INTRODUCTION

“I am a member of a profession which exists solely to serve American Society. I therefore at all times place the interests of my country, my profession, my unit and my mission above personal and career ambition or loyalty to any individual”


The Marine Corps and the nation it serves are founded on a set of basic moral principles implicit in such documents as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. These fundamental principles form a framework for our deliberations. The function, situation, and activities of the military are unique, and it is crucial that military officers have a clear understanding of the moral implications of their position. Unlike most other professions, leadership in the military involves dealing with morally problematic acts. This discussion should present some of the moral and ethical challenges today’s leader’s face, from generational and societal issues to organizational pressures.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

At the conclusion of this discussion, the Marine should have a better understanding of:

- Discuss the ethical, legal, and cultural issues confronted by military leaders.
- Discuss the importance of character based leadership in establishing a command climate that develops subordinates.

PREPARATION

- Required Reading:


  General Anthony C. Zinni, USMC, “The Obligation to Speak the Truth”, Lecture delivered to the students of the U.S. Naval Academy, Spring 2003 (20 pages). Attached

  Admiral Harold W. Gehman, Jr., USN, “Ethical Challenges for Organizations –Lessons Learned from the USS Cole and Columbia Tragedies, Dec 2005 (26 pages). Attached
Supplemental Reading:
Instructor selected readings from “The Armed Forces Officer”, U.S. Dept of Defense

Instructor Material:
None

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are some of the ethical, legal, and cultural issues confronting military leaders?

2. Discuss the importance of character-based leadership in establishing a command climate that develops subordinates.
Why Ethics Is So Hard
CDR Thomas B. Grassey, USN

Naval officers are practical, concerned with what should be done. Ethics is therefore interesting, for it is preeminently practical. The purpose of ethical consideration is to decide what ought to be done now, in this situation, all things considered.

Ethics has an ancient, even prehistoric, connection with the bearing of arms. Those who wielded the weapons of death were regarded as having sacred powers, a responsibility that placed them with those who healed the sick and interceded with the gods. Priests, doctors, and warriors were three easily recognized classes in many societies.

In our own day, General Sir John Winthrop Hackett famously observed, “The military life, whether for sailor, soldier, or airman, is a good life. The human qualities it demands include fortitude, integrity, self-restraint, loyalty to other persons, and the surrender of the advantage of the individual to the common good. . . . What the bad man cannot be is a good sailor, or soldier, or airman.” This idea has been recognized by service leaders, past and present. Honor, courage, and commitment are at the core of our profession.

But ethics rests on theories about the individual, society, the universe, knowledge, and life. Because such matters are beyond the normal ken of naval officers and most other professionals, we should not be surprised when their complexity manifests itself in confusing implications about our duties. Indeed, perhaps the most important point to acknowledge is that ethics is hard, not easy. Why is this so?

The Perspective of the Individual

Happily, in most situations we easily distinguish right from wrong. In fact, we usually make decisions without any awareness of their “ethical” aspects; it simply never occurs to us that we could steal a shipmate’s wallet or lie to our commanding officer. With properly formed characters, the reinforcement of good habits enhances the efficiency of our thinking, and we pursue goals with no conscious reference to standards of right and wrong. This is the most common reason why we imagine ethics to be obvious, straightforward, and easy.

Everyone, however, regularly confronts an inescapable fact of moral complexity: life does not always offer a choice between right and wrong. Sometimes we realize that our options are compounds with elements we normally would not accept in our actions. We grow aware of each alternative’s negative features, and we hesitate. Thus, a midshipman who is offered a preview of a final examination may weigh the goods and evils of cheating against those of not cheating.

A second factor is that morality changes, so one must stay informed about ethical matters. This need not signify acceptance of moral relativism, for our knowledge of right and wrong develops

1I wish to thank all the officers who participated since 1994 in the Naval War College elective “Ethics and the Military”; they significantly contributed to and clarified the ideas offered here.

through cultural growth just as our knowledge of nature advances through science. Aristotle, St. Paul, and Thomas Jefferson thought that nothing in the heavens could crash to Earth, and that slavery is morally acceptable; we know that both views are wrong. If even the greatest thinkers of any age can be in error about such important facts, we must be humble about the possibility—the inevitability—of errors in what we believe about science and ethics. But this is intellectual honesty, not relativism. Thus, just as many naval officers were wrong about the practice of flogging that Congress forbade in 1850, and others were wrong about racial segregation in the armed forces that President Harry Truman prohibits in Executive Order 9981 in 1948, and while not every change must be for the better, we are experiencing changes in how society views alcohol, adultery, women's role in the military, and homosexuality. Numerous leaders failed to recognize before 1991 that America would no longer tolerate the antics at Tailhook conventions; by the time they did, it was too late.

Two related factors also make ethics harder: the pressure of time, and the limits of knowledge.

Sometimes deadlines are recognized long before the moment of decision, while other times our decision must be made almost immediately upon becoming aware of a problem. In either case, we do not have enough time to avoid or eliminate the moral problem before we must decide what to do about it—whether to "run deck" the training records, whether to stay with the aircraft on line until it no longer endangers those on the ground.

Because ethics is based on knowledge, what we should do depends on what we know. Usually we feel we know enough to decide correctly. Frequently, however, our uncertainty is significant; we would decide one way if our beliefs were confirmed, another if they were refuted. The greatest difficulties arise when we seek to understand human motivations, including our own. As we contemplate non-judicial punishment for a petty officer who damaged government property, it matters decisively whether the cause was carelessness or callousness. If the expense was major and our superior is rate, we might also question whether our judgment is prejudiced toward punishment in order to be seen "holding someone accountable." How does one decide correctly in situations where critical factors are not known, and may never be ascertained?

The final aspect of an individual's pertinence in ethics is the influence of emotions. As Ovid reflected, "I see the better way, and approve it; I follow the worse." Our intellect and will are not always in harmony, even on mundane matters. Yet this considerably complicates ethics, for we must recognize in others what we know about ourselves: occasionally we do what we know to be "the worse," and we truly do not know why.

Although the power of emotions—anger, greed, lust, fear, vanity, despair, love, joy, hope, courage, and the like—is commonly acknowledged to affect a person's self-control, it may also distort thinking. How regularly do we see an individual with lengthy service experience and a record of outstanding performance fail victim to incredibly poor judgment, reasonable to one or another passion? When a mid-grade pilot performs an unsafe takeoff in front of his family, a colonel submits an inflated travel expense claim, or a flag officer maintains an adulterous relationship with an enlisted subordinate, it is hardly the result of a sudden impulse overwhelming clear thinking. Rather, the officer's thought processes are so distorted that what others see as obvious truth are justified if not hidden from the perpetrator. When Admiral Jeremy M. Boorda wrote in a suicide note that "what I am about to do is not too small," but then went ahead anyhow, he demonstrated that the thinking of our most able and senior leaders is subject to emotions and passions which complicate assessments about ethics. Was what he did morally wrong? Yes. Was he therefore immoral?

Perspectives on Organizations

Too many civilian officials and officers are under the impression that professional ethics is exclusively about individual choices in particular cases; they mistakenly assume that improvement in military ethics is tantamount to development of personal virtue. This is delusory for two reasons: what it ignores, and what it implies.

To focus one's attention on the individual and on specific cases is to neglect the more consequential and difficult topics of institutional policies and practices, formal and informal codes of conduct,
and people's organizational roles. It is, in short, to miss the essence of the naval services. When we put on our uniform, issue orders, and engage the enemy, we do so not as private persons but as members of an organized armed force, agents of our nation. All of the rules and procedures, laws and customs, duties and authorities that constitute the Navy and Marine Corps exist indifferently to the particular persons who are in the service at any given moment. What really matters is the organization.

If Herman Wouk was so much as obliquely correct in saying "the Navy is a machine invented by geniuses, to be run by idiots," the critical questions concern the machine. Policies and practices shape most of the moral environment of our professional lives; codes of behavior provide much of the remainder; and individual decisions—while highly visible—define what is left. For example, when "body count" became the measure of effectiveness in Vietnam, after-action reports exaggerated the number of enemy dead, and (more tragically) any body counted. If commanding officers' evaluations are closely correlated with their unit's readiness figures, that practice puts pressure throughout the service for false reports. When mixed-gender crews are assigned to ships and units that deploy, many people experience greater moral challenges than they had faced before. When a service, in little over a decade, shifts from a largely unmarried force to one in which family members outnumber service personnel, its policies on child care, housing, health services, schooling, time away from home, and geographic bachelor arrangements acquire greater moral significance. Poor organizational policies, such as those that hurt retention, will be felt by individuals in ways they identify as personal moral quandaries, how, for instance, to meet increased recruiting quotas without compromising standards. Formal and informal codes have nearly as much influence in shaping the ethics of our lives, yet it is easy to overlook the innumerable features of service culture which must be learned. Leading senior non-commissioned officers, taking care of the troops before yourself, going through the ship's initiation, washing boozes in your stateroom on "the boat," and believing that "it's only wrong if you get caught" are customs we may have encountered in our careers. But a service education addresses more than individual behavior: one learns in the Pentagon how the service pays the budget game; in joint assignments how large commands "act purple"; in dealings with Congress how political goals are attained; in interactions with contractors how capitalism works; and in operating with allied forces how national objectives are pursued. No one can rise in rank without mastering service culture, which has enormous ethical import.

The error of equating professional ethics with personal virtue is dangerous also for what it implies: that one is moral if one's personal behavior is pure, and immoral if it is not. Senior officers are thought to be lying, yielding to "political correctness" or putting their own advancement ahead of the needs of the service when they testify in their official capacities or make comments to the press about the progress of this program, the adequacy of the service budget, or the violation of an administration policy. Service members and others—failing to appreciate the complexity of organizational practices yet being bombarded with exhortations about the importance of ethics and core values (understood as personal virtues such as never lying)—condemn these leaders as hypocrites who do not stick up for their service and subordinates.

Clearly we are not suggesting that practices, codes, and customs are immune from moral appraisal—quite the contrary. Yet unless we understand the context of an officer's actions, we are apt to invoke individual standards in judging the performance of an organizational function. Just as we do not "tell the truth" when we open negotiations for the purchase of a used automobile (a routine practice with understood rules), a service leader might not "tell the truth" in Congressional or media interviews (also routine practices with understood rules). To assess the morality of such behavior, we must judge the practice itself as well as the specific performance.

