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Ambition and Careerism

Joseph G. Brennan

Aristotle confesses that the Greeks do not have a word for “ambition” except in the pejorative sense. He writes briefly on the subject in the fourth book of his *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle is less interested in constructing ethical theory from the standpoint of “right” versus “wrong” than he is in analyzing the virtues or excellences that pertain to human character. We should strive, he says, to perfect our character by acquiring these virtues, for we are not born with them but are rather by nature fitted to receive them through habit and education. In contrast to the intellectual virtues, such as wisdom and devotion to science, Aristotle talks of the moral virtues in terms of a mean or balance between two extremes—one of excess, the other of defect. Thus in his leading example, courage—especially military courage—the mean lies somewhere between the two extremes of cowardice and rashness. Just where the mean lies in the moral virtues, he says, must be determined by reason.

In classifying the virtues, Aristotle comes in due course to ambition [*philotimia*].¹ An aura of disapproval hangs about this word, much as it still clings to our word “ambition” or “ambitious.” Shakespeare’s Antony says to the Romans:

The noble Brutus
 Hath told you Caesar was ambitious:
 If it were so, it was a grievous fault,
 And grievously hath Caesar answered it.²

For “ambition” in the honorable sense, Aristotle uses the term “the Nameless Virtue” and describes it as the seeking and attaining of deserved honor. The excess of this trait leads us to grasp at honors of which we are not worthy and at the expense of others. The defect of it we find in the poor-spirited or small-minded man, who stands in contrast to Aristotle’s ideal, the magnanimous or great-souled man. Indeed, it is his analysis of the concept of the magnanimous man that leads Aristotle to the subject of ambition. The

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great-souled man seeks honor at the hands of those worthy to confer it; the vainglorious man goes after honors and position he does not deserve, while the poor-spirited man does not seek honor because he has a small opinion of himself. The poor-spirited man has no get-up-and-go, as Russell Baker's mother would say (she who constantly reminded him when he was a small boy that it was his duty to "make something of himself").³ Aristotle admired men who "made something of themselves" and would be puzzled at any military officer worth his salt today who would not want to be a general or an admiral, who would not work hard and well to attain that rank, accepting the honors as well as the responsibilities that go with it.

In U.S. military circles today, the question has been revived: What is the difference between an honorable, useful drive to advance in one's career, and, by contrast, that bad thing called "careerism"? Back in 1978, in the era of post-Vietnam syndrome, Gabriel and Savage's *Crisis in Command* caused an excited stir in the Pentagon.⁴ The book's authors charged the armed services with ethical deterioration and identified "careerism" as one of the causes or effects of that decline. Prominent among factors alleged to have led to the development of this vice was rapid rotation in the army during the Vietnam conflict, six-month tours so that an officer could include combat service in his record. Such officers, it was claimed, were seeking preferment and advancement in the wrong way.

Today we see the Vietnam era drifting into history, but once again the charge of "careerism" in the U.S. officer corps has been raised, this time in particular by two chiefs of service. In the spring of 1988, General Alfred M. Gray, Marine Corps Commandant, and General Larry B. Welch, Air Force Chief of Staff, expressed concern about "careerism" in their services. According to Richard Halloran's report in the *New York Times*, headed "Military Careers: Air Force and Marines Battle 'Ticket-Punchers,'" the term "ticket-punchers" is firmly tied to "careerism."⁵ The report quotes General Gray as saying repeatedly that he is "determined to stamp out careerism in the Marine Corps." General Welch made his position clear in an article in the journal *Airman*, stating that many of his officers had become primarily concerned with attending schools, taking on additional duties, and persuading generals to endorse their annual evaluation reports.⁶ "Job performance," said General Welch, "seemed less and less the measure of success." According to General Welch, the new air force evaluation system is designed to remove guesswork and put the emphasis on the officer's performance of his assigned job, on the tour he is doing now, not the tour he is aiming for on completion of his present assignment. In December 1988, at a post-lecture photo session at the Naval War College, General Welch reiterated his support of this position. "You're asking the wrong question," he said, "if you're asking what plans for advancement these young officers should make as they look down the road to their next tour. Their focus should

be on top performance *now* and not on determining what set of future positions or career steps will ensure success.”

