

First to Fight: Warrior Virtue in an Age of Moral Relativism

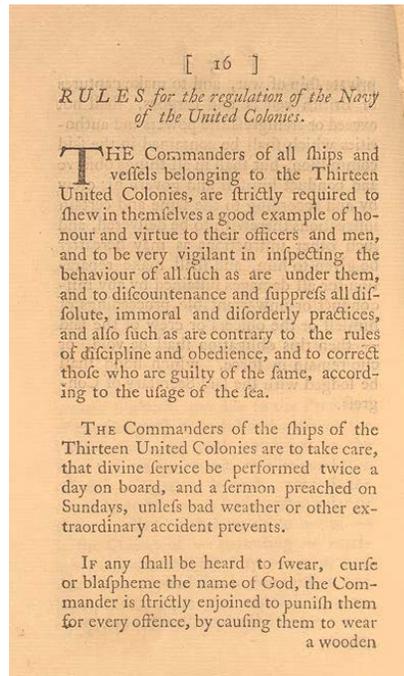
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On November 28, 1775 the Marine Committee adopted the first regulations for the continental Navy and Marine Corps. The Congress was concerned about moral behavior so the new regulations directed all Commanders of American Colonial ships to be moral role models and to punish immoral behavior.¹ The second article directed Commanders to cause divine services twice a day on board ship and a sermon preached on Sunday. The third article was a regulation to punish offences of cursing and if a Sailor or Marine blasphemed the name of God they had “to wear a wooden collar or some other shameful badge of distinction.”

Long before our UCMJ or Core Values, Sailors and Marines were expected to be virtuous. Our modern day Navy and Marine Corps were founded on positive morals and warrior virtues; however, over time our national attitude about what is right or wrong changed due to moral relativism.

Moral relativism is the philosophical idea that beliefs and truth have no objective standard and there are few or no absolute moral truths for all



people, at all times, in all places. Moral relativism is championed by many progressives who believe it is the heart of social tolerance; on the other hand moral relativism is often abhorred by conservatives who consider this philosophy the source of moral decay in society.

The purpose of this article is not to resolve the debate over relativism; instead it will explore warrior virtue, explain the moral factors/elements of war, then examine an often overlooked dimension of morality: human nature. This will be followed by two contemporary examples of moral failure: the problem of sexual assault (SA) and sexual exploitation (SE) in the military. Then conclude with a recommendation on how to strengthen individual and institutional character.

Warrior Virtues: A Moral Imperative

From *The Code of the Warrior*² “a true warrior has to

be morally superior” to their enemy and that fighting by a higher ethical code restrains the warrior in combat from committing atrocities or being inhumane. A warrior who fights by a higher moral standard, such as the Law of Armed Conflict, the Geneva Conventions, the Code of Conduct, and rules of engagement and comes home from war is less likely to suffer a psychological, moral, or spiritual injury. It is imperative we do not neglect the development of warrior virtues. However, this begs the question who determines the moral standard for warrior virtues in an age of relativism?

Moral Factors: The Real Weapon of War

One might say that the physical seem little more than the wooden hilt, while the moral factors are the precious metal, the real weapons, the finely honed blade.

-Clausewitz, *On War*³

Clausewitz’s classic *On War* provides the foundation for warfighting doctrine.⁴ For Clausewitz war involved rational and non-rational, material and immaterial, simple and complex factors. The non-rational, immaterial, and complex factors of war are identified as the moral factors or elements of war. Clausewitz forcefully wrote the “moral elements are among the most important in war.”⁵

The moral factors of war help warriors cope with the uncertainties of war such as: fog, friction, and chance. War is inherently a human dynamic;

thus “it is the human dimension that infuses war with its intangible moral factors.”⁶

Today’s Western warfare is over-reliant on and confident in technology which strives to make warfighting a rational enterprise. However, since war is mostly a human endeavor, the non-rational moral factors are critical for waging and winning wars regardless of technological superiority. This is seen with the fight against ISIL—technology will not defeat this evil foe; evil will prevail in this fight unless good people and governments have the moral will to fight.

What are the moral elements of war and warfighting? Clausewitz identified “The Principal Moral Elements” as: “The skill of the commander, the experience and courage of the troops, and their patriotic spirit.”⁷ Michael Handel noted that moral factors include “personality, creativity, experience, intuition of the leaders; the passion and *character* of the people; the training and motivation of the military; the quality of military doctrine; and the behavior of the troops under fire and their continued resistance following a defeat.”⁸

Clausewitz was emphatic that the moral factors cannot be fully known; nor can they be easily quantified, and although moral elements are often subjective to the individual, they should not be objectively neglected by the leader. The moral factors must be defined, clarified, and strengthened in order to develop and sustain a totally fit and resilient fighting force.

Human Nature: Good or Evil?