Because we are members of many organizations, each with its policies and practices, customs and codes of conduct, we all live multiple roles: we are spouses, parents, friends, service members, church congregants, alumni, and volunteers. The fact that competing roles create moral dilemmas is familiar. At any given moment, we could be tugged from many directions, and deciding what is the right thing to do requires understanding much about the various organizations, assessing the practices or codes...
that are contesting for our attention, and evaluating our own preferences. Such deliberations are sometimes far from easy.

Some Thoughts on Theory

Let us look briefly at the foundation on which ethical judgments stand, because a basic understanding of the theoretical support for our particular judgments and decisions will help us to see why they may be perplexing.

We should note right away that ethics can be intended, at one extreme, to specify bare minimums of performance. At the opposite extreme, ethics can be a call to serve for the highest ideals. Roughly put, the difference is this: compliance with Defense Department ethics regulations may keep you out of jail, but it will not suffice to get you into heaven. Yet some discussions about service ethics appear oblivious to the difference in purpose that might be desired, an error in theory that complicates our deliberations. For instance, do the general precepts of honor and telling the truth deprive one of the Constitutional right not to incriminate oneself?

The proliferation of legal requirements, prohibitions, and procedures in modern life, including our professional activities (note the growing role of the judge advocate in operational matters), could lead us to imagine that what is legal is also moral. It is symptomatic that the Defense Department's "ethics regulations" are written by lawyers, and a JAG officer invariably is designated the "command ethics counselor." However, the lawyer's business is with what is lawful, not with what is moral.

Second, and of immense importance in thinking about how to make ethical decisions, we should be alert to the fact that all of us employ at least three radically different approaches in our deliberations. The first invokes absolute rules, such as "Enzyme priors shall not be tortured." These can be extremely complicated and precise, as our legal system illustrates. Another focuses on the consequences of actions, and directs that one should do whatever brings about the best overall result. A third asks about intentions and character; what is this person's purpose?

Donahtly, although all of these approaches seem essential for sound ethical thought, they sometimes appear to be plainly inconsistent. For example, given a looming deadline of a terrorist threat to explode a nuclear weapon in an American city, should we torture a captured terrorist to extract vital information we are certain he knows? Our intentions would be noble, and we could save millions of lives, but only by breaking the rule not to torture prisoners.

Or small consolation, yet nevertheless important to note, is that disagreements reign and perplexes abound even among scholars and moral theorists. Can modern war be just? Are economic embargoes ethical? Is nuclear deterrence morally acceptable? Should women be assigned to combat? Is assassination of an enemy head of state permissible? Arguments on such questions are currently filling scholarly journals, with little consensus on what is correct.

Nor are such disputes confined to applications. Experts are divided about many of the most fundamental conceptual matters, such as how to answer the question "Why should I be moral?" Therefore, we in the military can accept with some comfort the idea that our struggles with professional ethics are reasonable, even warranted. However, the fact that the theories upon which our decisions ultimately stand are complex, conflicting, sometimes contradictory, and often inconclusive should warn us against the illusion that our profession's ethics can be uncomplicated and straightforward.

A final thought on theory. This is what Robert Finga calls "the high country of the mind." "Few people travel here," he warns, because "one has to become adjusted to the thinner air of uncertainty, and to the enormous magnitude of questions asked, and to the answers proposed to these questions. The sweep goes on and on, and so obviously much further than the mind can grasp one hesitantly to go near for fear of getting lost in them and never finding one's way out." Most of us choose not to wrestle too often with questions such as: What is the meaning of life? Is there a God? What determines whether an act is moral? How can I know what is true? What is worth dying for? Rather, we prefer to live with answers we accepted years ago. Yet if we are serious about professional ethics, we must acknowledge that all of our present convictions and beliefs depend, in the end, on our answers to such questions.

The Bottom Line

Naval officers need not be philosophers, so the study of theoretical matters may be left to scholars, but we are members of a profession which has its own distinguished ethical code, and in the performance of our duties we are bound to uphold that code. We are obligated, therefore, to reflect upon its character and practical directives.

The ethical code of the American military profession is specific, complex, and binding on all who wear the uniform. Senior leaders of the Navy and Marine Corps are especially obliged to recognize that it entails much more than vague pieties about "being a good person," "doing the right thing," and "practicing our core values." They must exemplify that code in their own performance of duties, articulate it coherently, and ensure that all under their command are educated in its precepts. Equally important, they must not demean their subordinates by trivializing the difficulty of meeting its high standards.

The bottom line of our profession's ethics is that we may have to lay down our lives in the service of our nation. No discussion of military ethics should lose sight of that fact. It is a hard truth, one not to be obscured by banal assurances that those who maintain their service's ethical code will become more popular, get promoted earlier, receive the best assignments, and end up being much happier and more successful people. None of those is necessarily true (nor automatically false). What is true is that our profession's ethics compels every service member's attention because its implementation is his or her responsibility, and nothing about it is easy.

An ethical decision is one that determines what should be done now, in this situation, all things considered. It is comprehensive—"all things considered"—and thus, at that moment of action, the ultimate authority on what to do. Because it requires us to consider everything that is relevant, ethical action particularly calls upon judgment, sensitivity, prudence, imagination, creativity, foresight, broad-mindedness, and wisdom. None of these capacities can usefully be taught, although through experience several of them can be learned.

What may be worse is that for none of these skills is our own self-evaluation trustworthy. We seldom can recognize when our judgment is misleading us, when we are lacking sensitivity or imagination, when we are not looking far enough ahead, or when we are being downright foolish. Since our internal sense is unreliable, we each have a professional responsibility to get external assistance to improve our moral deliberations. In general, good reading, reflection and discussion, and the study of persons who model right behavior can enhance our capacity to make moral decisions. Specifically, professional mentors and trusted friends are invaluable, particularly during the decision process when they can be perceptive and frank with us. Each of us can provide that help to others, just as we need it ourselves.

Intimate to being an officer is adherence to the military ethic. The nature of that commitment, the extent of its requirement, and the ways by which one fulfills it must be taught by all to all, and enforced by all on all. It is not easy.
General Zinni joined the Marine Corps in 1961 and was commissioned an infantry second lieutenant in 1965 after graduating from Villanova University. He has held numerous command and staff assignments, including platoon, company, battalion, regimental, Marine expeditionary unit, and Marine expeditionary force command. His staff assignments included service in operations, training, special operations, counter-terrorism, and manpower billets. He has also been a tactics and operations instructor at several Marine Corps schools and was selected as a fellow on the Chief of Naval Operations Strategic Studies Group. General Zinni's joint assignments include command of a joint task force and a unified command. He has also had several joint and combined staff billets at task force and unified command levels.

He has made deployments to the Mediterranean, the Caribbean, the Western Pacific, Northern Europe, and Korea. He has also served tours in Okinawa and Germany. His operational experiences include two tours in Vietnam; emergency relief and security operations in the Philippines; Operation Provide Comfort in Turkey and northern Iraq; Operation Provide Hope in the former Soviet Union; Operations Restore Hope, Continue Hope, and United Shield in Somalia; Operations Resolute Response and Noble Response in Kenya; Operations Desert Thunder, Desert Fox, Desert Viper, Desert Spring, Southern Watch, and the Maritime Intercept Operations in the Persian Gulf; and Operation Infinite Reach against terrorist targets in the Central Region. He was involved in the planning and execution of Operation Proven Force and Operation Patriot Defender in support of the Gulf War and noncombatant evacuation operations in Liberia, Zaire, Sierra Leone, and Eritrea. He has also participated in presidential diplomatic missions to Somalia, Pakistan, and Ethiopia-Eritrea, as well as State Department missions involving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and conflicts in Indonesia.
He has attended numerous military schools and courses, including the National War College. He holds a bachelor’s degree in economics, a master’s in international relations, and a master’s in management and supervision.

General Zinni’s awards include the Defense Distinguished Service Medal with oak leaf cluster; the Distinguished Service Medal; the Defense Superior Service Medal with two oak leaf clusters; the Bronze Star with Combat “V” and gold star; the Purple Heart; the Meritorious Service Medal with gold star; the Navy Commendation Medal with Combat “V” and gold star; the Navy Achievement Medal with gold star; the Combat Action Ribbon; and personal decorations from South Vietnam, France, Italy, Egypt, Kuwait, Yemen, and Bahrain. He also holds 36 unit, service, and campaign awards. His civilian awards include the Papal Gold Cross of Honor, the Union League’s Abraham Lincoln Award, the Italic Studies Institute’s Global Peace Award, the Distinguished Sea Service Award from the Naval Order of the United States, the Eisenhower Distinguished Service Award from the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the Chapman Award from the Marine Corps University Foundation, the Penn Club Award, and the St. Thomas of Villanova Alumni Medal.

He currently holds positions on several boards of directors of major U.S. companies. In addition, he has held academic positions that include the Stanley Chair in Ethics at the Virginia Military Institute, the Nimitz Chair at the University of California-Berkeley, the Hofheimer Chair at the Joint Forces Staff College, and the Harriman Professor of Government appointment and membership on the board of the Reves Center for International Studies at the College of William and Mary. He has worked with the University of California’s Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation and the Henry Dunant Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue in Geneva. He is also a Distinguished Advisor at the Center for Strategic and International Studies and a member of the Council on Foreign Relations.
THE OBLIGATION TO SPEAK THE TRUTH

Welcome from Dr. Albert C. Pierce, Director, Center for the Study of Professional Military Ethics

Introduction by VADM Richard J. Naughton, USN, Superintendent, U.S. Naval Academy

Lecture by General Anthony C. Zinni, USMC (Ret.)

This is an edited, abridged version of the original lecture transcript. Publication of this lecture is made possible through the generosity of Northrop Grumman Corporation.
Dr. Pierce
Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to the spring 2003 ethics lecture, sponsored by the Center for the Study of Professional Military Ethics. It promises to be a stimulating and rewarding evening. We at the Ethics Center like to think of these lectures as part of our ongoing efforts to contribute to enriching the life of the Naval Academy in the field of ethics, and while they’re open to the entire Naval Academy community, we are especially pleased that these lectures add some value to the core ethics course NE203, and I know particularly we have the NE203 midshipmen with us this evening.

