

Speech: leadership and 21st century flashcard



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Competence And Character: Schwarzkopf's Message To The Corps Page 1 of 5 Competence And Character: Schwarzkopf's Message To The Corps By Lieutenant General Dave R. Palmer " 56 (Retired) Assembly Magazine, May 1992 (Note: The author was the Superintendent of the United States Military Academy, more commonly referred to as West Point, when Schwarzkopf delivered his speech.) (Extract from article with parenthetical explanations) General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, Class of 1956, returned to his Alma Mater (West Point) on 15 May 1991 to speak to the Corps of Cadets.

It was a rare event, for not since Dwight D. Eisenhower returned from Europe in 1945 had America or West Point been able to welcome home a victorious war hero. Excitement and anticipation could hardly have been higher. At that moment, with images of his stunning success in DESERT STORM fresh in everyone's mind, Schwarzkopf was arguably the most popular person in America. The day was as beautiful as they come in the Hudson Valley. A brilliant umbrella of blue sky enriched the deep green of the Plain, still fringed by splotches of spring color.

A large crowd turned out, hoping for a glimpse of the famous visitor. The helicopter was right on time; spectators were not disappointed as Schwarzkopf arrived wearing his trademark desert camouflage uniform. Everything seemed to be on track. Relaxing for a moment before starting a scheduled press conference, sipping a glass of iced tea in the garden behind the Superintendent's quarters, our guest gave me the first indication that we might have a problem. He had a speech ready, he said, but for some reason he just didn't feel comfortable with it. What would you like me to talk about?" he asked. Now it was my turn to be uncomfortable. The address was set to

start in just three hours, and in that time we had the press conference, a brigade review (parade of the Corps of Cadets) in his honor and dinner with the Corps in Washington Hall. No time to start over. “ Well, any topic would be fine,” I responded tentatively. “ Stories from DESERT STORM, your summary of the entire deployment and employment, international problems remaining, things like that. I added that many cadets had followed the fighting closely through a situation room the Commandant had set up and that a group of commanders from the desert, from platoon through division level, had recently spent several days in seminars with the cadets. He was not visibly encouraged by my suggestions. Sitting backstage in Eisenhower Hall, due to go on in about ten minutes, he confided that he still was perplexed, that he did not have a good idea for a new approach if he abandoned the prepared remarks. “ Really, anything you talk about will be suitable,” I ventured. You are a national hero, and a valuable message is conveyed just by your being here. ” He looked at me ruefully, the way classmates can. Still unsatisfied. Competence And Character: Schwarzkopf’s Message To The Corps Page 2 of 5 “ There simply isn’t a more respected leader in the nation right now than you,” I tried again. “ Remember, the Academy’s very reason for being revolves around leadership. Our purpose is to produce leaders of character. So any topic you are comfortable with will fit the purpose squarely. ” His face lit up. “ That’s it! ” Three minutes to go.

In that short time, in that small holding room, he put his thoughts together. “ Now I know why the original talk wasn’t right,” he said. “ There is only one topic for me at this time at this place. ” Following the introduction, he strode out onto the stage, which was vast and empty except for a huge American

flag hung as a backdrop, reminiscent of the famous scene from the movie Patton. I took my seat, probably the most curious person in the packed theater. Still in desert camouflage battle dress, he paced the stage, as one reporter said, “like a lion.” He had no script, no notes whatsoever.

His address that night was totally unrehearsed. He delivered it in a straightforward fashion, the way he might have talked to soldiers in the field or in some other informal setting. It did not have the rhetorical flourishes or the practiced eloquence of MacArthur’s 1962 “Duty, Honor, Country” speech. Nor was it intended to be anything more than what it was: the right-from-the-heart sentiments of an old soldier about to hang up his uniform after 35 years of service, speaking to 4400 young men and women who were preparing for leadership in the 21st Century. Personal. From him to them.

It had force and a simple majesty. It moved those who heard it. For the rest of their lives, those cadets will remember the night General H. Norman Schwarzkopf talked to them about competence and character. (Schwarzkopf opened with a story of an event occurring when he was on the Academy’s faculty in 1967, then got right to the substance of his remarks.) “What do you say to the leaders of the 21st Century? That’s what you are, America’s leaders of the 21st Century. I’m in the twilight of a mediocre career, and in three short months I’m gone because that’s the Army way.

