

LEADERSHIP BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE

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Integrity requires the courage of sometimes saying no—or at least a persistent asking “why?”—from all of us to others of us who institute unexamined regulations that often require “no-win” solutions for both the system and personal integrity.

—Richard D. Miller, Chaplain, Colonel, USAF



WHAT IF AN operational leader told you that he had such conflicting demands that he was in a “no-win” dilemma? He could satisfy either demand but not both—and to fail to satisfy either would exact

great professional and personal cost. Most people would say something like, “Sure, there’s a solution. You just haven’t considered all your options. Innovate. Improvise.” Whatever the words, the message would be the same: find a solution. We expect that; it’s our culture.

Our mind-set envisions success in spite of ex -

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ternal constraints. The overriding assumption is that solutions to dilemmas do exist and that these solutions will be honorable to all parties without sacrificing the mission. A further assumption is the existence of clearly right and wrong choices in such dilemmas.

Life is not always so tidy. High military rank is often accompanied by competing or even conflicting interests. Problems can arise for which no painless options exist. For example, an organization's integrity may conflict with constraints that diminish the unit's safety and mission accomplishment. If that is the case, these demands are mutually exclusive. Since we can't compromise integrity, we must find a solution to the dilemma by changing the constraints. If *that* isn't possible, then rather than compromise integrity, leaders must sacrifice themselves professionally to change the constraints in order to resolve the dilemma and preserve the mission and the safety of their people.

Consider operational leaders faced with the legitimate concern for the effectiveness and safety of people under their command and with externally imposed constraints that not only complicate the mission but also unnecessarily imperil their people. These leaders face two realities. First, they don't have a lot of options. Second, none of the options are attractive.

Gen John D. Lavelle faced such a dilemma toward the close of the Vietnam War. As the commander of Seventh Air Force, he was responsible for conducting the air war in Southeast Asia. He was relieved of command on 6 April 1972. The problems he faced, the solution he chose, and the ramifications of his choices offer us lessons about decision making. This honorable officer would be retired as a major general rather than full general—the rank he held as commander of Seventh Air Force. Never before had such an action occurred in American military history.¹

Dilemma

When General Lavelle assumed command of Seventh Air Force in Saigon, South Vietnam, on 1 August 1971, he inherited rules of engagement

(ROE) that had evolved over three years. The ROE maintained the basic restrictions of a 1968 agreement by the Johnson administration² and consisted of directives, wires, and messages defining the conditions under which US aircraft could attack enemy aircraft or weapons systems. Seventh Air Force consolidated those directives into a manual of "operating authorities" and disseminated it to the units. Aircrews received briefings on the ROE prior to each mission.³

Essentially, aircrews could not fire unless they were threatened. Enemy surface-to-air missiles (SAM) or antiaircraft artillery (AAA) had to "activate against" aircrews before they could respond with a "protective reaction strike." Warning gear installed in the planes alerted aircrews that an enemy SAM firing site was tracking them.⁴

American aircrews lost this advantage late in 1971, when the North Vietnamese took several actions to vastly improve their tracking capability, the most important being the integration of their early warning, surveillance, and AAA radars with the SAM sites. This integrated system allowed the North Vietnamese to launch their missiles without being detected by the radar warning gear of US aircraft.

General Lavelle believed that because those mutually supporting radar systems transmitted tracking data to the firing sites, the SAM system was activated against US aircraft anytime they were over North Vietnam. He also learned, through the bitter experience of losing planes and crews on two occasions, that US aircraft were much less likely to evade SAMs when the radars were so netted. He later testified that this experience provided sufficient rationale for planned protective-reaction strikes, noting that "the system was constantly activated against us."⁵

The North Vietnamese also improved their tactics by using ground controlled intercept (GCI) radars to track US aircraft. Azimuth information developed by GCI surveillance was fed to fire-control radars. This netting effectively eliminated tracking with the Fan Song radar and allowed more than one missile site to be directed against a single US aircraft. General Lavelle later testified to Congress that he "alerted his supe-



Radar systems, such as this one south of Hanoi, changed the 1972 air war over North Vietnam and created General Lavelle's dilemma.

riors to the enemy's netting of his radars and advised them that the North Vietnamese now possessed the capability of firing with little or no warning."⁶

The air war had changed. General Lavelle made repeated and futile attempts to get the ROE changed to reflect the new threat to his aircrews and planes. However, not only did Washington refuse to change the ROE but the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) severely criticized General Lavelle for a lack of aggressiveness in fighting the air war. He received a personal visit from the chairman of the JCS, who made it clear that he was to find ways of prosecuting the war more aggressively

within the constraints of the ROE.⁷ The general had a problem. What took priority: the ROE or the safety and effectiveness of his command?