The inaugural lecture in this series was in April of 1999, almost four years ago, and we’ve grown from one lecture per academic year to one per semester. The first couple of lectures had moral courage as the theme, and then the next several focused on ethics and the use of military force. This evening represents a new focus, inviting retired senior officers and government officials to reflect on the ethical challenges in their own careers and more broadly in military and public service. We simply could not have a better speaker to sound this theme than our honored guest this evening. To introduce him, I will ask Vice Admiral Naughton, the 57th Superintendent of the U.S. Naval Academy, to come to the podium.
Admiral Naughton

Let me say it is a great pleasure to be here and introduce Tony Zinni to the brigade of midshipmen. Tony Zinni is simultaneously a warrior, a peacekeeper, a strategist, and a statesman. Combat-hardened in Vietnam and Somalia, he ended his career essentially as my boss at Central Command. When I was over in JTF Swallow as a deputy commander, he gave us great latitude and great support, and we hope that the infrastructure that we ruined during Desert Fox and in the spring of 2000 has made it easier for our combat troops today. But he’s truly a hero, and he knows a lot about strategic thinking.

He brought to the table a wide-angle view of what’s going on. He won acclaim for his ability to recognize the underlying political, social, cultural, historical, economic, and religious dimensions of what was happening in his theater. He is truly a respected troubleshooter for America and a respected troubleshooter for what’s going on in Southwest Asia today.

His operational career embodies the history of the 20th century. The names, the places he has served in geo-strategic and political assignments over the last several decades are where our country has been and where our country will be. Vietnam, Okinawa, Germany, Turkey, Iraq, Somalia, the former Soviet Union, Kenya, Liberia, Zaire, Sierra Leone, and Eritrea, and that’s not everywhere he’s been. He’s done everything.

We’re honored to have Tony Zinni come here and speak to us tonight about some of the ethical challenges that we will all face in the years ahead. He could not come to speak about a more relevant topic: the obligation to speak the truth. It is my great honor and pleasure to introduce General Tony Zinni.
General Zinni

Thank you. It’s a little bit strange to be in front of this group in uniform and not be in uniform. It’s not that long since I’ve retired, and retirement is a shock. For those of you that will face this someday, you’ll realize that taking that uniform off is a traumatic experience, especially after 39 years. The system doesn’t allow you to think about it much. You end up one day suddenly realizing your driver is not there. The aide is gone, and your airplane has got somebody else’s name painted on it.

(Laughter.)

General Zinni

You go cold turkey. As a four-star, I had to pull out in my car at MacDill Air Force Base after turning over command to General Tommy Franks of Central Command. For the first time in 10 years, I was leaving a base where I didn’t have to be in secure communications with the Secretary of Defense anymore, and as we were driving up 95 from Florida to our retirement home, I kept trying to reach for my cell phone. My wife kept grabbing my hand and saying, “What are you doing?” I said, “I have to call the command center and tell them where I am,” and she said, “They don’t give a damn anymore.”

(Laughter.)

General Zinni

That’s why I think we’re issued spouses. They keep you straight and make sure you understand what’s happened.

I wanted to speak to you this evening about your obligation as future officers to speak the truth as you know it. This is a difficult decision.

Right now, as you watch the war unfold, there are a number of retired officers who are working for the different networks, providing color commentary. Old generals never die; they just sign a contract with CNN, I guess. They have chosen to do that,
and I respect them greatly. They made a decision, in some cases where they see flaws or faults, to criticize the war plan. There has been a lot of debate about the appropriateness of this, whether the timing is right once the troops are committed, whether someone that is retired should do this.

There is a lot more debate about, when you wear the uniform, what is your obligation to speak? When is it appropriate, and when isn’t it appropriate? And I will be the first to tell you that the ground rules are fuzzy. Some of the rules are pretty clear. Some more have to do with your judgment, and some have to do with the judgment of your peers and the people that you may speak to.

I want to talk a little bit about a personal experience specifically and then a little bit about my generation and how we feel about the need to speak the truth to our civilian masters about things military. Not too long ago, about 1997, I was in Washington—as the Commander in Chief, U.S. Central Command—and I was asked to attend a press breakfast. The Pentagon’s public affairs officer said, “This is something we normally do when CINCs [Commanders in Chief, or Combatant Commanders] or others are in town. We have a breakfast with the media, and they’ll shoot questions out.” Jamie McIntyre from CNN dropped a bomb on me at this breakfast. He said, “What’s your view of the Iraqi Liberation Act?” Iraq was, of course, one of the countries in our area of responsibility, and I said, “I don’t know what the Iraqi Liberation Act is.” He said, “Well, it’s an act that has just been passed by Congress that authorizes $97 million for the Iraqi opposition groups.”

Now, based on our intelligence people and our knowledge of the Iraqi opposition groups, especially those outside of Iraq, we didn’t have very much confidence in their abilities. They had been pushing to be armed and to be supported in some sort of rebellion inside Iraq, and it was the judgment of my intelligence officers, CIA and others, that they weren’t a very viable organization and that anything like this could be a problem. I mentioned to him, “I don’t understand fully what the Iraqi Liberation Act is and what the $97 million is for, but if it’s for promoting them as a political opposition to Saddam, where they
can voice the need for multi-representational government, disavow the use of weapons of mass destruction, designs on their neighbors, and that sort of thing, then I’m all for it. If the money is there to support some of the wild schemes I hear about putting them in and supporting them in some way militarily as they become the front for countering Saddam, I’m opposed to it, because there are all sorts of problems with that.”

Well, as things would have it, Jamie McIntyre and the Washington Post and CNN made sure that was made public, and it didn’t please the legislators who passed the ILA, obviously. Unfortunately, I was also in town to go before the Senate Armed Services Committee to testify the day after that. And the day after that, needless to say, 13 senators were loaded for bear when I walked in, particularly Senator McCain. Senator McCain started really grilling me, because this was something that he supported.

I said, “Senator, my concerns about this are the fact that, number one, I’m the Commander in Chief of this region. If there is a military option and the use of military forces in this region, I think someone should have asked for my view or opinion in this.” In fact, what had happened is two Senate staffers and a retired general put together an actual plan for this, committing CENTCOM [Central Command] forces to support this, and I said, “So my first problem is that the Commander in Chief of the U.S. Central Command, the appointed military leader for this region, who reports to the Secretary of Defense and the President, has not been involved in this. My second problem is, what the hell Senate staffers are doing making war plans, a little strange to begin with, and my third point is why retired generals don’t stay home where they belong?”

(Laughter.)

**General Zinni**

I also said that I worry about this, because this isn’t a plan that we control. In other words, we are supporting a group when we don’t understand what they might do. They could drag us into situations where we aren’t the lead. We aren’t making the decisions. We’re trying to bail them out. I really don’t think
there will be a viable force on the ground. What the Iraqi Liberation Movement had proposed to the senators, and they accepted, is arming a few thousand of them, and they would go into Iraq and defeat the Iraqi military and turn them. In light of what’s happened in the last couple of days, maybe not the most brilliant plan we’ve ever heard of, and the other problem I had is, then we become responsible for them and what they might do.

Senator McCain was very upset with me, and he said to me, “What gives you the right to question this?” Later on, I got the same question from the National Security Advisor, Sandy Berger: “What gives you the right to question this?” My response was the First Amendment. You know, they didn’t appreciate that answer, but that’s what gave me the right.

(Laughter.)

**General Zinni**

And I mentioned to the Senate Armed Services Committee that, unless I forgot something, when I first came before you to be confirmed as the Commander in Chief of U.S. Central Command, Senator Strom Thurmond required of me to raise my hand and swear that I would come before this committee in the Senate and give my honest opinion and my honest views, even if they were in opposition to Administration policy or any other policies that may have been implemented by our government. I swore to do that, and yet those who were not hearing what they wanted to hear objected to it. It was very painful.

I managed to get called over to see my boss, the Secretary of Defense, along with the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, and got an appropriate portion of my anatomy chewed on. I had to respond to questions like: “Why did you do this? Why did you say this to the Senate?” And I said, “Because they needed to hear the answer. They needed to understand my view, that I have an obligation if asked a question to provide that.” I asked the Secretary of Defense, “Do you think I’m wrong? Do you agree with them and disagree with me, because if that’s the case, then you know, you obviously need to get another Commander in Chief.” He said, “No, I agree with you, but I disagree with the way you said it.” I said, “Well, I don’t understand. I spoke in
declarative sentences. I know that’s unusual for Washington, but you know, it’s the way I was brought up.”

(Laughter.)

General Zinni
The Undersecretary for Policy said, “No, you don’t understand the problem. You weren’t nuanced enough,” and I said, “You know, if you want nuance, don’t send a Marine. We don’t do nuance very well.”

(Laughter.)

General Zinni
Needless to say, this brewed on and on and has haunted me for a long time after that.

Not long after that, David Hackworth, one of my favorite guys, because he is irreverent and p----s everybody off, wrote an article in 1999 about Marine generals, and he said, in effect, “What is it with most of these Marine generals? They get inoculated with double shots of truth serum in boot camp? Why is it that Jack Sheehan, Chuck Krulak, Charlie Wilhelm, and Tony Zinni speak their minds? Why doesn’t anybody else speak their minds?” I liked it. Most of my bosses didn’t.

But why is it that we spoke our minds? And, this is what I would try to explain as to why you may see General McCaffrey, General Short, and others speaking their minds. Maybe not choosing the best time to do it, but the reason my generation does it goes back to our first war. I spent two tours of duty in Vietnam, as many of them have. We saw what happens when our country goes to war and goes to war in a way and on a basis that isn’t clear, that isn’t understood and may not even be correct, or in a way that employs our military that may have the same problems.

In 1997, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Hugh Shelton, sent each of us commanders in chief and service chiefs a book written by a young Army major named H.R. McMaster called Dereliction of Duty. Chairman Shelton required us each to read that book, and at the next conference of the CINCs and
service chiefs in Washington, D.C., he had Major McMaster, who had done research in writing this book about the performance of the military leaders during Vietnam, or the lack of performance in giving their views. General Shelton wanted to instill in us the importance and the need not to ever forget what happened in Vietnam and the need to speak out, now that we were in these positions of authority as the senior four-star admirals and generals of our respective services and the unified commands.

I want to read the closing paragraph from McMaster’s book to you, because this is what Vietnam meant to us. He said:

> The war in Vietnam was not lost in the field, nor was it lost on the front pages of the New York Times or on the college campuses. It was lost in Washington, D.C. even before Americans assumed sole responsibility for the fighting in 1965 and before they realized the country was at war; indeed, even before the first American units were deployed. The disaster in Vietnam was not the result of impersonal forces but a uniquely human failure, the responsibility for which was shared by President Johnson and his principal military and civilian advisers. The failings were many and reinforcing: arrogance, weakness, lying in the pursuit of self-interest, and above all, the abdication of responsibility to the American people.

