main classroom at the Institute, Arnold Friberg's famous painting of "The Prayer at Valley Forge" is displayed. It shows General George Washington on his knees in the snow during the American Revolution's most desperate hour. We hope that this helps inspire our students to understand that the greatest leadership is marked by humility, a humility which recognizes that there are indeed causes higher than oneself.