And that’s the right way; we can’t have the top plugged up and block the upward movement of many, many outstanding leaders. So what does an old warhorse, in his last three months in the Army, say to the leaders of the 21st Century? I think that some of the lessons I have learned in 35 years in the

Army are applicable to you who-this year or next year or the year after or the year after-are going to be leading this great Army of ours. And I thought I'd talk about them just a little bit. First of all, let me talk about the environment when we graduated in 1956.

There weren't going to be any more wars. [President Eisenhower] had adopted a military strategy of massive retaliation. Simply stated, we told the world that anyone who dared attack the vital interests of the United States would be faced with nuclear destruction. Many in that day were espousing that there was absolutely no need for an Army. " We ought to get rid of it, expand the size of our Air Force-ground battles will never be fought again. " I've been to war four times since then. And I've been to war in places where, in 1956, no one-absolutely no one-would have ever predicted.

When I was a cadet, there was something going on over in a place called Dien Bien Phu. I don't really remember very Competence And Character: Schwarzkopf's Message To The Corps Page 3 of 5 well what it was because I wasn't interested in that. After all, who cared about a tiny little place way over in Southeast Asia. When Dien Bien Phu (1956, French Indochina war)fell, it didn't even impress us. A couple of Social Science instructors tried to get us interested, but we didn't pay any attention to them. And certainly, certainly, we didn't know where Grenada was.

As a matter of fact, when I was told I was going to Grenada I said, " That's great. I've always wanted to go to Spain. " And there was a philosophy that the United States would never, ever, ever get involved in a major ground war in the Middle East. Never. That's the environment that we, the Class of ' 56,

graduated into. A man with far more eloquence than I will ever have (Douglas MacArthur) stood inside Washington Hall a few years ago and told the Corps of Cadets that ours is the profession of arms, and that our mission would never change.

Our mission was to fight our nation's wars. He also told us that we could not fail in that mission. A lot of people are calling the war we just won the " video game war. " People are talking about the great technology. But they've been talking about that since the day we graduated. In the final analysis, you should never forget that the airplanes don't fly, the tanks don't run, the ships don't sail, the missiles don't fire-unless the sons and daughters of America make them do it. It's just that simple. The mothers and fathers of America will give you their sons and daughters.

They will hand you their sons and daughters with the confidence that you will not needlessly waste their lives. And you dare not. You absolutely dare not. That's the burden the mantle of leadership places upon you. And it's lonesome, let me tell you. It's terrible, terribly lonesome to realize that you could be the person who gives the orders that will bring about the deaths of thousands and thousands of the young men and women whose lives have been placed in your hands. It is an awesome responsibility, and one that you must prepare yourself for.

As MacArthur said, you cannot fail. You dare not fail, because this entire nation will depend upon you at that time. What kind of a leader must a leader of the 21st Century be? You know, they are having a big discussion about this in America today. They are talking about how the Army turned

itself around, how we changed. And they are saving-because there is such a terrible lack of leadership in American industry today-that perhaps the Army should be studied to find our secret formula to get rid of all those lousy, incompetent leaders who could finally win a war.

That's bull! We didn't lose in Vietnam. Not militarily, I've got to tell you. I never was in a single battle in Vietnam that we lost. Not a one. In fact, we kicked the hell out of the VC and the NVA in every battle I was ever in! But we did lose something in Vietnam. We lost our integrity. There was a terrible erosion of integrity within our leadership in Vietnam. Not everybody. I'm not condemning everyone. But I am saying that that is a fact of life-and we just could not allow that to continue. And you can't let it happen on your watch.

To be a 21st-century leader, you must have two things: competence and character. Competence And Character: Schwarzkopf's Message To The Corps
Page 4 of 5 I've met a lot of leaders that were very, very, very competent. But they didn't have character. For every job they did well in the Army, they sought reward in the form of promotions, in the form of awards and decorations, in the form of getting ahead at the expense of somebody else, in the form of another piece of paper that awarded them another degree.