This wasn’t some columnist. This wasn’t some left-wing, liberal journalist that wrote this book. This was a highly touted, very successful, now command colonel in the United States Army who discovered this and said this, and charged all of us, then very senior to him, to not ever let that happen again.

Shortly after that, Secretary of Defense McNamara wrote his book that was called *In Retrospect*, about the Vietnam War, a book that angered me greatly, and I want to read just two short quotes from that. He said:

> I want to put Vietnam in context. We of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations who participated in the decisions on Vietnam acted according to what we thought were the principles and traditions of this
nation. We made our decisions in light of those values.

Yet we were wrong, terribly wrong. We owe it to future generations to explain why.

I truly believe that we made an error, not of values and intentions, but of judgment and capabilities.

He went on to say that, “One reason the Kennedy and Johnson administrations failed to take an orderly, rational approach to the basic questions underlying Vietnam was the staggering variety and complexity of other issues we faced. Simply put, we faced a blizzard of problems, there were only 24 hours in a day, and we often did not have enough time to think straight.”

Well, I felt terribly sorry for him, because I can tell you where my Marines were putting 24 hours a day at the time, and so this becomes very emotional for us, who lived through this. We feel a strong sense not to let this ever happen again to our nation.

There is an obligation when you are in uniform to follow orders. There may become a point in time in your career when you have to make a decision. Your choices are only two: to follow those orders or to step aside. You have no other choice when you swear that oath to the Constitution of the United States except to follow the orders of our Commander in Chief, but you have, up until that point when you have to make that decision, a sincere obligation to give your honest view and opinion on what’s going to happen and what in your view is right or wrong about the decision that’s being made.

There is a lot of debate now about what’s going on in the Pentagon. There is a lot of debate about decisions on war plans that are made by those wearing civilian suits that may have been removed from the purview and the prerogative of those wearing uniforms where it should be, and you’re hearing a lot of the rumblings of that. I personally don’t believe this is the time to air that out. There is no rule about that, but when our men and women are in combat, we don’t want to do anything to make them believe that there is some flaw or some mistake in what’s bringing them to the battlefield. But I do believe at some point—it should have been well before and it wasn’t—our political system didn’t create the debate we needed in this case.
What certainly needs to come is an examination of what we have done on the battlefield, what strategic and policy decisions we made, and even what operational and tactical decisions were made. We are obliged to do that. We are obliged to look back and be as critical as we possibly can of ourselves. There is a time to do that and a time not to do that, but it is an obligation.

The trouble with what we are obliged to do as we become more senior is that we have to answer to many masters. If you’re a service chief, you have an obligation to answer to your service Secretary and through that service Secretary to the Secretary of Defense and the President. At the same time, you swear that obligation to the Senate and to the Congress, and you answer to the American people through their elected officials. At the same time, as a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, you answer through your chairman directly to the Secretary of Defense and to the President. Those can be three competing obligations. There are times when you may have to say things to the elected representatives of America and to the people that are not in agreement with the policies that are being passed down through your normal chain of command, what used to be known as the National Command Authority before transformation changed the lexicon.

By the way, I think that’s the only thing I’ve seen in transformation now is the words we can’t use. I’m waiting for the real transformation to occur. We’ve gotten rid of one artillery program, and we changed three words in the military dictionary. I’m hoping there is more to come to transformation than that, but it remains to be seen.

The same thing happens to our CINCs. We are obliged to stand before the Congress that confirms us and answer to them and in effect to the American people about what we feel and what we think and what our opinions are, and at the same time, to our Commander in Chief.

Now recently, Elliot Cohen has written a book that talks about the need for our political leaders to not listen to our generals. He said in effect in his book that the generals are risk averse, and the generals tend to be conservative, and I quote my friend Colin
Powell, who said, “Guilty as charged.” We are risk averse in many cases, because we measure risks in casualties and in failure of the mission, and oftentimes generals tend to try to mitigate risk. The Powell doctrine of overwhelming force did not say that you don’t gamble or you take risks or that you are bold or audacious. It says that you mitigate that risk by putting on the battlefield overwhelming force to protect yourself at that same time.

If you speak out, you’re going to find that there are things that work against you speaking out. One of them is the question of loyalty. You’re required obviously to be loyal to your bosses and loyal to the system. It’s very difficult to sit before a congressional committee and give testimony when you know that what you might be saying might not be in agreement with the policy of the chain of command, the Secretary of Defense, or the President of the United States.

You have to remember that when we have troops in battle, it becomes difficult to speak out as it is now, because they need our support. They want our confidence. They want to believe what they’re doing is correct, so timing becomes a problem. There is also the uncertainty about the rightness of what you’re saying. I don’t think anyone can be 100 percent certain that what they say is correct, that what they say is the absolute truth in the long run, especially if you’re trying to be predictive about events. You also have to understand that it is at great personal risk that you speak out, and a lot of times, you are putting at risk a career that you’ve worked hard to develop, but you owe this obligation to those that work for you.

The generals and the admirals that I grew up with and I knew that went through the Vietnam era swore to themselves that we wouldn’t let it happen again, that we would question, that we would comment, that we would take these positions over and above our own benefit and our own careers, and I want to just tell you when this hit home to me. When I was a young captain in Vietnam, newly wounded on the battlefield, I was evacuated to an Army evacuation hospital in Danang, the 85th evacuation hospital. At the same time as I was evacuated, so were some of my troops, who had been killed and wounded in the same fight.
I had been rushed into the operating room as they took the
downs out and debrided the wound, and as I came to about 24
hours later, I was in a really weakened state and could barely
move. The first thing I wanted to know was what happened to
my men, and I asked the corpsman, or the medic rather—it was
an Army hospital—to please take me to the ward where I could
maybe find my troops. I went all around the hospital and had a
difficult time finding any of the troops. I didn’t know what
happened to them or where they were evacuated. I knew some
had come with me.

I found my Kit Carson scout there, and we went into one ward,
and I recognized one of my Marines, a lance corporal named
Maui—big, Hawaiian kid, tough athlete—a strapping guy who
had been shot up in his legs and had lost the use of one leg.
Maui was fairly heavily sedated, and I went up to him and
grabbed his hand, and Lance Corporal Maui looked up at me,
and he said, “Sir, why are we here, and what are we doing? Does
what we’re doing and what we did count for anything?” And I
tried to answer Maui, but I didn’t give him a good answer. I gave
him kind of the pat answer, the company response, and I was
really disappointed in myself.

I walked out of that ward, and I said, “Never again in my career
will I ever, ever not be able to explain to one of my soldiers,
sailors, airmen, Marines, why they’re here doing what they’re
doing.” I made a promise to myself, to Lance Corporal Maui,
that never in my career, in my life, would I find myself in a
position where [I am silent or less than truthful] when there is
something I felt I had to say about the policy, about how we were
using our forces, about the operations, the tactics, or whatever it
is that affected the lives of the men and women I was responsible
for, and I think you see reflected in my peers this same sense or
this same feeling.

In your career, you are going to find yourself at moments when
this issue is going to hit you. It doesn’t just happen when you’re
wearing four stars. It can happen at any time in your career. It
can happen in the smallest unit. It can happen in the smallest
command. There can be an issue that you feel you need to deal
with, you need to speak out on. It’s a personal decision. It’s a
difficult one to make. What you have to say may not be well received. What you have to say may come back in some way to harm you career-wise or other ways. You have to pick that time and that cause and that reason fairly carefully, but you have to remember one thing. You have to look yourself in the mirror the next day, but more importantly, you have to look at the men and women that you’re responsible for. They need to know that you stand up for them and that you’re willing to speak what is right and truthful.

It’s not easy, and you will be criticized for it, and it’s very painful to accept that criticism, especially if you feel in your heart of hearts you’re right. Sometimes you find yourself in a position where you know you’re right; you say what you have to; and the decision is made opposite of how you feel. Then the very difficult position you are faced with is praying that you are wrong, praying that in the end that whatever happens out there will happen in a way that benefits our mission, that benefits our troops, even though you may be then criticized for having made the statement. It puts you in a difficult position to pray to be wrong and to pray afterwards to have to suffer the consequences of having taken a stand that doesn’t pan out.

But I think each of us who are going to put something on that acknowledges our authority, whether it’s those first gold bars or it’s those four stars eventually, [we] have to remember that we have in our hands the true treasure of the United States of America, the enlisted men and women we are given responsibility for. There is no greater treasure that this country has, and along with that comes the responsibility to accomplish the mission which we hope is noble and right.

In my war, back when I was your age, we went into a conflict, as you heard Secretary of Defense McNamara say, with the right intentions, but we did it the wrong way and found the wrong cause. We created an incident, the Tonkin Gulf incident. We had the United States of America and its citizens believe in the President of the United States, who created a falsehood for going into war. We fought, based on a strategy that I believe the decision-makers felt was right, the domino theory. If you don’t stop communism in Vietnam, all of Southeast Asia will begin to
fall, and it will affect us adversely around the world. It was a flawed strategy. It was based on a lie, and we fought it terribly. We didn’t mobilize this nation for that war. We went to individual replacements instead of unit replacements and made a whole series of mistakes and bad decisions at the lowest tactical levels all the way up to the highest strategic policy decisions. We can’t let that happen, when you get yourself in that strange situation where you need to trust and believe in your leadership and that point where you as someone who has sworn an oath to the Constitution must obey the order or step aside, but have those doubts and those gnawing concerns that tug at your heart.

No one can give you the right answer. It’s pretty clear what your obligations are in terms of whom you answer to and what kinds of answers you’re supposed to provide, but in most cases, the timing, the decision to speak out, ends up having to be a personal one. There is no universal rule about all this, and it’s very difficult for anyone senior to you to give you the advice on how to do it. Those judgments have to be made from within.

The only advice I could give you is to be as proficient as you can and as knowledgeable as you possibly can, so when you face those decisions and those points in your career, they’re coming from the greatest base of understanding, the greatest base of knowledge, the greatest base of experience that you can gain or you can provide for yourself, and then you won’t have those agonizing doubts as to whether you may be right, or you may be wrong, and should I speak out, or shouldn’t I speak out.

