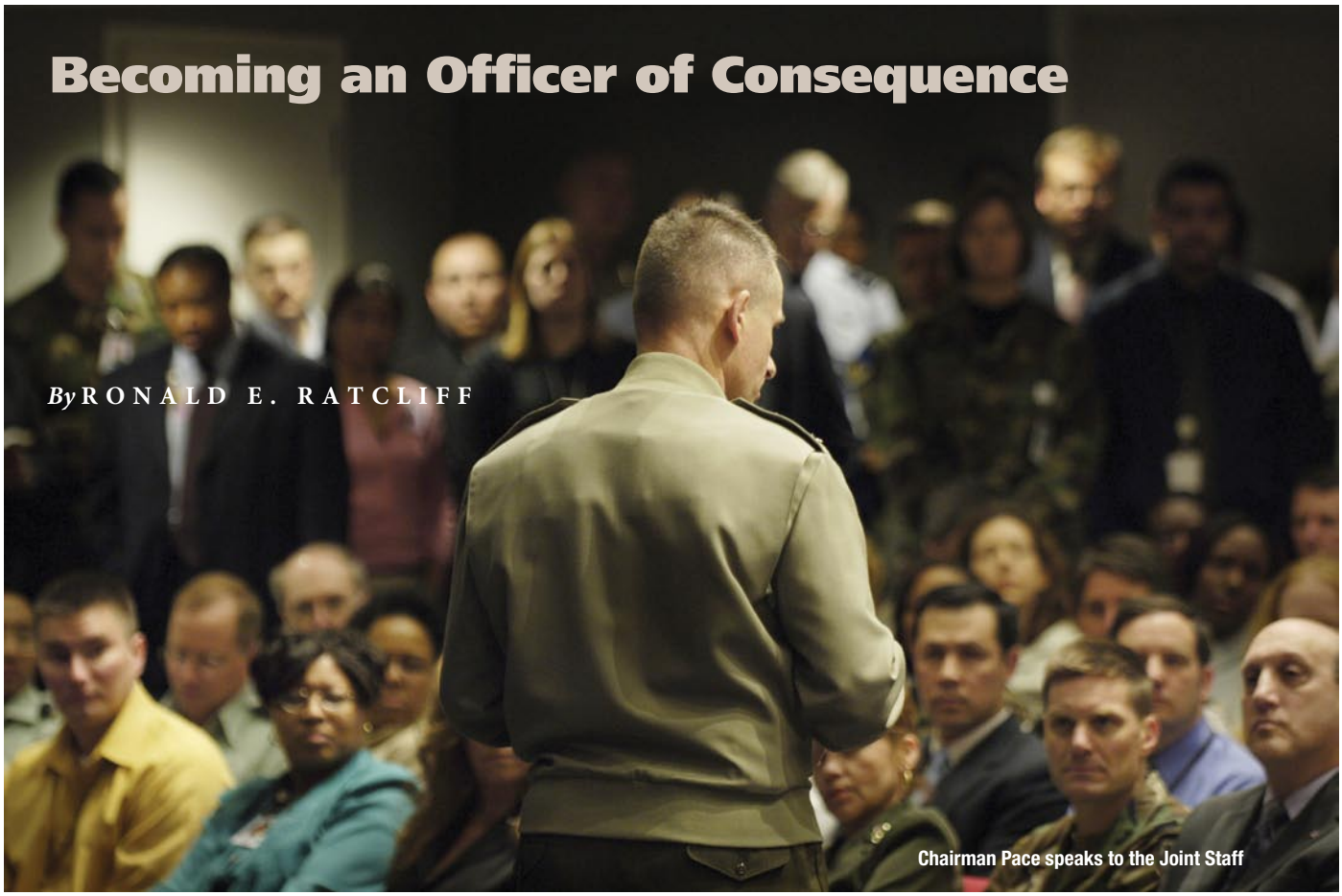
Becoming an Officer of Consequence

By RONALD E. RATCLIFF



JFQ (D. Myles Cullen)

Chairman Pace speaks to the Joint Staff

I believe that a general who receives good advice from a subordinate officer should profit by it. . . . In particular, he must not let the source of an idea influence him. Ideas of others can be as valuable as his own and should be judged only by the results they are likely to produce.

—*Frederick the Great*

Much of the literature about military history and leadership is focused on a few great leaders who rose to meet the martial challenges of their time and place. Often forgotten are the subordinates who enabled these leaders to see their challenges more clearly and who helped them turn their decisions into action, causing the outcomes that established their places in history.