He chose the latter, authorizing a strike on 7 November 1971—the first of 20 to 28 missions from that date to 9 March 1972. Regarding these missions, Lavelle stated that he “made interpretations of the ROE that were probably beyond the literal intention of the rules.”⁸ Each strike involved six to eight aircraft, for a total of 147 sorties out of approximately 25,000 flown during the period. Each mission attacked missile sites, missiles on transporters, airfields, 122 mm and 130 mm guns, or radars.⁹

In response to a JCS inquiry about Seventh Air Force's authority to strike a GCI site on 5 January 1972, General Lavelle replied that, since his aircraft were authorized to hit radars that controlled missiles or AAA, he believed they were also authorized to strike GCI radars that controlled enemy aircraft. He later received another JCS message that, although sympathetic, said he had no authority to strike a GCI radar and that he should order no such strike again.¹⁰

When a leader starts cutting corners in integrity (intentionally or unintentionally), that action can pervade the entire organization.

Although amended on 26 January 1972 to authorize strikes against primary GCI sites when airborne MiGs indicated hostile intent,¹¹ the ROE still didn't address the netted SAM threat. This amendment was as close as General Lavelle got to persuading the JCS to adopt satisfactory rules of engagement.

Consequences

On 8 March 1972, a senator forwarded to the Air Force chief of staff a letter written by an Air Force sergeant—an intelligence specialist in Seventh Air Force. It alleged ROE violations and on-going falsification of daily reports on missions. The Air Force inspector general (IG) flew to Saigon to investigate the matter and confirmed that "irregularities existed in some of 7th Air Force's operational reports."¹² General Lavelle immediately stopped all strikes in question and assigned three men to find a way to continue the protective-reaction sorties but report them accurately. The conclusion was that this couldn't be done.¹³

On 23 March 1972, General Lavelle was offered reassignment at his permanent grade of major general or retirement. He opted for

retirement, effective 7 April 1972.¹⁴ Little did he know what lay ahead.

The Air Force, having already announced that General Lavelle retired for personal reasons, would be forced to admit on 15 May 1972, after congressional inquiry, that the general had not only retired but had also been relieved of command because of "irregularities in the conduct of his command."¹⁵ This revelation led to hearings before the Armed Services Investigations Subcommittee of the House Committee on Armed Services.

In his statements before the committee, General Lavelle convincingly maintained that he did not order the falsification of any reports. Although he insisted throughout the investigations by the Air Force and Congress that he learned of the falsified reports only after the IG investigation, as commander, he accepted full responsibility for those reports.

Reports on four of the missions were found to contain falsehoods.¹⁶ General Lavelle stated that he traced the probable cause of the false reporting to the first protective-reaction strike, which he had directed from the operations center. When his lead pilot reported by radio that the target had been destroyed and that they had encountered no enemy reaction, the general stated, "We cannot report 'no reaction.'" As General Lavelle explained, "I could report enemy reaction, because we were reacted upon all the time [with the existence of the upgraded radar]."¹⁷ Unfortunately, since his instructions to the pilot were vague, aircrews made false statements on some subsequent operational reports.

Congress accepted General Lavelle's explanation of the confusion over his intent regarding the reporting of the protective-reaction strikes—but only after many months of inquiry. By that time, few people were interested in clearing his name; consequently, General Lavelle would be remembered as someone who disregarded the ROE, fought his own unauthorized war, and made everyone falsify reports to keep it secret.

Although none of these allegations appear to be true, General Lavelle did make mistakes. His first was failing to make clear that Seventh Air Force demanded absolute integrity of its people.

Had he done so, there would have been no mistaking his intent concerning operational reports. Indeed, such action might have had the effect of curbing widespread practices—unknown at the time—that were compromising the military’s integrity. Specifically, widespread disclosures were made of illegal bombing and falsification of official records of these illegal raids, which had been going on for years before General Lavelle even appeared on the scene. These revelations caused the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee to drop his probe in August 1973. According to the chairman, “Air Force and Defense witnesses gave us to believe that falsification was so rare and so contemptible that it was good cause to remove General Lavelle from his command and drum him out of the service because he had ordered documents falsified.”¹⁸ However, the chairman’s decision didn’t even merit publication in any of the papers or periodicals that had previously convicted the general in print.