We do not swear an oath to the President of the United States. We do not swear an oath to the king or the queen. Each one of us swears an oath to the Constitution of the United States. It is unique. Even our closest allies, the Brits who are on the battlefield with us, swear an oath to an individual, to the Queen. We don’t. You swear an oath to a concept, to an ideal, to a law, and with that comes the obligation to protect the men and women that you’re responsible for, to protect the concept, the values, the ideals of what our country stands for, and it supersedes any obligation or duty to any one individual. What goes with that is the understanding that when the order is issued, you have
to follow it or step aside, but up to that point, there is this obligation to speak out and to speak the truth.

You will face this, as I said, somewhere along the line in your career. As you get more senior, the issues get, I think, more critical, but you will face this even at the lowest level, as I said before.

You don’t want to develop the reputation of being a complainer or being someone that is always an obstructionist, so you have to choose the point in time pretty wisely, and you have to make sure that you’re not jousting every windmill, but I think you will gain the respect of those who work for you if they understand that you’re willing to sacrifice perhaps your own career and future to do what is right.

And I would just close with something that I learned at my last command. My sergeant major and I conducted what we called the command climate survey in the Central Command Headquarters. It was a combination of a written survey and a number of us going around and talking to a number of the enlisted men and women from all the services.

Normally things came out that were very good. We were very pleased with the results and how the command was viewed by our enlisted force. One year, the sergeant major came in to me and said we have an unusual comment on the command climate survey that reflects a trend, because I see it on several different surveys, and I’ve heard several people say it when I talk to them, and it is a concern about careerism amongst officers, that the enlisted force has a sense or feeling that their officers are careerists. This really shocked me. I mean, I really felt in the command we had some very strong officers, from the most junior to the most senior, and if the enlisted force was thinking that these were careerists, that had to be really damaging to their trust and their confidence in what we could do.

So I decided to get the sergeant major and several of our enlisted troops together to talk about this issue. The sergeant major picked some of our best and brightest and those who would speak out, who weren’t intimidated by being with the sergeant major
and the CINC. We gathered them around a table in my office, and I told them that I was shocked to see this, and I really felt this might, you know, reflect a lack of trust in our officer corps, and they quickly corrected me. They said, “You don’t understand. We’re not talking about the officers as individuals. We do respect them, and we do trust them.” They were talking about the system that has forced officers to pay more attention to their careers than to their job and their leadership position, the system that these young men and women in our enlisted ranks saw were driving our officers to make careerist kinds of decisions.

Everything was a cut or a selection, whether it was school or command or joint staff duty, or the right duty assignment. What they saw reflected was a very small professional military with a high selection rate. What they saw were systems in our services that were zero defects in the way we judge people, and what they saw in their officers, who they felt sorry for, was that they were trapped in these decisions and having to make these sort of career decisions that consumed them and their time, making these wickets and cuts all along. They didn’t see their officers as able to lead and to concentrate on leadership, or as able to make mistakes and not suffer from making those honest mistakes that weren’t necessarily killers, and they were concerned about what they were seeing in that leadership.

It worried me greatly, to the point where I talked to our service chiefs about that perception, because I was getting it from all four services. It worried me that sometimes the system could put us in a position where we don’t create and develop officers who are willing to speak the truth and feel the sense of obligation to do it, regardless of the cost, or who won’t be respected or admired or rewarded for doing that. I would hope that we would never find ourselves in a position where we would create an atmosphere where our subordinate leaders didn’t feel free to speak. So the other part of the obligation, besides speaking the truth, is to encourage an environment or an atmosphere where that’s invited and welcomed by your subordinate leaders too.

This is going to be a critical issue, I think, over the coming months. We are involved in a very controversial endeavor here with a very controversial strategy and a very controversial method
of applying that strategy. In the weeks and days ahead, I really believe we are going to face much of this criticism, and you’re going to find many of the uniformed people having to make a difficult decision on what to say about how things evolved and how things are going. I would hope again that they choose their time and their words carefully while we have troops on the battlefield, but at some point, I think these issues have to be dealt with. If not, we’re doomed to repeat them again.
ADMIRAL HAROLD W. GEHMAN, JR, USN (RET.)

Admiral Harold (Hal) W. Gehman, Jr, USN (Ret.) completed over 35 years of active duty in the U.S. Navy on November 1, 2000. His last assignment was as NATO’s Supreme Allied Commander, Atlantic and as the Commander-in-Chief of the U.S. Joint Forces Command, one of the United States’ five regional joint Combatant Commands.

Gehman was born in Norfolk, VA on October 15, 1942, and graduated from the Pennsylvania State University in 1965 with a BS in Industrial Engineering and a commission in the Navy from the NROTC program. A Surface Warfare Officer, he served at all levels of leadership and command, primarily in guided missile destroyers and cruisers. During his career, he was assigned to an unusual five command-at-sea tours in ranks from Lieutenant to Rear Admiral.

Admiral Gehman served in Vietnam as Officer in Charge of a Swift patrol boat and later in Chu Lai, Vietnam as Officer in Charge of a detachment of six Swift boats and their crews.

His staff assignments included a Carrier Battle Group staff, a fleet commander’s staff, a Unified Commander’s staff, and on the staff of the Chief of Naval Operations in Washington, DC.

Promoted to four-star Admiral in 1996, he became the 29th Vice Chief of Naval Operations. As VCNO, he oversaw the formulation of the Navy’s $70 billion budget and developed and implemented policies governing the 375,000 people in the Navy.

Assigned in September, 1997 as SACLANT and Commander-in-Chief, US Joint Forces Command, he became one of NATO’s two military commanders and assumed command of all forces of all four Services in the continental United States. He was responsible for the provision of ready forces to the other Joint Combatant Commanders overseas and for the development of new joint doctrine, training procedures, and joint requirements.
Immediately after retiring in 2000, Gehman was appointed Co-Chairman of the Department of Defense review of the terrorist attack on the USS Cole in Aden harbor, Yemen. On February 1, 2003, he was appointed Chairman of the Space Shuttle Columbia Accident Investigation Board, which reported its findings to the nation on August 26, 2003.
ETHICAL CHALLENGES
FOR ORGANIZATIONS:
LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE USS COLE
AND COLUMBIA TRAGEDIES

Welcome from Dr. Albert C. Pierce, Director, Center for the
Study of Professional Military Ethics

Introduction by VADM Rodney P. Rempt, Superintendent,
U.S. Naval Academy

Lecture by Admiral Harold W. Gehman, Jr, USN (Ret.)

This is an edited, abridged version of the original lecture transcript.
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of Northrop Grumman Corporation.
WELCOME

Dr. Pierce

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. On behalf of the Superintendent and the Center for the Study of Professional Military Ethics, welcome to the ninth ethics lecture in this series. The inaugural lecture was held in this room five years ago next month, and we now do one each semester. We at the Ethics Center are particularly pleased that we can make this kind of contribution to the study and the practice of ethics here at the Naval Academy. These lectures are open to the entire Naval Academy community, but our primary audience consists of the midshipmen who are currently enrolled in NE-203, and we’re delighted to see them here in great strength tonight.

The first couple of these lectures, going back to 1999, focused on moral courage, and then the next several on ethics and the use of military force, issues of the just war. Last spring, we introduced a different approach, and that is to bring former officers here to reflect on ethical challenges they faced, observed, or handled in their careers and in their lives. Tonight’s lecture is in that vein—how organizational behavior, technology, human life, risk, and ethics all come together—the issues that this Academy is all about.

To introduce this evening’s speaker, I’ll turn the podium over to the Superintendent, Vice Admiral Rempt.
INTRODUCTION

Admiral Rempt

It’s a pleasure to have you all here tonight to address a serious subject. This is a great opportunity to help us focus on the importance of ethics and what ethics really means in our everyday life. I’ll just spend one moment and talk about what ethics is.

Now, I could ask a number of midshipmen here to give me the definition, since you’ve all been taking the course, and you could spout that back in a second, I’m sure. I’ll give you a practical perspective. There are many different definitions, but ethics to me is essentially the foundation for how we live our lives, how we as individuals choose to live and to face the world and face our fellow man in what we do. It’s what we believe in our gut, and often it’s a value system that we fall back on when the chips are down, or when normal rules don’t apply, or the situation has dramatically changed, so that everything we knew before doesn’t really fit the new situation. Perhaps we’re in a crisis, or perhaps we are at war, or perhaps we’re a prisoner of war. The rules that we lived under for all of our life suddenly have no meaning, or we cannot figure out exactly what we’re supposed to do. Perhaps we’re on the streets of Iraq, faced with a new situation that we have never thought about before, and suddenly we are thrust into deciding the right thing to do.

Well, we’re fortunate tonight. Admiral Harold W. Gehman is here to give us some ethical insights and his perspective from his many responsibilities. He has dedicated some 35 years of his life to active service in the Navy. As a surface warfare officer, he completed five different sea tours in command, and he has served aboard guided missile cruisers and destroyers. He has held numerous key leadership positions, including as the 29th Vice Chief of Naval Operations, the Commander-in-Chief of the U.S. Joint Forces Command, and NATO Supreme Allied Commander, Atlantic.

Following his retirement, Admiral Gehman continued serving his country out of uniform. He immediately assumed duties as co-
chairman of the Department of Defense review of the USS Cole terrorist attack. In 2003, he became the chairman of the space shuttle Columbia accident investigation board and has led the investigation that resulted in the findings of that board. Truly a remarkable individual.

His integrity and his devotion to service are unwavering examples for us all. We can learn a great deal from the lessons he has learned in his experiences as a senior naval officer and as a retired naval officer heavily involved in critical issues that face the government of the United States. It is my distinct pleasure to introduce Admiral Hal Gehman.
Admiral Gehman

Thank you, Admiral Rempt. It’s a pleasure to be here. I’d also like to recognize former Secretary of the Navy John Dalton, who is in the audience; former Chief of Naval Operations Carl Trost, who is in the audience; and also a former next-door neighbor of mine, Vice Admiral Mike Haskins and his wife, who are in the audience. Dr. Pierce, thank you for inviting me.

I am not a graduate of the United States Naval Academy. I am a graduate of Penn State University, and I got an engineering degree there and was in the Navy ROTC program. In 1965, I was handed a diploma in one hand and a set of orders to a destroyer in the other hand, and 35 years later, I retired. However, my high regard for this institution comes honestly from 35 years of dealing with your distinguished graduates, both working for them and having them work for me, and my high regard for this institution also comes from the fact that my father is a 1939 graduate of this institution and served 30 years in the Navy. 1939 was a tough year to graduate. The next six years were tough as well, and he is pretty proud of his 30 years.