The only reason why they wanted that was because it was a sure road to faster promotion, to somehow get to the top. You see, these were very competent people, but they lacked character. Now, on the other hand, I've met a lot of leaders who had superb character, but they weren't willing to hold their own feet to the fire. They weren't willing to pay the price of leadership. They were not willing to go the extra mile, to do that extra little

bit because that's what it took to be a great leader. And none of those leaders are with us. And none of those leaders would lead in battle.

Because the bottom line to everything is, again, when you lead in battle-when you lead in battle-you are leading people. You are leading human beings. I've seen competent leaders who stood in front of a platoon and saw it as a platoon. But I've seen great leaders who stood in front of a platoon and saw it as a platoon. But I've seen great leaders who stood in front of a platoon and saw it as 44 individuals, each of whom had his hopes, each of whom had his aspirations, each of whom wanted to live, each of whom wanted to do good. So, you must have competence and you must have character.

Some great man once said that character is seen only when nobody is watching. It's not what people do when they are being watched that demonstrates character, it's what they do when they are not being watched that demonstrates true character. And that's sort of what it's all about. To lead in the 21st Century, to take soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines, coast guardsmen into battle, you will be required to have both competence and character. Out there among you are cynics. They are the people who scoff at what you are learning here. They are the people who scoff at character.

They are the people who scoff at hard work. But they don't know what they are talking about, let me tell you. I can assure you that when the going gets tough and your country needs them, they are not going to be there. They WILL NOT be there. But you will. What's the magic formula? After Vietnam a whole cottage industry developed, basically in Washington, D. C. , that consisted of a bunch that had never been shot at in anger, but who felt fully

qualified to comment on the leadership abilities of all the leaders of the United States Army.

They were not Monday morning quarterbacks, they were the worst of all possible kinds-Friday afternoon quarterbacks. They felt qualified to criticize us before the game was even played. They talked about great operational concepts and plans and maneuvers, never understanding-never understanding-that the plan goes out the window when you cross the line of departure because there is always some son of a bitch in this choreographed dance you have planned who climbs out of the orchestra pit with a bayonet and chases you around the stage!

They are the same ones who were saying, “ My goodness, we have a terrible problem in the Armed Forces because there are no more leaders out there. There are no more combat leaders. Where are the Pattons? Where are the Eisenhowers? Where are the Competence And Character: Schwarzkopf’s Message To The Corps Page 5 of 5 Bradleys? Where are the MacArthurs? Where are the Audie Murphys? They are all gone. We don’t have any out there. ” Coming from a guy who’s never been shot at in his entire life, that’s a pretty bold statement. But, you see, leaders were out there. And they are out there.

And YOU will be out there. The Pattons and the Bradleys and the Audie Murphys, they aren’t running around in peacetime killing people, I hope to hell! it takes a war to demonstrate that we have these people in our ranks, and our ranks are loaded with them. They are loaded with them-and you are going to be one of them when you join our ranks. If there is any doubt in

anybody's mind, or was any doubt in anybody's mind, there sure as hell isn't any doubt now, because it took us 100 hours to kick the ass of the fourth largest army in the world! Competence with character. That's what you must have.

That's what you are going to carry with you from West Point. Those of you who really believe what you are learning here. To hell with the cynics.

Believe it! Believe it! Believe it! You must believe it if you are going to be a leader of the 21st -century military. You must believe it! " Throughout, the Corps had interrupted the general repeatedly with roars of approval – there is no other way to describe their spontaneous and enthusiastic reception of his presentation. At the end, the First Captain (the cadet commander of the Corps of Cadets), asked him if he would stand for questions.

Schwarzkopf had not planned to do so – an audience of nearly 5000 normally is not a good forum for questions – but he graciously accepted the invitation. He held the cadets enthralled for another half hour or so with humor and candor. His performance was a textbook demonstration of charisma and its impact on a body of people. Finally, he paused, looked out over the Corps, and once more made his point: " we've had a good time tonight and we've had a lot of laughs, but I don't want you to forget what I told you before.

Don't ever forget that you are going to lead human beings. Their lives are going to be placed in your hands and you have to measure up. And the only way you are going to measure up is with competence and strong character. And you are learning that at West Point today. Believe it. And to hell with those who tell you not to believe it. And to hell with the skeptics. They won't

be there. You will be. ” For Educational Use only. Used with permission by Assembly Magazine. Not to be reproduced without the permission of Assembly Magazine.