The study of human nature from a Western perspective can be traced back to philosophers like Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle. These great thinkers influenced the Enlightenment philosophers such as Hobbes, Hume, Rousseau, Locke, and Kant who wrote about human nature, understanding, and reasoning. Furthermore, theologians such as Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin significantly influenced the development of our understanding of human nature. These philosophers and theologians influenced the founders of our nation when drafting the documents of freedom and our laws. Additionally, our founders developed our National identity and character based on morality, virtues and religion.⁹

There is no unified definition of human nature; however, for the purpose of this article human nature is “the generally innate but flexible characteristics of humankind as a whole, comprising the set of behaviors, attitudes, and dispositions that typify the human race.”¹⁰

The fundamental question related to understanding human nature: are humans born inherently good or evil? A lot of people are uncomfortable with the word evil. Our modern understanding of the English word evil is rooted in our nation’s Judeo Christian history. The ancient Hebrew word for evil is רָע (ra‘) which in an adjective form means evil or bad, and the noun form is often juxtaposed and contrasted with good.

Some conclude that humans are born innately good and learn to do evil. Learning is modeled in families and society. Others believe humans are born as blank slates (tabula rasa) with no innate mental content, and learning about right and wrong comes from sensory experience most often nurtured in families and society. While others believe humans are born with an innate human nature with the capacity of good and evil and that morality is learned and developed in healthy families, relationships and society.

In my opinion evil is a threat to our national security and way of life. Our enemies are not always foreign adversaries; there are enemies among us. The simple definition of enemy is “someone who hates another; someone who attacks or tries to harm another; something that harms or threatens someone or something.”¹¹ Within the military we have enemy who desires to perpetrate evil upon others in the form of sexual assault and exploitation.

Sexual Assault and Exploitation: More than Moral Failure they are Evil

Rape, sexual harassment, groping, revenge porn, and sexting are more than examples of moral failure they are evil and destructive behaviors. Sexual assault and exploitation are a human problem in and out of the military that harms individuals, families, and society; within the military SA and SE negatively impacts morale and readiness. Sexual assault and exploitation can traumatize and stigmatize

victims for life. These harmful acts are a heinous crime because they not only violate the law they violate the body and soul of their victims.

The military is a noble institution, the evil acts of a few can bring dishonor to all. The military has proactive policies and programs to combat destructive behaviors and to prevent personal harm of service and family members. However, policy and programs have limitations; since SA and SE are human problems they must be solved by good people stopping evil behavior.

I am sure for some the hair just raised on the back of your neck. The problem of evil has most often been left to the realm of religion and theology; our government is inherently secular thus there is not nor can there be a theological policy or program for combating evil. However, we can do more to stop SA and SE. I believe at the core of the SA and SE problem is the lack of or underdeveloped character of some service members. This character problem leads to a lack of devotion to our Core Values. A virtuous warrior will live by Core Values; individuals who honor others will not violate someone; also virtuous warriors will have the moral courage and commitment to take action to intervene and stop SA and SE. If you see something, say something; if you know something then do something—no one is an innocent bystander!

Character First: A Morally Fit Fighting Force Can Stop SA and SE

The Marine Corps makes strategic warriors— “The Corps’ ranks are few because of the difficulty of our training and the commitment needed to face the challenges of our mission. Our nation places its trust and confidence in those who earn the title, as every decision a Marine makes has the potential to prevent a conflict—or escalate it. At all times focused, alert and in control, Marines are strategic warriors with training, judgment, and *character* our entire nation depends on.”¹² Think about it “character our nation depends on,” is the same character individual service and family members depend on so they will not be SA or SE.

What is character? Character is “the totality of an individual’s attributes and personality traits, particularly his or her characteristic moral, social, and religious attitudes.”¹³ Character is developed in relationship to others and nurtured in families, communities, schools, religious organizations, and institutions. The Marine Corps develops character beginning the moment a recruit or officer candidate steps on the yellow footprints.



How can we strengthen individual and institutional character in order to continue to make better Marines, virtuous warriors, and a morally fit

fighting force? We can strengthen character through leadership training and education.

Leadership and Character Development Education and Training: A Matter of Both the Heart and Mind

Our Corps’ 30th Commandant the late General C. E. Mundy stated it best in the Foreword of FMFM 1-0 *Leading Marines* “The most important responsibility in our Corps is leading Marines. If we expect Marines to lead, we must provide the education of the heart and of the mind to win on the battlefield and in the barracks, in war and peace.”¹⁴

The education of the heart and the mind is something the Marine Corps epitomizes. Developing an individual’s character is at the core of being a Marine. It was not by chance that the first chapter of *Leading Marines* is titled “Our Ethos.” Ethos comes from the Greeks and most profoundly Aristotle in his classic work *Ethics*.¹⁵ Fundamentally, éthos (ἦθος) means habit or custom. Aristotle employed the term to refer not only to habit but to character; thus ethics are “things pertaining to one’s character”¹⁶ or ethos (habit) which is critical to the formation of one’s character.

In Book Two of *Ethics* Aristotle wrote “Virtue, is twofold, intellectual and moral. Both the coming-into-being and increase of intellectual virtue result mostly from teaching—hence it requires experience and time—whereas moral virtue is the result of habit, and so it is that moral virtue got its name

[ēthikē] by a slight alteration of the term habit [éthos].”¹⁷ Aristotle believed that morals and virtues like courage, magnificence, truthfulness and justice were learned then habituated into good actions and attitudes.

