

## PRESIDENT'S FORUM

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### *Professionalism and Leader Development*

MY FIRST YEAR as President of the Naval War College has been an incredible experience and a real journey of professional discovery. Besides what I've learned about the inspiring work of the College, I have made two additional, significant discoveries over this first year's journey. These are things I didn't fully appreciate when I assumed this command, but wish I had a long, long time ago.

- The first is that there is an operational imperative—a war-fighting imperative—that we view our Navy as a profession, and ourselves as members of a true naval profession.
- The second is that to successfully execute our Navy missions as effectively as possible, there is nothing more important over the long term than leader development.

In this Forum, I'd like to “unpack” these discoveries, but before I do, two caveats are in order.

First, I hope our readers do not interpret these remarks as preaching from the “Ivory Tower.” I believe the things about which I'm speaking are far from abstract considerations. Quite the contrary, I am convinced there are practical and operational implications to the subjects of professionalism and leader development, and that it is vital to engage in much more explicit discussion of these subjects than has been typical in Navy culture in the past.

Second, this discussion is not about trying to fix a significant problem we have today. It is much more about ensuring we are prepared for the challenges of tomorrow. In the past, our institution and our leaders have been largely successful—in some cases exceedingly successful. Today, however, the world is changing

at an increasing rate, and the “VUCA” acronym accurately captures the environment for which we need to prepare our leaders. The operational environment is volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous and promises to become ever more so in the future. What has proved successful in the past is not going fully to prepare us for the future. This discussion is about moving from good to great, and being ready for the increased challenges we will face in the future.

*Professionalism.* Let’s return to my first “discovery”: there is an operational imperative—a *war-fighting* imperative—that we view ourselves as members of a profession in a nontrivial sense of the word. It has come as something of a shock to me that I have had this realization so late in my career! But that is precisely what makes me think we owe the Navy and the nation a change in our culture so that the sense of personal identification with the Navy profession is pervasive through the fleet at all levels of rank.

Over the years I’ve read multiple articles in *Joint Force Quarterly* and other military-related periodicals on the subject of professionalism. At the time, much of those discussions didn’t resonate with me. I had been exposed to the concept of the military as a profession in my early years at the U.S. Naval Academy, but, for almost my entire career, to be professional meant looking good in uniform and being technically and tactically competent. When I read the Navy Ethos, the word “professional” was simply an adjective meaning the sailor was squared away and a good operator.

In my current job, I’ve been reexposed to the basic ideas of what it means to be a member of the profession of arms. Here’s what I’ve come to understand. Our Navy has a dual character. On one hand, it is a military department organized as a bureaucracy. The bureaucratic dimension of our organization is unavoidable for any organization of our size and complexity. But on the other, it is an organization dedicated to supporting a military profession. It is this dual nature as both a bureaucracy and a profession that shapes our key challenge as Navy leaders.\*

- Bureaucracies originated out of society’s need for efficient, routinized work. The focus on efficiency drives an organization characterized by centralized planning and control, little delegation of discretionary authority, and compliance-based behavior.
- Professions originated out of society’s need for the expert application of specialized knowledge. For professions to provide that expert knowledge most effectively, they need autonomy. That autonomy is based on trust: trust between society and the profession, and trust among the members of the

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\* A great deal of the language and concepts of this way of thinking is reliant on the Army’s excellent work articulating the profession/bureaucracy tensions in its service. It is clearly articulated and laid out in U.S. Army Dept., *The Army Profession*, ADRP 1 (Washington, D.C.: June 2013), pp. 1–4.

profession. This trust is based on shared values/ethos, and demonstrated actions in accordance with these values/ethos.

The dual character of our Navy is important to understand. The attributes and strengths of both the bureaucracy and the profession are needed to execute the wide variety of functions across the Navy every day, and tension between the two is necessary and natural. As the leaders of the Navy, however, our challenge is to ensure the overarching characteristic of the Navy is—and remains—that of a military profession.\* Why? Because a bureaucratic organization will never succeed in combat; only a professional organization can and will.