To America's great fortune, many of the smartest and most service-minded youth opt for military careers; thus, the talent pool from which the Armed Forces draw their senior officers is extraordinarily deep. Those who rise to three- and four-star positions and assume command of armies and fleets constitute less than one-half of one percent of those who serve as military officers.

The vast majority of those who select a military career will achieve more modest positions of rank, responsibility, and authority. Many will earn the privilege of commanding some form of military endeavor, from warfighting to combat support. Most finish their service as commanders and lieutenant colonels, while a smaller number end up as captains and colonels. Despite their more modest ranks, however, almost all leave indelible marks on the senior officers they serve under in one staff or another, and some will help those leaders achieve greatness.

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Staff duty has always been part of officers' careers, yet many find they are ill prepared when the time comes. While selection to most staffs demands superior operational performance and significant warfare expertise, actual staff duty is often focused more on managerial and organizational skills. Frequently, especially for those temporarily assigned to staffs, officers serve in important decisionmaking positions with limited experience or scant operational proficiency in areas for which they are directly responsible. Yet their commanders and staff peers will demand the same high level of performance that has characterized their careers up to that point. While some are not equal to the task, most are, and a few excel.

Those who rise above their peers and gain the ear of the commander become *officers of consequence* because their commanders value their judgment and seek their counsel when making difficult choices. Achieving that status requires a mix of professional skills and personal traits. This article will focus on those traits and will also draw attention to the special challenges staff officers face when they serve as temporary individual augmentees. It examines

what commanders expect from their staffs and how they view their subordinates. Finally, it presents a foundational framework that officers reporting to a staff might consider when deciding how best to present their opinions.

The Individual Augmentee

The Long War has created a new form of staff duty, the individual augmentee (IA). An IA is a Servicemember who fills a temporary duty position on a combatant commander's staff or subordinate staff to augment operations during contingencies or heightened missions in direct support of contingency operations.[1] Increasingly, military personnel are finding themselves serving as IAs attached to military staffs in Afghanistan, Iraq, or elsewhere in U.S. Central Command.

Such assignments are challenging for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the relative isolation inherent in temporary positions. Unlike most staff officers, the IA is essentially an outsider with little connection to commanders and their staffs. While the number of IA billets emerging from the Long War fluctuates, the positions number in the thousands and range from junior enlisted to senior officer billets. Personnel assigned to IA billets often bring limited experience and meager technical skills and are forced to learn quickly on the job.

While some IA billets require merely warm bodies, others are decisionmaking positions that can have life-or-death impact. The value of IAs, however, is less dependent on their positions or billets than on the professional attributes they bring to the job. Like all staff officers, they are expected to contribute more than mere physical presence and mechanical obedience. Staff officers must be not only industrious, but also professionally curious, constantly searching for new information to provide superiors with fresh perspectives on issues confronting the command.

The Staff Officer's Role

The role of the staff officer has long been recognized as helping the commander to make the best possible decisions and assuring that they are implemented. *The Joint Staff Officer's Guide 2000* notes that the staff officer "serves to ease the commander's workload by furnishing basic information and technical advice by which he or she may arrive at decisions."[2] In providing such support, staff officers are expected to keep the commander apprised of pertinent information, anticipate future needs, and develop, analyze, and compare possible solutions to the challenges faced by the command. Implicit in such tasking is the expectation that staff officers will be candid in their observations and recommendations.

Chairman Pace meets students after making address at National Defense University

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The challenge for all staff officers is to gain the respect and professional regard of their seniors so their opinions are both heard and considered. The willingness and ability of staff officers, especially if they are junior, to articulate unconventional or unpopular opinions are difficult to come by. First, speaking out requires solid confidence in one's position, especially if more experienced officers hold a different opinion. Second, one must present a dissenting position in a clear and concise manner that will influence the thinking of a commander through compelling logic. Both require the staff officer to replace strongly held biases with well-informed analysis and astute appreciation of the situation.

