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President's Notes: Firing Line

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FIRING LINE

I was both surprised and pleased during my first week as President of the Naval War College, to have had so many of those well-wishers who stopped in or phoned include in their remarks comments on the *Naval War College Review*. Many friends—active and retired officers, congressmen, educators, and others—closed our conversations with “keep the *Review* coming.” Not all its articles escape critical comment, but that is hardly surprising. This quarterly publication is not a house-organ, cranking out a particular party line, but a scholarly journal intended to stimulate and challenge its readers and to serve as a catalyst for new ideas.

I disagree with both the thrust and conclusions of some of the *Review's* articles myself, but my opinions do not necessarily detract from the value of those compositions. For instance, in this issue I take exception to Professor Hitchen's writing on the Code of Conduct. The subject is, of course, very close to me and I have read countless articles about, and heard many proposals for revising the Code. His is what I might call the “outsider's” viewpoint; shared by many, it focuses on Article V (“... I am bound to give only name, rank, service number, and date of birth...”) as a flawed stipulation requiring revision. It has been my observation that those who have not served as prisoners of war but who write on such matters invariably assume that Article V is the “heart” of the Code. My further observation is that few of those who have been prisoners of war for a signifi-



cant period of time have any trouble understanding or dealing with it. The Article is just a piece of good advice: to utter as little as possible except for the four items required under international law, at least until one is sufficiently certain of his ground to be able to use his words as weapons against his captors. That's what Brig. Gen. S.L.A. Marshall meant when he wrote it, and that's what it says.

If Article V was flawed, it was given clearer meaning in a Presidential Executive Order signed in November 1977. However, scarcely noted by commentators, a second, more important Executive Order was also signed at that time. That one dealt with Code provisions that have great significance for “insiders”; it dealt with command authority within a prison camp. The Code says that if one is senior he will take command and, that if not senior, he will obey the orders of the senior prisoner and back him up in every way. The shocking discovery for us who returned from North Vietnam was to be told that the Code did not have the force of law. Had this fact been generally known in prison I'm afraid our PW military organizations would have been much less effective. Now that “the cat is out of the bag,” President Carter's new Executive Order should go far toward remedying what could have been a serious problem in the next war. As

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for Professor Hitchen's question: "Is the Code of Conduct required at all?", I believe that the answer is "no" for about 60 percent of the American fighting men. However, some of us need its moral support to hitch up our courage, and a few of us need a little fear of the law to keep it hitched up.

Institutional nepotism aside, I thought Captain Platte's multipolarity article was the finest in this issue. However, he isn't immune from disagreement either. He believes the U.S.S.R. best suited by experience to play the "balancer" in a tripolar world. I would argue that China is equally experienced. The Chinese Communists' World War II performance in fighting two enemies simultaneously, alternately siding with each against the other, must have set a record for aplomb and agility. At any rate, they certainly smoked the true nature of their conflicts by the man on the street in the United States. Americans, Captain Platte and I agree, will have the least affinity for three-cornered confrontations. Visualizing all the bad guys on one side and all the good guys on the other will never get us by.

I don't intend these notes merely to be a rebuttal or even a comment on every article. Rather, I intend to use this space as a sounding board to float a few ideas of my own.

In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle, differing with his teacher Plato, held that although both are dear to us, piety requires that we honor truth even before our friends. I address this to my friends the strategists, the analysts, and the tacticians. The truth to be honored is that your analyses, your equations, your principles, and your plans too often are based on incomplete if not erroneous assumptions about the nature of man and the nature of war. The extension of rational management principles to planning and waging a war is obviously not without value. Indeed, to ignore those tools is crippling and

criminally dangerous. Equally dangerous, however, is the belief that the uncritical application of those principles will bring victory in war. War is an irrational undertaking and there are no tenets of rationality to which all men subscribe. We may cry with Job, "Oh that mine adversary had written a book" but he hasn't and yet we err in ascribing our own values, reactions, cultural processes, etc., to him. This "mirror imaging" is often warned against but as often forgotten. It is a blind spot or perhaps more properly, a false view, a mirage, that we must rid ourselves of. We must do it nationally and we are going to do it in our courses of instruction here at the War College. In a future issue of the *Review* I wish to look into some specific aspects of this subject.

In the first article of this issue, The Honorable Edward Hidalgo warns that striving to avoid error is not the same thing as seeking the attainment of a positive goal—that avoiding failure is not success. I intend that my term as President of the Naval War College be devoted to the quest for the positive goal, but that will require good judgment. It has been said that good judgment is based on experience, but that, unfortunately, good experience is based on bad judgment. Once upon a time I zigged when I should have zagged. At any rate—

The old order changeth, yielding
place to new,
And God fulfills himself in many
ways,
Lest one good custom should
corrupt the world.



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