His second mistake lay in choosing to work around the ROE to accomplish the mission yet keep his crews safe. That meant bending the unrealistic ROE, an action that produced both positive and negative results.

From a positive viewpoint, despite the vastly improved North Vietnamese air defenses, no American lives or aircraft were lost during the raids in question. To that extent, General Lavelle’s decision had the desired effect. Ironically, the conditions for protective-reaction strikes—relaxed in January 1972, as mentioned above—were abolished in March 1972, but not before the issue of integrity in reporting would cost General Lavelle his command.

General Lavelle’s actions also had negative effects that he had no way of foreseeing. Therein lies the danger of working around bad ROE rather than having them changed. His decision to “interpret the ROE liberally” had several ramifications.

It led to continuing decay of the command’s integrity, which contributed to the falsification of operational reports, which led to the sergeant’s letter to the senator, which led to

the IG investigation, which led to Lavelle’s being relieved of command, which the Air Force kept secret, which led to a congressional investigation. This phenomenon is now commonly referred to as the “slippery slope effect.” That is, when a leader starts cutting corners in integrity (intentionally or unintentionally), that action can pervade the entire organization.

A commandwide climate of integrity is indispensable.

For General Lavelle, it would get much worse. By this time, he *really* had no control of events, and some of the ramifications of his actions could have had strategic implications for peace negotiations and the credibility of the armed services.

Specifically, at the same time General Lavelle began strikes on the newly integrated radar-SAM/AAA network, Henry Kissinger was in Paris conducting secret peace talks with the North Vietnamese. General Lavelle had no way of knowing about the talks, and Kissinger didn’t know about the bombing. But Le Duc Tho of North Vietnam knew about both. To him, Kissinger was either lying or very poorly informed. Shortly thereafter, the talks broke off abruptly.¹⁹

General Lavelle, as well as the Air Force, Army, and Navy, would feel shock waves from his operational decision: Lavelle was accused of criminal misconduct;²⁰ court-martial charges were filed against him and 22 other officers;²¹ the nomination of Gen Creighton Abrams as chief of staff of the Army was delayed for over four months;²² the Senate Armed Services Committee conducted an extensive and critical look at the command and control structure of the Air Force;²³ General Lavelle’s retirement rank was reduced to major general;²⁴ naval aviators said that they had been involved in protective-reaction raids not authorized by the ROE;²⁵ Department of Defense IGs now reported directly to the service secretaries rather than to their

service chiefs;²⁶ and the Senate Armed Services Committee placed an indefinite hold on promotions for about 160 Air Force officers.²⁷ Amazingly, none of the threatened action against any of the affected officers came to fruition. Although the investigations were eventually dropped, they underscore the fact that operational decisions are not made in a vacuum and that negative effects, however unintentional, can be extensive.

History places some people in circumstances that require them to choose either to do the right thing or keep their careers intact.

Instead of choosing between continuing the missions under intolerable circumstances or obeying the poor ROE, General Lavelle could have averted the problems listed above by ceasing operations until authorities changed the ROE to reflect the reality of the threat. Doing so would have meant going outside the chain of command when his superiors were unresponsive—an action that almost surely would have cost him his command. The option existed, but he chose not to take it. As it turned out, he lost his command anyway. Had he lost his command while demanding proper ROE, he would have (1) forced a change in the rules instead of leaving them to chance, (2) provided an example of the importance of taking care of people under our command *and* maintaining integrity, and (3) avoided the personally and strategically undesirable outcomes he could not foresee.

Lessons Learned

Two important lessons should be clear for operational leaders. The first is understanding the importance of integrity at all levels of command. The second is accepting the fact that sometimes leaders may have to sacrifice themselves because it's the best thing for the organization, the people, and the country.

The first lesson isn't difficult to understand, but it's tough to apply because choices aren't always clear in positions of increased responsibility. Nevertheless, a commandwide climate of integrity is indispensable. To accept anything less than absolute integrity in personal and professional behavior is to invite breakdowns like the one described by the noncommissioned officer who broke the story on false reports in Seventh Air Force:

We went through the normal debrief, and when I asked [the aircrew] if they'd received any AAA, they said, "No, but we have to report it." I went to my NCOIC and asked him what was going on. He told me to report what the crew told me to report. . . . The false information was used in preparing the operational reports and slides for the morning staff briefing. The true information was kept separate and used for the wing commander's private briefings.²⁸

This speaks to the possibility of a wide problem. But in October 1972, the Air Force responded quickly and well to the challenge of reestablishing the standard by sending the following message to all units. It's as applicable today as it was then:

Integrity—which includes full and accurate disclosure—is the keystone of military service. Integrity binds us together into an Air Force serving the country. Integrity in reporting, for example, is the link that connects each flight crew, each specialist and each administrator to the commander-in-chief. In any crisis, decisions and risks taken by the highest national authorities depend, in large part, on reported military capabilities and achievements. In the same way, every commander depends on accurate reporting from his forces. Unless he is positive of the integrity of his people, a commander cannot have confidence in his forces. Without integrity, the commander-in-chief cannot have confidence in us.