Values in Action: Character Strengths and Virtues

Aristotle stated in the first sentence of his *Ethics* “Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action as well as choice, is held to aim at some good. Hence people have nobly declared that the good is that which all things aim.”¹⁸ If the aim of all action is “the good” then who determines what is good or virtuous? As a religious person I believe there are moral absolutes but recognize that the government cannot and should not impose or compel theological beliefs upon others; religion is a matter of personal choice. Then what moral framework can we use to develop virtuous warriors?

The classification of Character Strengths and Virtues (CSV) can be a source for providing us an objective moral standard for enhancing our leadership and character development training and education. The CSV classification demonstrates from empirical evidence there are universal virtues and character strengths that can be observed, measured, tested and applied to our lives to make us better humans. The CSV classification has been deployed by the Values in Action Institute on Character¹⁹. Values in Action developed the *Science of Character*²⁰. This science is

strength based and each individual can self-assess then learn to develop their individual character. However, character is best developed in community.

In an article, *Through the Lens of Strength: A Framework for Educating the Heart*²¹ the authors provided a compelling argument of why CSV is a viable alternative to traditional or prescriptive character development education and training.

The CSV classification is rooted in Aristotelean virtue ethics. In the seminal work *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*²² the researchers describe six core virtues and 24 character strengths. The six core virtues are: wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence.

Linkins, Niemiec, Gillham, and Mayerson (2014) noted that this classification “provides a cross-culturally relevant framework for ‘educating the heart’— a common language for students, teachers, and the rest of us to understand and call forth what is best in ourselves and others.”²³

How do you assess your CSV? This is done online at <http://www.viacharacter.org>. After you take your assessment you receive your 24 strengths profile. The VIA institute provides an online description of each strength and how to develop your character.

Institutions like the Marine Corps can develop a curriculum using the CSV classification. For example: Marine Poolees or Officer Candidates awaiting training could take the assessment, read a study guide

then at boot camp or OCS begin a character development continuum training and education program. For those already on active duty or in the reserves they could take the assessment and enroll in the character development program that would be delivered during leadership courses or during general military training.

First to Fight: Character Strengths and Virtues Applied

LtGen Victor H. Krulak’s classic work *First to Fight: An Inside View of the U.S. Marine Corps*²⁴ captures the essence of what this article is about. General Krulak stated “the Marines are assemblage of warriors, nothing more.”²⁵ General Krulak commented in his chapter “The Fighter” that “Whatever the form of combat, the genius of the Marine as a fighter has caused his superiors to place a great deal of confidence in him. They are convinced of his ability, to the point where they will offer unhesitatingly his commitment in the hour of crisis. More important, the American people will accept the offer with the confidence, born of long experience that when a Marine is called upon he will be ready and, when committed to a fight, that he may be depended on to win.”²⁶

We can continue being the world’s finest fighting force that our Nation depends and become even more virtuous warriors by strengthening our character through educating the heart and mind using Values in Action.

The image on the first page is an original version of the first Navy Regulations downloaded from the Library of Congress at <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/religion/el04.html#obj113>

¹ Morality in the Navy, <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/religion/el04.html#obj113>

² French, S. (2003). *The Code of the Warrior*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

³ Clausewitz, Carl von, (1989). *On War*, translated and edited by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989, p. 184.

⁴ MCDP 1, (1997). *Warfighting*. Quantico, VA: Marine Corps Doctrinal Publications.

⁵ Clausewitz, p. 184.

⁶ MCDP 1, p. 13.

⁷ Clausewitz, p. 186.

⁸ Handel, Michael, (2001). *Masters of War: Classical Strategic Thought*. London: Frank Cass Publishing. p. 82.

⁹ Huntington, Samuel, (2004). *Who Are We: The Challenge to America's National Identity*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

¹⁰ Human Nature. (2007). VandenBos, G. R. (Ed.). *APA Dictionary of Psychology*, Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2007, p. 450.

¹¹ Enemy. (2016).

<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/enemy>

¹² <http://www.marines.com/operating-forces/strategic-warrior>

¹³ Character. (2007). VandenBos, G. R. (Ed.). *APA Dictionary of Psychology*, Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2007) p. 163.

¹⁴ Leading Marines, (1995). FMFM 1-0, Washington, DC: HQMC.

¹⁵ Aristotle. (2011) *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by R. C. Barlett and S. D. Collins. Chicago, ILL: University of Chicago Press.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 306.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 26.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 1.

¹⁹ VIA Institute on Character. (2016) <http://www.viacharacter.org/www/>

²⁰ The Science of Character (video). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U3nT2KDAGOc>

²¹ Linkins, M., Niemiec, R., Gillham, J., & Mayerson, D. (2014). *Through*

the Lens of Strength: A Framework for Educating the Heart. The Journal of Positive Psychology.

²² Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. (Eds.), *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification*. New York, NY: Oxford University.

²³ Linkins, M., Niemiec, R., Gillham, J., & Mayerson, D. p. 1.

²⁴ LtGen V. H. Krulak. (1984). *First to Fight: An Inside View of the Marine Corps*. Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 177.