- The operational environment—on the land, on the sea, or in the air—is violent and complex, dominated by uncertainty and ambiguity.
- Success in this environment requires much more than tactical competence; it requires judicious and decentralized employment of that competence at all levels: tactically, operationally, and strategically.
- And the key enabler of decentralized employment is trust—trust up, down, left, and right within an organization, and trust between the military and the nation it serves.

My colleagues that study organizations have taught me that trust is largely absent from bureaucracies. In fact, such organizations are specifically designed to function in low-trust environments. By contrast, trust is the central characteristic of a professional organization. Trust in a profession is built on each member's core identity being associated with the profession, and each member's actions being guided by an ethic shared across the profession.

It is here, in this difference in the nature of trust in bureaucracies and professions, that I've come to understand the war-fighting relevance of professionalism. I now clearly see the absolute operational imperative to thinking, seeing, being a profession: *only this identity engenders the trust necessary to fight and win in today's operational environment.*

This updated understanding of professionalism has also improved my thinking about ethics. I now see ethics through the lens of professionalism. As members of the maritime profession of arms, our ethic is what guides and steers our actions. That ethic certainly includes laws, regulations, and policies. But those are a mere baseline of legal compliance. Far more important for guiding our discretionary professional judgment are the nonlegal professional expectations established by our Navy culture, its values, and its highest aspirations. Our ethic guides us to act always in a manner that supports the values of the nation we serve, and enhances the trust within the organization, and with our civilian leadership / nation. In a

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\* Ibid., pp. 1–4.

complex world, our ethic helps us understand not only what we can or what we must do but, more importantly, what we should do.

The tension between our Navy's bureaucratic and professional attributes will grow greater as we move into times of fiscal pressure and away from sustained combat. We have a choice in how we see ourselves, in how we think about ourselves, and as we think about what we're doing from day to day.

As we all attend to our day-to-day assignments, I ask all Navy leaders to make a conscious effort to let the framework of the Navy *as a profession* drive our vision, thinking, and decisions. We'll be a better Navy if we do.

**Leader Development.** My assignment as President of the Naval War College has afforded me the opportunity to have a wide variety of discussions on the subject of leader development. As a result of those discussions, I've come to understand that our traditional approach to leader development is incomplete and insufficient. In retrospect, I now clearly see that I had on many counts failed in my responsibility to execute the critical role of a leader in leader development. My rather passive approach of simply serving as a role model was good but insufficient. As I argued earlier, the world is changing at an increasing rate, and the operational environment continues to grow more complex. We can't rely only on experience and observation to develop our future leaders. Nor can we rely solely on the schoolhouse, mobile training teams, or General Military Training programs. I have come to believe that the single most effective means of improving leadership across the Navy is "leaders engaging leaders."

Leaders at all levels must be actively involved in development of those in their charge. Preparing them for the challenges of the future is not an ancillary aspect of their "real" job—in some respects it is their most important job. There is no need for one to be a "leadership expert" to move out with leader development efforts. One doesn't need to have all the answers. In many respects, the most important thing we can do to make us all cognizant of our professional identity is simply ensuring that conversation about leadership, ethics, and the naval profession is a routine aspect of our interactions with each other. Explicitly raising such issues in the midst of routine operational activity will have a significant impact on our personnel as they realize it is a shared expectation that professionalism is part of what it is to be a member of our Navy. And no one is in a better position to do so than leaders at all levels. Leaders engaging leaders—this is the key. Making professionalism, leadership, and ethics an integral part of Navy life will do far more to encourage and embed professional identity than any number of PowerPoint presentations by "leadership experts."

So these are two key "discoveries" since reporting to the Naval War College: the operational imperative of seeing ourselves as a profession, and the critical

role of leaders in leader development. As I look to the future, I believe we need to do the following:

- Acknowledge that there is an operational imperative for the Navy to recognize the tension between bureaucracy and profession in our Navy, and deliberately choose to nurture our professional identity.
- Recognize the critical role of “leaders engaging leaders” in our development efforts and recognize that explicit attention to issues of leader development and ethics is a vital and important aspect of leaders’ responsibilities at every level and rank.

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*(This “President’s Forum” is derived from a presentation on professionalism and leader development delivered at the Navy Flag Officer and Senior Executive Symposium in April 2015.)*