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While the myth has grown that the commander alone has the fullest vision of the challenges that confront the organization, that is rarely the case. General Omar Bradley addressed the importance of getting the most out his staff. He argued that the problems associated with modern warfare have become so complex that they are beyond the grasp of any one person, no matter how senior or experienced. As a consequence, he asserted that senior commanders have a duty to seek out and nurture staff officers who are willing to speak truth to power: "A leader should encourage the members of his staff to speak up if they think the commander is wrong. He should invite constructive criticism. It is a grave error for the leader to surround himself with 'yes' men."[3] He recalled that General George C. Marshall demanded that his staff provide him opposing views and question the advice and counsel being given him by his senior commanders. In Marshall's words, "Unless I hear all the arguments concerning an action, I am not sure whether I have made the right decision or not."[4]

Indeed, the confidence of senior officers, especially those making life-or-death decisions, is earned, not inherited. Individuals who find themselves suddenly thrust into IA billets, as well as those who enjoy a more measured pace into staff positions, would do well to ponder what they must do to establish their reputation as an *officer of consequence*—one whose views find a ready audience and whose counsel is valued and duly considered. To achieve such professional regard requires a firm grasp of three essential aspects of military service: a well-developed personal and professional ethical framework, a solid hold on formal and dynamic decisionmaking processes, and a sophisticated understanding of risk management.

What Commanders Want

A general on the German General Staff once remarked that staff officers displayed four basic attributes: they were either clever or stupid, and they were either industrious or lazy. While such blunt Teutonic categorizations provide an uncomfortable bit of clarity, they also offer insight into how staff officers are judged. Perhaps a more useful description would differentiate officers who are *industrious* versus those who just *do their job*, and those who strive to bring a wide *range of professional knowledge* versus those who are content to contribute along more *narrowly focused lines*. As figure 1 shows, staff officers within these parameters fall into one of four quadrants that generally define their roles and how their commanders view them.

Clearly, commanders desire staff officers characterized by quadrant I. Such individuals are valuable because they not only work diligently, but they also bring a breadth of professional knowledge and inquisitiveness that often produces truly innovative solutions. Not surprisingly, these are the officers of consequence whose opinions are valued even if they run counter to conventional or popular thinking. Individuals who choose to remain narrowly focused on the familiar aspects of their areas or who avoid learning about the more general aspects of joint warfare inhabit quadrants II and III. These officers have the potential to move into quadrant I, given the opportunity or the right motivation. Indeed, as mentors, commanders should push their officers in that direction. Quadrant IV officers, unfortunately, do exist and often find themselves marginalized and quickly reassigned.

While most junior officers would prefer to be viewed as quadrant I officers, most are not, if for no other reason than they lack the experience or professional knowledge to make them *effectively* industrious. Wisdom is born of experience and the maturity to understand *where* one's experience is relevant—and *when* it is not. Professional knowledge, however, is not solely predicated on experience. It depends mostly on one's professional curiosity and willingness to learn through either formal education or personal endeavor, such as reading. One without the other is insufficient. While most junior and midgrade officers have a limited range of experience, their value can be enhanced greatly by the quality and range of their intellect gained and nurtured through education and professional reading.

The IA, depending on grade and experience, has the added challenge of finding meaningful opportunities to demonstrate both professional knowledge and industriousness. In many cases, it falls to the commander and his senior subordinates to provide such opportunities in order to determine what sort of staff officer they have. Some IAs may need to create opportunities themselves, like permanently assigned staff. In either case, doing only what one is told or staying within the narrow confines of one's area of expertise is unlikely to make one a quadrant I officer.

Staking a Position

A staff officer must be willing to speak truth to power, which requires the courage to expose one's ideas to the harsh light of critical examination. To do so effectively, an officer of consequence must bring three essential elements to the discussion (See figure 2):

- a well-defined personal ethical framework that will enable one to hold firm to his convictions despite pressure to conform or compromise
- a definitive personal decisionmaking framework that enables one to identify missing or ignored criteria that are critical to the development and comparison of alternative courses of action
- a clearly understood personal risk management framework that enables one first to appreciate the vagary and ambiguity that cause uncertainty and then to wisely assume or avoid risky situations or actions.

Ethical Frameworks. Ethics are the operationalization of morals. Ethics are not what we profess to do, but what we actually do when confronted with difficult choices. Moral foundations are as diverse as the theories about where they come from (family, religion, or culture). Military service adds its own dimensions to those foundations, sets minimal ethical standards, and then does something many professions do not: it holds individuals accountable for their actions.

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While it is often stated that the means never justify the ends, the application of deadly force requires all officers to have a rock-solid *personal* understanding of exactly where their ethical lines exist. Too often, individuals, especially junior officers, fail to develop their own personal ethical frameworks fully. Failure to identify and ponder ethical issues can become deadly, especially when individuals must make split-second decisions under confusing circumstances. Equally regrettable are instances when a junior officer's seniors or group acts against his personal ethical standard, and he is unable or unwilling to step forward and hold to his beliefs.

