

Prudence, War and Civil-Military Relations

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Prudence gets a bum rap in contemporary society. Too bad, because the classic virtue of prudence denotes one of the most essential and most difficult aspects of the military profession. Prudence has to do with exercising sound judgment, being able to assess the facts of a specific situation and choose the best course of action to follow. A prudent choice avoids both the extreme of being brash—taking too much risk—and of being overly cautious—avoiding any risk. Properly understood, prudence lies at the very heart of our profession.

Some may find any application of prudence in the military profession oxymoronic. After all, on the battlefield, the imprudent is a daily routine. We award Presidential Unit Citations and individual medals for valor for doing what many would consider brash. On the anniversary of D-Day, for example, we still honor paratroopers for jumping behind enemy lines, knowing that at best they would be surrounded as they fought to seize and retain objectives assigned to them. We still visit Pointe du Hoc, France, where Rangers climbed cliffs in the face of withering fire, and we still walk the beaches in silent tribute to those who waded ashore to directly assault the heavily fortified enemy. Add to these examples those of any other war or any other service, and one could easily conclude that a discussion of prudence in our profession is out of place.

Prudence does, however, have a place at the military table; our vocabulary confirms it. “Prudent risks” are acceptable, and we seek leaders who can identify and take them, for they are necessary to win wars. “Gambles” are not, for they represent excessive risk that puts both lives and mission accomplishment in unnecessary danger; leaders do not gamble with lives or missions. Chapter 13, “Planning Overlord,” of GEN Dwight D. Eisenhower’s *Crusade in Europe* covers the

multiple, extended conversations and arguments among Eisenhower and his senior leaders focused on the risks inherent in invasion—command and control, lines of operations, tactical innovations, air and naval operations, logistical preparation, timing of decisions and so on—and the degree to which they might be mitigated.

Eisenhower’s account demonstrates a historical verity: Prudence is—or should be—an essential aspect of a war leader’s conscience. One can see it most clearly by comparing commanders. In the Civil War, GEN George B. McClellan was often an overly cautious leader, missing opportunities that the battlefield presented to him; GEN Ulysses S. Grant is more widely seen as an aggressive, risk-taking commander, although some say overly aggressive at times. In World War II, British Gen. Bernard L. Montgomery was usually more cautious (except perhaps in the Arnhem campaign), whereas GEN George S.

Patton is recognized as an aggressive risk taker, again, sometimes overly so, according to some. In the Korean War, GEN Douglas MacArthur’s Inchon operation is usually understood as an example of bold but acceptable risk; his drive to the Yalu River, on the other hand, many see as imprudent.

Identifying the proper place between the extremes of brash gamble and overly cautious inaction depends upon the specifics of each case. Sometimes the prudent action will lean more toward the brash; other times, more toward the cautious. A prudent judgment is more art than science. Hence, a broad understanding of history, an analytic mind that can discern the relevant facts of a particular case, a synthetic mind that can see coherence amid the fog of ambiguity, the ability to listen to the experiences and judgments of others and allow a decision to emerge from an extended discourse—all are essential war leadership traits.

War leadership extends beyond the military profession. Identifying the prudent course in war also requires an extended civil-military discourse, at least at the operational and strategic levels. Major campaigns are not solely military decisions, for they require significant commitment of national, and sometimes multinational, resources. GEN Grant's 1864–65 campaign at the end of the Civil War, Britain's Gallipoli campaign in World War I, the Normandy campaign of World War II, Inchon during the Ko-

rean War and the major campaigns of our current wars illustrate this point. Preceding the decision to execute each of these campaigns was a set of extensive civil-military discussions.

In war, soldiers and statesmen, commanders and politicians (from the executive and the legislative branches) must collaborate. Together, they must set strategic aims, manage alliances, decide the nature of acceptable risk and shape operational choices. Together, they must ensure that ends and means—military, diplomatic, economic

and fiscal—are aligned in the best possible way. Together, they must constantly assess and reassess progress toward achieving strategic aims, changes in enemy activities, adaptations required of friendly forces and many other aspects associated with the conduct of war. This requires a proper civil-military discourse throughout the war, not just at the beginning and end.

War responsibilities fall on both military and political leaders. The civil-military discourse is often difficult, however. A politician's life experiences, outlook and temperament differ significantly from those of a military commander. Political leaders have the "upper hand" given their constitutional responsibility—at least in a democracy—while the military commanders have the upper hand given their life-long study of and preparation for war. The duality of position and difference in outlook and experience could lead to a climate of contentiousness in a civil-military discourse, rather than cooperation. Deference is not the issue, for the military commander must be deferential to civilian leadership. The issue is setting respectful and trustful conditions for the essential discourse that must take place among those civilian and military leaders responsible for wartime decisions. War ends are, and always have been, political; the primary means to achieve war ends are military—force and violence. Although military means may be primary, they are not exclusive. Diplomacy remains essential, even during a war; so is social and economic policy. The old saw, "Let the politicians set the goals, then leave the military alone to execute" is not only false, but dangerous. It sets up a false dichotomy in the civil-military relationship that reflects neither the reality of war nor the reality of a democracy. Further, the false dichotomy hinders the emergence of the prudent course.

Military and civilian leaders need each other if a democratic nation is to prosecute war successfully. Finding the prudent course, avoiding the brash and the overly cautious, adjusting that course as a war unfolds and maintaining sufficient unity in a nation's com-

mitment to success are hard enough even under ideal conditions. In many cases, it is not the side that gets it right that wins a war, but the side that gets it least wrong, can adapt the fastest and can sustain its will to win. Open, respectful, straightforward, facts-of-the-case-based discourse—as prudence demands and Eisenhower’s book describes—increases the probability of “getting it least wrong” and adapting as conditions change. Bullying, belittling, backdooring, undermining, and other ever-present human and organizational dynamics—whether intentional or not, whether military or civilian—erode the quality of discourse. Such dynamics lower the likelihood of adopting a prudent course of action and, therefore, lower the likelihood of success.

A proper discourse broke down in the last long war America fought. As GEN Bruce Palmer writes in *The 25-Year War: America’s Military Role in Vietnam*, one of the larger lessons from the Vietnam War was this: “It is im-



perative that our highest civilian and military heads be in close, even if not cordial, contact with each other, maintaining a continuous and candid discussion of the purpose of the undertaking, the risks involved, and the probable costs, human and material. Differing views must be surfaced ... in order that no false sense of security is engendered. ... In any event, a hostile relationship ... invites disaster.” As difficult as it may be, serving our

soldiers and our citizens demands nothing short of the highest quality discourse among our military and civilian leaders. Prudence, and its associated discourse, helps ensure that valor and sacrifice are not wasted. □

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