According to the Halloran story, it appears that “careerism” has been less of a problem in the navy. Sea duty is a good way of advancement in that service, and among naval officers with ambition (whether in the honorable or pejorative sense of the word) there is a feeling that going to graduate school or even to the prestigious Naval War College may get in the way of sea command and more rapid professional advancement. (However, we may note in passing that the former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Crowe, moved away from submarines to study for a Ph.D. at Princeton.)

At this point we might look back a bit at some great captains of the Second World War. Had he known General Douglas MacArthur, Aristotle would have considered him a paradigm of ambition, in the sense that MacArthur sought honors and was indeed worthy of them. What we do not know is what the philosopher would have made of Colonel MacArthur’s mother writing to Secretary of War Baker in October 1917, requesting the secretary to make every effort to see that her son was promoted to brigadier general.⁷ But we can surmise that Aristotle would also have found a place for the general in his *Poetics*, where he writes of the man “of great reputation” who, by some “error of judgment” [*hamartia*] overreaches himself in such a way as to encompass his downfall.⁸ Not that the general fell very far: after his recall by President Truman from the Far East he faded away in a blaze of glory and honor, and that is what Aristotle’s man who possesses “the nameless virtue” seeks.

General Dwight Eisenhower may not have had quite the same sense of honor due him as MacArthur had, but he had a weather eye out for his career. His biographer, Stephen Ambrose, states that after his 1928 tour at the Army War College, “he [Eisenhower] wanted to choose the general staff, as service in that was a major plus in an officer’s career.”⁹ In his excellent essay “Is Ambition Unprofessional?” (*Army* magazine, July 1988), Lloyd Matthews, a retired army colonel and editor of *Parameters*, cites General George Marshall’s biographer Forrest Pogue recording that “he [Marshall] was able and ambitious.”¹⁰ Marshall’s father was equally ambitious in his son’s behalf, pulling all the strings he could to get the VMI graduate his lieutenant’s commission.

General Joseph Stilwell, who saw more frontline action than any other U.S. four-star general, may be considered as exhibiting the virtue of ambition only in a Pickwickian sense. Standing as he did at a slight angle to the universe, “Vinegar Joe” declared that “the higher a monkey climbs the tree, the more you see of his behind.”¹¹ Indeed, Stilwell as a youth had no intention of going to West Point. His father had planned to send him to Yale, but changed his mind when young Joe was involved in a schoolboy prank that resulted in the inadvertent slugging of the principal of Yonkers High School. Joe’s father

decided that his son needed training in discipline and made arrangements for his appointment to the Military Academy. According to Barbara Tuchman, Stilwell's biographer, Dr. Stilwell conveyed the news to his athletically inclined son in a soothing way, telling him, "There is a nice place up the Hudson where you can play tennis."¹²

We Americans are a success-oriented people, have been since the days of Ben Franklin, Joseph Epstein's model of American ambition in his book titled with the name of that virtue.¹³ Old Ben has left us all kinds of little notes, advice enlivened with humor, on how to get ahead, arrive at the top, how to make one's pile with prudent honesty, how benevolently to share the proceeds of our success with those less fortunate (and perhaps less ambitious) than ourselves, keeping a decent share of the profit for our personal benefit, for, after all, we owe it to ourselves. The opposite of success is failure, and we Americans have little patience with failure. That is one reason why the trauma of Vietnam hit us so hard. We failed. But we are not supposed to fail! Navy fighter pilot Jim Stockdale, hermetically transformed by more than seven years' confinement in Hanoi, half of them in solitary and under torture, emerged from captivity declaring among other things that the American officer must learn how to deal with failure as well as success.

With regard to careerism, I asked a number of officers at the Naval War College how they construed the term. Many prefaced their remarks with "service before self." One officer said careerism means climbing to the top by stepping on the faces of others. A second saw nothing wrong with being ambitious and concerned with one's military career: after all, isn't it a matter of doing the best for yourself that you can without injury to others? A third admitted that he could not define careerism but, like the eminent jurist on pornography, he knew it when he saw it. Others mentioned "ticket-punching," and when asked to clarify the meaning of that well-worn phrase, said that it was trying to get those assignments reputed to be the fastest tracks to promotion. Still another said that careerism was making sure of your visibility, seeing to it that high-ranking superiors notice you in such a way that when the promotion board meets and your name comes up, someone will remember you favorably. Others spoke in terms of deep drafts, screening for major command, aiming for executive officer on a cruiser or a carrier, or getting a squadron command. A few spoke of the Washington tour as a necessary call on the Wizard of Oz, without which it was impossible to follow the yellow brick road to ensured promotion.