My job here tonight is to talk about the challenges of ethical behavior in large, complex organizations. Your job is to listen. My only concern, of course, is that you’ll finish your job before I finish mine, but that’s a risk I’m willing to take.

I wanted to put your mind at rest that I am not going to give you a theoretical set of remarks about ethics. I’m really here to talk about the practice and the practical aspects as I have witnessed it and some of the adventures that I have been involved in both in the Navy and out of the Navy. It seems like, for one reason or another, I have had a series of experiences wrestling with big organizations such that people continue to give me more jobs to wrestle with big organizations. So you might say that my remarks tonight are entitled or labeled after the current television program, Big Organizations Behaving Badly. For some set of reasons, my career has allowed me to experience both the good and the bad of big organizations. My career has also put me in
touch with people senior to me, who took the time to point out
when organizations were behaving strangely and allowed me
perhaps to see the difference. When I tell you some practical
stories, sea stories as we like to say, we’ll let you judge whether or
not there are lessons to be taken away from this.

It’s my goal tonight that, when you leave here, you will be a little
bit more aware of how organizations work and act, and how
individual ethics and individual standards sometimes bump up
against some of the practical challenges of the day. By being a
little bit more wise and a little bit more aware of how
organizations act, perhaps you will be a little bit more observant
and a little bit more conscious of things that are happening
around you and thereby, perhaps, contribute to the solution of
the problem.

I don’t believe that it is the goal of the ethics department, and it’s
certainly not my goal here tonight, to think that a United States
Navy ensign can go out and fix problems, but at the same time,
we don’t want you to be part of the problem. We want you to be
aware when situations are happening [that make it hard to
explain] the behavior of the organization. Maybe we can help
you explain what’s going on. If we succeed tonight, we will both
be successful. Also, the mentors who have helped me along the
way will have been successful, which I think is the whole point.

Some of the events that I’m going to relate tonight occurred while
I was on active duty. Some are taken from the investigation into
the terrorist attack on the USS Cole in Aden, Yemen in October
of 2000, and some are taken from the recently completed
investigation into the tragic loss of the space shuttle Columbia on
the 1st of February last year [2003] and the loss of the seven crew
members on board. The reasons I mention the seven crew
members are; first, three of them were naval officers, and second,
we’re not talking about theory here, folks. We’re talking about
life and death. People can get hurt if we don’t do our jobs right,
and I want you to take that aboard.

We’re here to talk about organizational culture. Those are the
terms that we like to use in the shuttle investigation, and a lot of
what I’m going to talk about relates to engineering, because a lot of it is technical, and engineers have cultures of their own.

I am reminded of the story of a foursome playing golf: a lawyer, a doctor, a dentist, and an engineer. They had played golf together regularly. As they were going around the golf course, they noticed that the foursome in front of them was playing exceedingly slowly, and after a few holes of being delayed, they finally started waving and trying to get the attention of the foursome in front of them to allow them to play through. The foursome in front of them ignored them—didn't even acknowledge that they were back there. Their frustration grew, and finally the marshal came around, and our four golfers complained vociferously about the slow play and the impolite attitude of the foursome in front of them who didn’t acknowledge their desire to play through.

The marshal looked at the foursome and said, “You all should be ashamed of yourselves. Those four guys in front of you are blind. It's a miracle they can even play golf at all. They come out here a couple times a year. They have a great time. They're really good golfers. I mean, they're playing almost as fast as you are, and you should really be ashamed of your shortsightedness.”

Well, our foursome was quite chagrined at this, and the lawyer said, “You're absolutely right. I'm ashamed of my impatience, and I am going to offer those gentlemen free legal services from my company.” The doctor said the same thing: “I'm sorry for our impatience and our criticism of them. I'm glad that they can do what they can do, and I'm going to offer them free medical care.” The dentist said, “I'll offer them free dental care.” The engineer said, “Why don’t they play at night?”

(Laughter.)

**Admiral Gehman**

How you approach a problem depends on your background and how you have been taught to approach a problem. Tonight, by relating some actual, real-life, no-kidding stories, hopefully, we can come away here with some understanding.
When Dr. Pierce asked me to speak, the first thing I did was look up “ethics” in the Webster’s dictionary. According to Mr. Webster, “ethics” means one, a complex of moral precepts held or rules of conduct followed by an individual. In other words, that’s the definition as it applies to you and me, to an individual. There is a second part to the definition, and that is the body of moral principles or values governing or distinctive of a particular culture or group. In other words, that’s the definition as it applies to groups of people.

Or you might put it this way. Similar to what Admiral Rempt said, it’s the pattern of behavior by individuals or groups of people when the boss isn’t standing over their shoulder. It’s essentially how you act when you are acting on your own without supervision right behind you. It’s how you act instinctively. Now I’m going to get back to this several times tonight, so we’ll be able to connect that dot again.

[Here’s] a little personal philosophy, particularly about large organizations. You belong to a large organization. The Naval Academy is a large organization. The Navy and the Marine Corps are large organizations. It is my firm belief that all large organizations essentially behave like an organic being, that is, an animal or a plant, and these characteristics are fairly predictable and fairly standard.

For example, it is my view that the first and highest priority and the primary goal of every large organization is self-preservation, just like an animal. If the organization feels threatened or challenged, the first thing the organization does is go into a self-preservation mode. Sometimes that means defensive actions. Sometimes it means offensive actions. If you are part of an enterprise that’s threatening another organization or challenging another organization—for example, when they told me as the Commander-in-Chief of Joint Forces Command that my job was to transform the Armed Forces, that was threatening to a lot of people. If you are aware of the reflexive response that all organizations are most likely to respond with when threatened, you will then understand why the organization is behaving the way it does.
Second of all, these responses to threats and challenges by large organizations can be understood and predicted, no matter what the leader says, no matter what the boss says about how open they are to change and how willing they are to accept new ideas. The organization itself is not going to do that. The organization will resist because the rank and file think that they are defending the organization, and they think that their actions are right and just. They aren’t criminal. They’re not bad. They think that they’re protecting their organization. I’m going to get back to that later.

Third point, one of the most common defensive mechanisms of all organizations is what I call trivialization. When a large organization is presented with a challenge, like a new idea or a change or a threat of any kind, one of the most common responses is to trivialize it. What an organization will do is invent a mind-numbing, endless series of studies, committees, analyses, and working groups until it just wears you down. I tell you, I’ve seen it over and over again.

Fourth, there is such a thing as good culture too, by the way. Not all cultural traits are bad. I’m going to give you a litany here of evil and bad cultural traits that I have seen in practice, but there are good cultural traits, and the good cultural traits need to be nourished, like good communications and openness and honesty and things like that.

And lastly, individuals do make a difference in large organizations. After all, organizations are just collections of people. Generally, it is not possible to change bad organizational culture by simply reorganizing or firing the head. Now, even though sometimes members of Congress or the press or even our bosses want to fire somebody when something goes wrong, if you have an organization which is not working well, firing the head guy, even though it feels good, won’t fix the organizational problems. If you do get a new boss into a rotten organization, the new boss is going to have the same problems, and unless that new boss can fix the organizational matters, it won’t do him any good.

Okay. I promised you some real-life, no-kidding, practical stories with a little bit of dirt thrown in, and so I’ll get started, and I’m
going to refer back to this free philosophical discussion I gave you and try and tie these things up.

The USS Cole, DDG67, essentially a brand-new Arleigh Burke-class destroyer, was worked up as part of the George Washington battle group, just like all the other destroyers in the battle group, except that the Cole was essentially loaded down completely with land-attack Tomahawks, or TLAMs. The Cole, even though she worked up as part of the battle group, was probably never going to see the battle group, because the Cole was part of a schedule to provide the unified combatant commanders with the hundreds of Tomahawks which the JCS [Joint Chiefs of Staff] said they could have. So the Cole did a normal workup with the battle group but then went off to fulfill the Tomahawk numbers.

In the workup, the Cole did all of the antiterrorism and force protection training that everybody else in the battle group did. The Cole excelled. She was the top ship in the battle group. If you need to have so many graduates of an antiterrorism and force protection school, she had more graduates than was required. She got letters of commendation from Second Fleet for her exercises and training when they were attacked doing terrorist drills.

She went to the Med. She went to the East Med. and fulfilled the TLAM requirements for the East Med., and she was scheduled to transit all by herself through the Suez Canal and the Red Sea to go into CENTCOM [Central Command] to fulfill CENTCOM’s TLAM requirements. She transited the Suez Canal on the 10th of October, 2000, transited the Red Sea at 27 knots on the 11th of October, and pulled into Aden, Yemen on the morning of the 12th of October for a brief stop for fuel in the daylight—four hours.

While alongside the fueling dolphin at 12 o’clock noon while the crew was eating lunch, a small, open, flat-bottom Boston Whaler-type skiff, one of many that came alongside the Cole, came along the port side at mid-ship, with two men inside who detonated themselves, killing 17 people. Twenty-five others were seriously wounded, enough to be evacuated, and others were slightly wounded.
There were three investigations into the Cole attack. The FBI was charged with finding out who did it. The Navy conducted an investigation to determine the performance of the commanding officer and the crew. Secretary of Defense Cohen appointed Army General Bill Crouch and myself to investigate whether or not the system—big organization—whether or not the system did everything that it should have done to help the Cole conduct a safe transit by herself. As a matter of fact, the charter to us was not to investigate the Cole. Our charter was to investigate all independently transiting units. Even the North Dakota National Guard C141 that stops in Nairobi, Kenya for fuel, who is looking out after them? How about the Military Sealift Command tanker that got oil in Aden, Yemen 13 times in the previous 12 months? So that was our charter: we were looking at the big organization, so the parties to our investigation weren’t the CO or the XO or the officer of the deck. The parties to our investigation were the Navy, the Joint Staff, the Central Command, and the DIA [Defense Intelligence Agency]. We like to say that ordinary rank and file people don’t have anything to fear from us, but if you’ve got a secretary and a potted plant outside your office, then you do have something to worry about.

We conducted this review, and we were not happy with what we found. It turned out that the Cole was sent off on this mission and forgotten about. The system didn’t do the Cole any favors. For example, why was the Cole going 27 knots through the Red Sea? Why, if she was to conduct an independent transit from one place to another place that’s far apart, and there are no oilers in between, why don’t you go at your most economical speed—16 or 17 knots?