Therefore, we may not compromise our integrity—our truthfulness. To do so is not only unlawful but also degrading. False reporting is a clear example of failure of integrity. Any order to compromise integrity is not a lawful order.

Integrity is the most important responsibility of command. Commanders are dependent on the integrity of those reporting to them in every decision they make. Integrity can be ordered, but it can only be achieved by encouragement and example.

I expect these points to be disseminated to every individual in the Air Force—every individual. I trust they help to clarify a standard we can continue to expect, and will receive, from one another.²⁹

That's the kind of message each commander needs to make clear from the outset—the kind of standard people should demand from each other. Still, a valid question remains: “Who can maintain absolute integrity? Not me and not you, so how useful or realistic is such a demand?” The answer begins with other questions. Without such a standard, how would you introduce yourself to your unit? By telling them you expect “really good integrity,” “their best effort,” “what suits each person”? The point is that the standard for integrity is just that—a standard. None of us will attain it every day, but we gain much by holding it before the unit. Consider this: if the standard doesn't apply fully and continuously, then what good is it as a core value? Its value exists precisely in its utility.

The second lesson is more difficult to discuss because the object of the lesson—sacrificing one's career if circumstances require it—is rather unpalatable. Indeed, people are often ridiculed for taking such a stand. Yet, history places some people in circumstances that require them to choose either to do the right thing or keep their careers intact. As the Stoic philosopher Epictetus tells us in *Enchiridion*, “Remember, you are an actor in a drama of such sort as the Author chooses—if short, then in a short one; if long, then in a long one. If it be His pleasure that you should enact a poor man, or a cripple, or a ruler, see that you act it well. For this is your business—to act well the given part, but to choose it belongs to Another.”³⁰

Furthermore, we must recognize that playing the part can exact a great price. Doing the right thing doesn't always result in accolades. The Book of Ecclesiastes has a simple, timeless message: “I returned and saw that the race is not al-

ways to the swift nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise nor riches to men of understanding, nor favors to men of skill, but time and chance happeneth to them all” (9:11). The Book of Job is even more blunt: Job learns that life isn't always fair and that bad things happen to good people. Despite this realization, people must lead—and they must lead within the roles in which history places them.

Conclusion

Abraham Lincoln once remarked that “if you once forfeit the confidence of your fellow citizens, you can never regain their respect and esteem.” Indeed, as unpleasant as the realization might be, sometimes leaders face dilemmas for which no comfortable solution exists. It's not entirely fair for me to criticize General Lavelle for his decisions, since I didn't experience his dilemma. Indeed, if I had to choose between the alternatives he considered, I probably would have made the same choice.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that even if leaders are faced only with gray areas that offer no clear choice, that still does not absolve them from the dilemma. There is a better choice: demand change. If the issue is important enough, the decision maker should demand resolution of unsatisfactory constraints (in this case, the ROE). Even though this option will likely cost the leaders their careers, it is the best decision for the institution and for the people under their command.

This article represents just the first half of the effort. The follow-up work must be an assessment of command ethics. Once we agree that a climate of integrity is a critical leadership issue, we'll want to measure that climate. Such an assessment must identify valid, reliable indicators of the ethical health of a command. It should highlight positive signs as well as warning flags of behavior that need to be addressed before a problem arises. That, it seems to me, is the key: having enough situational awareness in the command to foresee a problem—or at least to recog-

nize one as it is developing—rather than seeing it only in hindsight.

Each commander can accept this challenge informally while preparing for new levels of leadership. Measuring how well the challenge is met might not be possible. That is, ethical lapses might still occur, and we have no way of know-

ing whether they would be more severe or more frequent in the absence of such an effort. What is certain, however, is that this examination—both before assuming command and during command—can ultimately groom more professional people and produce more effective units. □

Notes

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5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, 4.
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30. Quoted in James B. Stockdale, *Thoughts of a Philosophical Fighter Pilot* (Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Press, 1995), 189.