More than one officer spoke of what seemed 180 degree turns in the matter of helping advancement along. An air force officer, having listened to his chief of staff talk about the new evaluation form's emphasis on an officer's current assignment, recalled that when he entered the service a dozen or so years before, officers were encouraged to "fill the square" by completing advanced education in the civilian as well as the military sector. "I personally

received,” said this officer, “a letter from a general officer urging me to obtain a master’s degree in order to remain competitive in achieving my full potential.” He added, “I followed his advice.”

And a marine colonel wrote, “If I were to be asked to list the primary negative influence in the officer corps today, I would unhesitatingly nominate ‘careerism’ as being at the root of the problem of ethical shortfalls. In its essence, careerism can be described as the subscription by an officer to that school of thought described by Gabriel as the ‘entrepreneurial model.’ Such an officer believes he has a ‘job’ to perform within a corporate bureaucracy, that the true measure of success is how far and how fast he can climb to what he perceives as the ladder of success. His credo is risk avoidance and promotion of self, his loyalty is entirely personal, his ethics situational. . . . If he manages to maneuver himself into a command position, he uses his subordinates to advance his career with concomitantly little understanding or appreciation of his role as leader, teacher and example to his junior officers. . . . The tragedy of the careerist is that he is self-replicating, for he drives off many of the very type of officer needed in the military services.”¹⁴

Let me end this roll call of officers by citing two other opinions offered. One officer reminded his seminar that many of the junior officers in line for promotion will be judged by superiors who may themselves have come up by way of careerism and ticket-punching, whether you take these terms in their good, bad, or neutral sense. The second made the sensible remark that we should be careful not to label as “careerism” the very natural and useful urge in an officer “to be where the action is.”

In times of hot war, promotion and advancement come quickly to competent military officers, many of whom in times of peace have been chafing under the bonds of slow promotion. In peacetime, some services have certain advantages over others. Navy and Coast Guard ships and aircraft operate in ways not altogether different from wartime deployment, so it may be hard for their officers to find time to go to graduate schools or war colleges. Other services, or maybe all of the services, may have a problem in combating the inevitable erosion of martial spirit in an era of prolonged, though uneasy peace. “Peace” here is taken to mean the diminution of clear and present danger of superpower conflict, not the jabs and jolts the nation may expect continuously to receive from smaller powers and their agents ill-disposed to the United States. As we look down the road to a bumpy peace that may extend into the twenty-first century, will the problem of “careerism” (in the bad sense) grow progressively more difficult to get rid of, linked as it is by many analysts to the entrepreneurial rather than the military ethos?

In his *Critique of Judgement*, Kant says, “War, provided it is waged with order and due respect for the sacred rights of civilians, has something sublime about it, while too long a peace may lead to a purely commercial spirit.”¹⁵ U.S. military officers would not go quite that far, but they might admit that Kant

has a point there. After all, one can devise just so many training programs and exercises. To which some critics have added that the present danger is not so much the military threat posed by the U.S.S.R., but the prospect of continuing support into the next century for a 2,000,000 personnel armed force backed by immense hardware of incredible sophistication, backed in turn by a navy of a dozen or more battle-groups. How to avoid, ask these critics, the sagging of this gigantic apparatus under its own weight? How to escape the erosion of morale—not to mention morals—among the personnel of a mighty military arm, its future uses not always clearly visible? How to clean house, keep a taut ship, continue the march, without ambition and careerism, in the worst sense, from becoming all but inevitable?

In reply, one might observe that some countries seem to run armed forces of high proficiency and morale that have not fought a war for centuries. How do they do it? Although Sweden and Switzerland, in size and demography, are incommensurable with the United States, might we put the question to military representatives of those countries? I asked two colonels about it, one Swedish, one Swiss: How do you maintain high morale in your military forces in the context of past and ongoing peace? The Swedish colonel promptly named two factors—not the only ones, but the most important: first, there is the threat, the perpetual shadow cast by the great neighbor to the east; and second, the integration of the military and civilian communities in his nation, assisted in large part by required national service from all sectors of the population. The Swiss officer, a retired colonel of reserves and a professor at the University of Zurich, stated that his country had its threats as well: that, for example, of being caught in the middle of clashing powers, as in the Second World War, and a similar situation represented by the Cold War which, fortunately, did not break out into hot conflict. Like the Swedish officer, he cited the close weave of the military into the civilian community of his country: "Switzerland does not have an army; it is an army!"¹⁶ Every male between the ages of 20 and 45, whatever his station, is obligated to perform annual military service. Perhaps this is not the time or place to recall John Stuart Mill's conviction that an all-volunteer force is regressive, attracting to its enlisted ranks the least privileged members of society. This opinion might be countered by the sobering thought that the Vietnam experience showed us that you cannot draft into military service an unwilling middle class. But the time for reconsideration of obligatory national service may yet come for us, possibly as early as the turn of the century.