The Cole was going 27 knots because European Command and Central Command could not agree on when the Cole should shift OPCON [Operational Control] from one theater to another. The staff officers, the junior officers— schedulers who thought that they were protecting their organization’s best interest—they each insisted that the Cole should stay in their theater up until the last minute. They squeezed and squeezed and squeezed until the only way the Cole could execute the schedule was to go 27
knots. If she goes 27 knots, then she has no chance of making it
to the oiler, and she must stop—even if the threat is high.

Now were these people criminal? Were they bad people? No,
they weren't bad people. They were protecting the organization,
at least they thought they were.

The rules and regulations of all unified commanders and their
Navy components for port visits and brief stops are essentially the
same. You go to the Op Order, and in the back of the Op Order
is an in-port protection plan, and you select from among the
measures that are offered back there, according to the
THREATCON [Terrorist Threat Condition]. If you are in
THREATCON Alpha, there are 25 measures. You pick out
which ones apply to you. You send a message to your immediate
senior in command that this is what I propose to do for my force
protection while I am in this port. If you are in THREATCON
Bravo, you have to do everything in Alpha plus Bravo. So the
Cole did this.

Now the Cole worked up in one battle group when she was going
to the Persian Gulf. She was going to report into a new battle
group. They don’t know each other. Never met each other. So
the Cole sends off a message with its force protection plan, and
the message is one sentence. It says, “In accordance with ref. A, I
intend to do everything required under THREATCON Alpha
and everything under THREATCON Bravo.”

Well, of course, they couldn’t. Of course, they weren’t going to
do everything in THREATCON Alpha and Bravo. Some of
them didn’t apply. Some of them are for nighttime. Some of
them are for when you’re tied up to a pier, like keeping
automobiles off the pier. Some are for when you’re at anchor,
and of course, they weren’t going to do all those things. There
was no pier in Aden. They were going to be at a mooring
dolphin. They were going to be there in the daytime, and it says
post nighttime sentries and things like that. So, of course, they
weren't going to do everything.

Well, no problem, right? Sending the message off to an admiral,
who is the battle group commander. He’ll catch it. The answer
comes back: Your plan is approved, but oh, by the way, you used
the wrong reference. Now you see where the priorities are here?
The individuals here, nobody was breaking any laws or anything
like that, but they were trivializing the process. They had
reduced the process down to its lowest common denominator. I
send off a message. I get an answer back. Therefore, we are
protected from terrorists.

As I indicated, the Cole excelled at her force protection and
antiterrorism training, but it must not have sunk in, because they
posted no useful sentries. They did none of the things that they
said they were going to do in their training. Obviously, whatever
the training program consisted of, it was filling boxes. It was
fulfilling a requirement, and it wasn’t sinking in. It wasn’t having
any kind of an impression on anybody.

Why didn’t we get the training result we wanted to from a unit
which had excelled? Why didn’t we get the result? Well, our
investigation found that they essentially had gone through the
motions. In other words, they had determined the minimum that
needed to be done, and they had trivialized the whole event.

Let me talk about the space shuttle Columbia for a second. The
Columbia crashed while trying to reenter the Earth’s atmosphere
after the 113th shuttle mission. I didn’t know there were 113
shuttle missions, with one previously unsuccessful one,
Challenger, but the shuttle Columbia was attempting to reenter
the Earth’s atmosphere over Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas, going
10,000 miles an hour. At 207,000 feet, it broke apart. Left wing
came off. Within hours after that, I got a call from the Deputy
Administrator of NASA asking me to chair this investigation, and
I said I would, and so we went to work.

Well, unlike the Challenger, which happened a few seconds after
liftoff with lots of cameras pointing at it, and someone in a few
hours saw a little puff of smoke where the two seals or the two
segments of the solid rocket booster joined together, and they
could tell the O-ring had failed, no one saw what happened to
the Columbia. NASA doesn’t track shuttles, you might be
surprised to learn. There were a couple of amateur
photographers who were taking pictures of this streak going across Texas at sunrise, but there were no witnesses.

So how do we solve this problem? Well, we went to work, and essentially we created a small body of experts, who oversaw NASA doing the work. NASA actually did all the work, but I had 13 board members and 140 full-time investigators who were experts at aerodynamics, thermodynamics, flight dynamics, telemetry, data reduction modeling, simulation, and everything like that. We oversaw NASA doing the work, and we knew this was going to be a tough nut to crack. This was going to take weeks and weeks, if not months.

In the course of working closely with NASA engineers and NASA scientists as we tried to solve what had happened to the Columbia, we became aware of some organizational traits that caused our eyebrows to rise up on our heads. After not very long, we began to realize that some of these organizational traits were serious impediments to good engineering practices and to safe and reliable operations. They were doing things that took our breath away.

Since we had availed ourselves of world-class, Nobel-prizewinning experts in the physics and the science and the engineering side, we went out and got ourselves world-class experts in organizational behavior, risk management, assessment, and reliability. We got ourselves smart in the right way to handle risky enterprises. We also went out and looked at best-business practices, including the Navy’s, by the way, in some cases. We learned a lot from the Navy. We built a template, applied it to the shuttle program, and were not satisfied with what we found, to say the least.

We concluded and put in our report that the organizational traits, the organizational faults, management faults that we found in the space shuttle program were just as much to blame for the loss of the Columbia as was the famous piece of foam that fell off and broke a hole in the wing. Now, that’s pretty strong language, and in our report, we grounded the shuttle until they fixed these organizational faults.
Okay, do you hear an organization being threatened here? Remember what I said about what organizations do when they’re threatened? Well, guess what? But now, see, I’m an old, battle-scarred investigator now, and I knew exactly what this organization was going to do. When we started talking about its behavior, it instinctively went into a defensive crouch, as predicted, and it started to trivialize all of the work that had been done.

Well, in order to understand a couple of the examples I’m going to give you, I need to give you the issue from the NASA point of view so you can understand the pressures that they were under. In doing so, I am now going to give you the information you need to award you a master’s degree in management.

In a developmental program, any developmental program—whether it’s a Joint Strike Fighter [JSF], the Virginia class submarine, or the Comanche helicopter, it doesn’t make any difference—the program manager essentially has four areas to trade. The first one is money. Obviously, he can go get more money if he falls behind schedule. If he runs into technical difficulties or something goes wrong, he can go ask for more money.

The second one is quantity. You see the quantity argument quite clearly in the F-22 Raptor program, which started off at 800 airplanes, then went to 550 airplanes, and is now hovering at around 400 airplanes. You just buy fewer of these things.

The third one is performance margin. If you are in trouble with your program, and it isn’t working, you shave the performance. You shave the safety margin. You shave the margins. You see that in the vertical-lift JSF right now. It’s too heavy.

The fourth one is time. If you are out of money, and you’re running into technical problems, or you need more time to solve a margin problem, you spread the program out, take more time. These are the four things that a program manager has.

If you are a program manager for the shuttle, the option of quantity is eliminated. There are only four shuttles. You’re not
going to buy any more. What you got is what you got. If money is being held constant, which it is—they're on a fixed budget, and I'll get into that later—then if you run into some kind of problem with your program, you can only trade time and margin. If somebody is making you stick to a rigid time schedule, then you've only got one thing left, and that's margin. By margin, I mean either redundancy—making something 1.5 times stronger than it needs to be instead of 1.7 times stronger than it needs to be—or testing it twice instead of five times. That's what I mean by margin.

You can pick up your diplomas at the door on your way out tonight.

It has always been amazing to me how many members of Congress, officials in the Department of Defense, and program managers in our services forget this little rubric. Any one of them will enforce for one reason or another a rigid standard against one or two of those parameters. They'll either give somebody a fixed budget, or they'll give somebody a fixed time, and they forget that when they do that, it's like pushing on a balloon. You push in one place, and it pushes out the other place, and it's amazing how many smart people forget that.

The space shuttle Columbia was damaged at launch by a fault that had repeated itself in previous launches over and over and over again. Seeing this fault happen repeatedly with no harmful effects convinced NASA that something which was happening in violation of its design specifications must have been okay. Why was it okay? Because we got away with it. It didn't cause a catastrophic failure in the past.

You may think that this is ridiculous. This is hardly good engineering. If something is violating the design specifications of your program and threatening your program, how could you possibly believe that sooner or later it isn't going to catch up with you?

By the way, the solid rocket booster segment O-ring seal that caused the loss of the Challenger also leaked on at least 50 percent of the previous flights. For you and me, we would
translate this in our world into, “We do it this way, because this is the way we’ve always done it.” Have you ever heard that around here? The facts don’t make any difference to these people.

Well, where were the voices of the engineers? Where were the voices that demanded facts and faced reality? What we found was that the organization had other priorities, and I’m going to pull them together for you in a second. Remember the four things that a program manager can trade? This program manager had other priorities, and he was trading all right, and let me tell you how it worked. In the case of the space shuttle, the driving factor was the International Space Station. The first piece of the International Space Station was launched in November 1998 by a Russian Soyuz rocket. In 1999 and 2000, there were four missions each year, or eight missions to assemble the first parts of the International Space Station, so that by November of 2000, two years after the first module went up, the space station was inhabited by its first crew.

In January of 2001, a new administration takes office, and the new administration learns in the spring of 2001 that the International Space Station, after two years of effort, is three years behind schedule and 100 percent over budget. They set about to get this program back under control. An independent study suggested that NASA and the International Space Station program ought to be required to pass through some gates. Now, gates are definite times, definite places, and definite performance factors that you have to meet before you can go on. The White House and the Office of Management and Budget agreed to this procedure, and the first gate that NASA had to meet was called U.S. Core Complete. The name doesn’t make any difference, but essentially it was an intermediate stage in the building of the International Space Station, where if we never did anything more, we could quit then. The space station would be about 60 percent built, but it would have the modules there that the Italian, Japanese, Russian, and Canadian parts could plug into. That’s why it’s called the International Space Station. And the date set for Core Complete was February 2004. Okay, now this is the spring of 2001.
In the summer of 2001, NASA gets a new administrator. The new administrator is the Deputy Director of OMB, the same guy who just agreed to this gate theory. So now if you're a worker at NASA, and somebody is leveling these very strict schedule requirements on you that you are a little concerned about, and now the new administrator of NASA becomes essentially the author of this schedule, to you this schedule looks fairly inviolate.

Okay, so once again, let me ask you a question. Do you hear a threat to your organization here? If you don’t meet the gate, the program is shut down. Now, if you were a NASA engineer, this is serious talk. It would be like saying if you don’t win the Army-Navy game, we’re going to close the Naval Academy. Okay, does that sound like a threat to your organization? Okay, well, they took it as a threat.