Among the most demanding ethical questions officers face is the choice between honesty and loyalty—when it is right to be

Figure 1. How Commanders View and Treat Staffs

	Industrious	Just Doing the Job
Professionally Knowledgeable and Curious about a Wide Variety of Things	I Challenge and Get Out of the Way	II Motivate and Stimulate Curiosity
Professionally Unaware or Narrowly Focused on Few Things	III Educate, Teach, and Provide Exposure	IV Replace or Marginalize

Figure 2. Essential Elements

obedient and when it is wrong. Loyalty in military service is almost always the essential attribute of a trusted subordinate. Yet it is often the subordinate—willing to risk being considered disloyal—who asks the frank question that might give the commander pause to reconsider a decision. The limits of one's loyalty is a decision that every officer must make, especially one who aspires to being more than a "yes man."

Decisionmaking Frameworks. Decisionmaking frameworks can be as complex as the formal military decisionmaking process with sophisticated branch and sequel procedures, or as simple as basic rule sets such as "if X happens, I will do Y." Most decisions are based on sophisticated but informal pattern recognition techniques or well-conceived and formal rule sets derived from experience or education. Occasionally, and too frequently in some commands, decisions are the product of organizational momentum that applies the same set of solutions to any problem. Pattern recognition and experiential bias have their place, but not at the expense of a well-reasoned approach to decisionmaking.

While it is impossible to delineate a comprehensive decisionmaking process that fits every command or instance, all require the decisionmaker to do four fundamental things:

- assess the situation to identify the challenge that must be resolved
- decide what to do
- implement the chosen course of action
- assure that the action is done well and is leading to desired ends.

The quadrant I officer understands not only how decisions are made but also why they are made, and he adds substance to the debate as the choice is being selected.

Risk Management Frameworks. In his reflections about World War II, Admiral Ernest King noted that the ability to assess the risk in a course of action and to choose wisely whether to take the risk was one of most difficult challenges a commander faced. While audacity is an admirable quality in military service, it coexists with its catastrophic cousins, recklessness and foolhardiness. How is one to know the difference? Carl von Clausewitz opined that only the commander's coup d'oeil was capable of such discernment, which does little for the staff officer who strives to help his commander choose wisely in risky situations. Prudent risk-taking requires an appreciation for the critical uncertainties that surround a situation, an understanding of the likely range of consequences of one's actions, recognition of a command's vulnerability to undesirable consequences, and identification of ways to minimize harmful consequences if risky action must be taken.

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Developing personal frameworks or models establishes a solid foundation that makes seniors and peers alike confident in the logic of one's arguments. In a profession that places a premium on individual credibility, one cannot assume that serendipitous or divine inspiration will appear when one is confronted with momentous decisions. As Admiral King noted, knowing when to take risky action requires not only a grasp of the issues at hand but also the moral courage to present a compelling argument, which is the hallmark of an officer of consequence.

The role of staff officers and their importance to a command are ultimately decided by the commander. All staff officers, but especially individual augmentees, face the onerous challenge of gaining the respect and ear of their superiors. Working hard and bringing professional expertise are seldom enough to establish oneself as an officer of consequence in the eyes of a commander. Equally important is the willingness to challenge the status quo, to stretch the operational envelope, and to take unpopular stands on issues. Such attributes, however, must be accompanied by the ability to present logical and compelling recommendations that reflect the values of the organization and take risk into consideration.

Commander of *Enterprise* Carrier Strike Group with his chief of staff and British RAF air commodore at briefing

U.S. Navy (Josh Thompson)

To develop into an officer of consequence when rank and experience are in short supply requires finding ways to provide the commander with insights that others have overlooked. Such awareness rarely comes spontaneously. Rather, it is derived from hard thinking and professional judgment, using personal frameworks that enable a deeper understanding and appreciation for the situation and what to do about it. **JFQ**

NOTES

[1] Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction 1301.01C, January 1, 2004.

[2] Joint Forces Staff College, Publication 1: *The Joint Staff Officer's Guide 2000* (Norfolk, VA: National Defense University, 2000), C–1.

[3] Omar N. Bradley, "On Leadership," *Parameters* 11, no. 3 (September 1981), 3.

[4] Ibid.