As far as the U.S. military is concerned, I believe the critics overestimate the threat of moral erosion from within, though perhaps we should reflect on some points raised in their jeremiads. In the enlisted ranks, the all-volunteer force is working better for us than the early troubles led us to expect. So far as this civilian observer can determine, on the basis of limited observation, the morale of the U.S. officer corps is, on the whole, high. Just as there is

honorable ambition, a desired trait in an officer, so there is “good” careerism as well as the more talked-about “bad.” The legitimate desire for personal advancement, as Colonel Matthews says, is a vital psychic fuel in military organizations. I would add that you cannot put a mix of high-spirited, success-oriented U.S. military officers together and expect them to trudge along quietly without interest in ambition or career. The dialectic of the situation, as philosophers would say, derives from the fact that we Americans are a highly individualistic lot (Tocqueville noticed this trait not long after he landed in Newport in 1831), and it must be quite a struggle for energetic young American officers of superior quality to suppress those drives in themselves in a military context where service before self, community before the ego, represents the ideal. But the dialectical tension between individual drive for advancement and requirements of service before self need not be entirely disadvantageous, either to the individual officer or his military service. For it is the tension of opposites, as Heraclitus said thousands of years ago, that keeps the world in being, that generates the stretched-string vibration of waking, not sleep, not death but life.

Notes

1. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book IV, Ch. 4, 1-6. *Philotimia* (literally, “love of honor”) has a somewhat narrower connotation than our word “ambition.” The ambitious man today may aim at success, power or wealth as well as honor.

2. *Julius Caesar*, Act III, ii, 82-85.

3. Russell Baker, *Growing Up* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1982).

4. R. A. Gabriel and P. L. Savage, *Crisis in Command* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978).

5. *New York Times*, 25 April 1988, sec. A, 18.

6. General Larry B. Welch, USAF, “Chief Concerns,” *Airman*, April 1988, 22-23.

7. William Manchester, *American Caesar: Douglas MacArthur 1880-1964* (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1978), 93.

8. Aristotle, *Poetics*, Ch II, 13, 8-12.

9. Stephen E. Ambrose, *Eisenhower: Soldier, General of the Army, President-Elect, 1890-1952* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983), 87.

10. Colonel Lloyd Matthews, USA (Ret.), “Is Ambition Unprofessional?”, *Army* magazine, July 1988.

11. Attributed to Stilwell in *New York Times* editorial “Rumsfeld’s Rules of Ego,” 5 December 1988, A 22. See below, Tuchman, 272.

12. Barbara W. Tuchman, *Stilwell and the American Experience in China, 1911-1945* (New York: Bantam Books, 1980), 13. Note Tuchman’s observation of Stilwell (501-2): “Perhaps in his [Stilwell’s] heart he was not ambitious or desirous of the top command; even, in his inmost heart, did not think he deserved it. . . . He was one of those individuals who, though conscious of their quick intelligence and superior ability, for some reason do not think highly of themselves.”

13. Joseph Epstein, *Ambition: The Secret Passion* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1980).

14. Colonel Michael C. Wholley, USMC, “Careerism and Corporate Ethic,” unpublished essay, Naval War College, October 1988.

15. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, II, 28. Professor John Ladd, a noted Kant scholar, writes, “If you read the surrounding passages, you will see at once that Kant is not approving of war. The attribution of sublimity to it is aesthetic, the feeling of the sublime coming under the aesthetic, like the beautiful, and not under ethics of justice (*Rechtslehre*). Kant repeatedly says that ethics is not a matter of feeling and so the feeling of the sublime cannot be an ethical ground. . . . But [attribution of the sublime to war] should not be taken as condoning war, morally speaking, any more than the feeling of awe before a hurricane means that one thinks it a good thing. For he (Kant) thinks that war is a violation of human rights, the right to live in peace (liberty).” Letter to the author, 22 December 1988.

16. See John A. McPhee, *La place de la concorde suisse* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1984).