So off we go. Remember the options that I told you. If a program manager is faced with problems and shortfalls and challenges, if the schedule cannot be extended, he either needs money, or he needs to cut into margin. There were no other options, so guess what the people at NASA did? They started to cut into margins. No one directed them to do this. No one told them to do this. The organization did it, because the individuals in the organization thought they were defending the organization. They thought they were doing what the organization wanted them to do. There weren’t secret meetings in which people found ways to make the shuttle unsafe, but the organization responded the way organizations respond. They get defensive.

We actually found the PowerPoint viewgraphs that were briefed to NASA leadership when the program for good, solid engineering reasons began to slip, and I’ll quote some of them. These were the measures that the managers proposed to take to get back on schedule. He’s only got four choices, right? There is no more money. There are no more shuttles. He can’t sell a shuttle on eBay and get more money or something like that. So the only choice he has is margin.

These are quotes. One, work over the Christmas holidays. Two, add a third shift at Kennedy Shuttle turnaround facility. Three,
do safety checks in parallel rather than sequentially. Four, reduce structural inspection requirements. Five, defer requirements and apply the reserve, and six, reduce testing scope. I know you don’t understand what that means about shuttle turnaround stuff, but I think you get the idea. They’re going to cut corners. That’s what they’re going to do. Nevertheless, for very good reasons, good engineering reasons, and to their credit, they stopped operations several times, because they found problems in the shuttle, and they got farther and farther behind schedule.

Now, I’m sorry to make this a long shaggy-dog story, but it has a point. Then they did something which was really extraordinary. There were four shuttles. Three of them are identical, and they’re lightweight. One of them, a Columbia, the original shuttle, the first shuttle, was very heavy. Because it was heavy, it could not carry anything to the International Space Station. It could get to the International Space Station. The inclination of the orbit, with respect to the equator, varies with the amount of weight that you can carry. It’s easy to put things in orbit in the equator. It’s very hard to put things in orbit in high inclinations. The International Space Station has a high inclination. The Columbia could reach the International Space Station, but it couldn’t carry anything. Therefore, it had no value in assembling the International Space Station.

Because they were in such dire straits to meet this Core Complete gate, they decided to put the Columbia into the schedule anyway. After this mission, the ill-fated last mission of the Columbia, the Columbia was going to be slammed into an overhaul facility. Columbia wasn’t even equipped with a docking port. They were going to put a docking port on it, and they could at least use the Columbia for crew swaps, even though they could not carry anything up.

The reason I tell you this story is because this mission of the Columbia, the one that was lost, had been delayed 13 times over two years, because it was the lowest priority thing that NASA was doing. Missions to the International Space Station were the highest priority. But after this mission is over, the Columbia is going to get modified, and the Columbia is crucial to the
completion of the International Space Station. Now, all of a sudden, if the Columbia has a problem, it becomes a big deal.

Well, two launches before the Columbia’s ill-fated flight—it was in October—a large piece of foam came off at launch and hit the solid rocket booster. The solid rocket boosters are recovered from the ocean and brought back and refurbished. They could look at the damage, and it was significant. So here we have a major piece of debris coming off, striking a part of the shuttle assembly. The rules and regulations say that, when that happens, it has to be classified as the highest level of anomaly, requiring serious engineering work to explain it away. It’s only happened six or seven times out of the 113 launches, at that time, 111 launches.

But the people at NASA understand that if they classify this event as a serious violation of their flight rules, they’re going to have to stop and fix it. So they classify it as essentially a mechanical problem, and they do not classify it as what they call an in-flight anomaly, which is their highest level of deficiency.

Okay, the next flight flies fine. No problem. Then we launch Columbia, and Columbia has a great big piece of foam come off. It hits the shuttle. This has happened two out of three times. Now, we go to these meetings. Columbia is in orbit, hasn’t crashed, and we’re going to these meetings about what to do about this. The meetings are tape-recorded, so we have been listening to the tape recordings of these meetings, and we listen to these employees as they talk themselves into classifying the fact that foam came off two out of three times as a minor material maintenance problem, not a threat to safety, even though the regulations required them [to do that]. Why did they talk themselves into this? Because they knew that, if they classified this as a serious safety violation, they would have to do all these engineering studies. It would slow down the launch schedule. They could not possibly complete the International Space Station on time, and they would fail to meet the gate. No one told them to do that. The organization came to that conclusion all by itself.

What we have in the tape recordings is a perfect example of Gehman’s Axiom Number 3: They trivialized the work. They demanded studies, analyses, reviews, meetings, conferences,
working groups, and more data. They keep everybody working hard, and they avoided the central issue: Were the crew and the shuttle in danger? [This was] a classic case where individuals, well-meaning individuals, were swept along by the institution's overpowering desire to protect itself. The system effectively blocked honest efforts to raise legitimate concerns. The individuals who raised concerns and did complain and tried to get some attention faced personal, emotional reactions from the people who were trying to defend the institution. The organization essentially went into a full defensive crouch, and the individuals who were concerned about safety were not able to overcome.

I would argue, and I've interviewed these people personally, I know who I'm talking about, that if these individuals who were concerned about safety had understood better how organizations naturally react when challenged, that they would have been able to cope with this better, and they would have found a way to get around the issue and get the attention this issue deserved.

I want to close with an event that happened to me, and I asked Admiral Trost's permission to tell this story before we went on the air here. When I wrote this, I didn't realize Admiral Trost was going to be here, but I asked his permission to tell this story, because he knows it's the truth.

When I was a Navy captain, I was the Executive Assistant [EA] to the Vice Chief of Naval Operations in 1989. Admiral Trost was the CNO, and I was the EA to the Vice Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Bud Edney, and during that time, the investigation into the gun turret explosion on USS Iowa came to our desk. Secretary Dalton remembers this story too, even though he wasn't the Secretary at the time. By the time it came to us, I had no official role in this. I was just a paper pusher for the Vice Chief, and it was up there for the CNO to endorse, and the CNO asked the Vice Chief to take a look at it and do all the things that needed to be done.

So Admiral Edney, my boss, says, “You take this home this weekend. You're a surface warfare officer. You read this thing and tell me what you think.” About two-thirds of this
investigation by volume was studies, analysis, tests, documents, testimony, and statements by people in the Navy and the Naval Sea Systems Command and the Ordinance Division testifying to the fact that the gunpowder could not possibly go off by itself.

Now, the reason why the system had to say that is because if they said anything else, that the gunpowder could go off by itself, that meant that the 16-inch guns on Navy battleships weren't safe, and the organization wasn't going to do that, now was it? The organization was defending itself, and so since the gunpowder couldn't possibly go off by itself, there could only be one explanation. Somebody did it on purpose.

So these investigators looked around. The whole gun crew, of course, was killed, and they found a person, some poor soul in the gun crew, who was a little bit different, and they said he must have done it, and that's what the report said. Mind you, I'm making a great generalization here. So I take this thing home, and I read it, and I come in the next day. I have no official status in this. My boss just asked me for my opinion, and I said, "Oh, my goodness. Look at all these studies. Look at all this documentation. I think they're right. Powder couldn't possibly have gone off. I think they're right. Somebody must have done something."

So the Navy's endorsement was that we aren't sure what happened, but most likely this poor, unfortunate sailor had done something dastardly and had set the thing off on purpose. Well, that isn't what happened. About a year later, a laboratory got the gunpowder to go off spontaneously, and a couple of lawyers pointed out to us that you couldn't have said that about that individual if he had been alive. You only said it because he was dead, and whether that's right or not, it's still not clear to me that we know what happened on the Iowa. I don't know. But [I failed] to recognize that what I was seeing here was the organization defending itself, the organization acting in a very predictable, very understandable way. If only I had been wise enough to realize that, I would have been a little bit more suspicious. That event has been burned into my skull since 1989. So now when people ask me to go inquire into how big
organizations act and what they do, I am scarred, and I'm really suspicious.

So in conclusion, are we doomed then? Are we all helpless because big organizations are going to run all over us and trample us into the earth? Absolutely not. Absolutely not. People do make a difference.

Let me give you a couple of pointers, a couple of observations. First, you need to recognize what is going on around you. Be observant. Watch how your seniors handle tough problems. Try to put yourself in your senior's position, and imagine how you would handle a problem, because some day you're going to have to. Don't think that this is some distant problem that is never going to come to rest on your doorstep. It certainly is.

Second, try and make yourself aware of those very, very few times when your organization really is threatened. You need to know the difference between all the daily little pushing and shoving, all the daily little problems, all the daily little discomforts that all organizations face, and the issues which are really considered to be threatening to the organization. Because on those issues which are truly threatening to the organization, the organization is going to behave in the ways that I've tried to explain to you tonight, and if you can recognize that, you'll be much better off.

Third, learn to be a bureaucratic guerrilla fighter. There is always more than one way to get things done. Like those engineers at NASA who could not get their point made, learn if you get stopped in one direction, you can still do the right thing by finding another way to get it done, even if your organization has become defensive and not interested in helping you out.

Fourth, stick to first principles. By first principles, I mean, essentially the right thing to do, but do the right thing because it's in your organization's best interest to do the right thing, not because you want to get in somebody's face, or you want to score a debating point with somebody. That won't get you anywhere. Use the organization's mission and the organization's principles as your best defense.
Last, never personalize an issue. You can be energetic. That’s all right. But do not personalize the issue. Do not personalize the issue yourself, and do not allow the issue to become personalized into someone else. That never succeeds. Sooner or later, the issue is going to get resolved, and if the issue has become personalized, how it gets resolved could make you road kill, and that doesn’t do anybody any good.

I don’t want you going away from here thinking that all large organizations are evil, that you’re doomed if you belong to a large organization, and that they’re all going to go out and trample you to death. That certainly is not the case. We found wonderful cultural traits throughout NASA every place we went, a lot of good people trying to do the right thing. But I do hope you go out of here tonight a little bit more aware of the perfectly understandable and predictable way that organizations tend to behave when they are threatened or challenged. By being more aware of what’s going on around you and being more aware of how these organizations behave, perhaps you’ll be able to recognize the symptoms yourself, become part of the solution, and protect yourself from becoming a victim of it. You’ll be able to handle yourself more productively. Perhaps you’ll be able to do the right thing and help the organization find the answer to its problems.

I’d like to thank you all for your commitment to the service of your country. Thank you for your attention tonight. I believe we are in good hands. Thank you very much.