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## In My View

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## IN MY VIEW

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### MORAL OBLIGATION—NONE OF THIS IS EASY

Sir:

A few thoughts in reply to articles in the Winter 2014 *Review*, from hindsight's perspective . . .

The Air Force (and Navy) made serious commitments to education throughout my military career. Much of this focused on “technical/managerial” proficiency in the tradecraft of acquisition and operation of highly technical systems to support national objectives. Much of that training has been used on a daily basis, and I use it even today, as a defense contractor—there are elements of physics and operational employment of such systems that are and remain fundamental and immutable. What I find interesting from the perspective of hindsight is the extent to which the other elements of that educational commitment have retained and perhaps increased in value over time. In the end, education is meant to shape, as well as inform, the mind.

To the question posed as the title for a book review: Professional Military Education (PME) is necessary and lies beyond the obvious study of conflict and strategy. More broadly, many institutions offer thoughts on ethics—I think Admiral Stockdale and Dr. Brennan got it right when they crafted a PME course on “Moral Obligation.” It is that inner imperative and moral compass that shape the elements of leadership noted in Christopher Johnson's essay. I think this is also the essence of Williamson Murray's approach to Thomas Ricks and *The Generals*. These “obligations” (leadership moments) are not theoretical exercises—the open wound of sexual harassment is cancerously eating at our servicemen and service-women, as well as at the services' relationship with the state. Recent episodes of cheating on proficiency exams within Air Force and naval nuclear staffs also bring to light the necessity of education beyond that of “operational proficiency.” In fairness, the military is not unique—GM faces issues re ignition switches, and one of the great “moral” institutions (the Roman Catholic Church) faces issues

re priestly abuses. It is leadership (not management) that allows organizations to, first, avoid these crises and, ultimately, rise beyond them.

Regarding Williamson Murray, I will disagree with him re his closing thoughts of “return to a moral calculus that is nothing short of a return to the sexual standards of the Victorian age.” The “highly respected retired general” cheated—cheated on himself and his family (and the other person involved did likewise). It’s the cheating that most fundamentally mattered, not the affair per se. I believe that it is moral obligation—how you hold yourself in a world whose moral compass is compromised uncontrollably by events outside of a leader’s control—that most strikingly points at leadership.

None of this is easy. I offer these thoughts as thanks to Admiral Stockdale and Dr. Brennan for conceiving such a course, the Air Force and Navy for offering it to me, and to Bill Turcotte [Dr. William E. Turcotte, today professor emeritus, was the chairman of the College’s National Security Decision Making (now National Security Affairs) Department from 1975 to 2002], for granting me his personal copy of the original text, signed by Dr. Brennan. Of all the materials from that year in Newport, it has been the one I have returned to most often, for all the reasons captured in the Winter 2014 issue of the *Naval War College Review*.

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