



## **Sign of Strength: Command, Faith, and Personal Example in Today's Army**

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“So help me, God.”

I recited these words—the final words of our oath of office—the day I was commissioned as an Officer in the United States Army. I have repeated them with each subsequent promotion throughout my 38-year career. And for the hundreds, if not thousands, of Soldiers whom I have had the honor to commission, enlist, re-enlist, and promote, “So help me, God,” has also been the final plea of their own oaths as they embark on their military journeys.

Without a shred of doubt, I believe that God has, indeed, helped me. He has blessed me with a strong and healthy family; with brave, hard-working teams of warriors; and with opportunities to serve and lead within the organizations that fight and win this great Nation's wars.

And in these roles—particularly those bearing the weight and responsibility of command—God has helped me find clarity and comfort in the challenges I have faced, and the decisions I have made.

Command is an incredible privilege, however, it is an occasionally (and inevitably) isolating experience. On such occasions, prayer helps me speak to God in special ways, especially when I may not have been able to share my thoughts, burdens, and concerns with another person. In this turn to prayer, I find renewed strength and wisdom for what lies ahead.

By exercising my personal faith, I have experienced that all things seem just a bit easier. My life works better for me when I am led by God, which means to me that I am earnestly representing to others what I myself have been taught. In this way I remain consistent to the values I have been exposed to throughout my life of faith.

Our “Army Leadership and the Profession” doctrine does not speak about faith and religion. However, it does say a lot about the importance a leader's presence, and how we must demonstrate self-confidence,

composure, resilience, and humility.<sup>1</sup> Another leader's interpretations of this doctrine may differ, and rightfully so, but in my own experience, my “presence” is directly correlated with the strength of my relationship with God. Experience has also shown me that many of our Soldiers, Army Civilian professionals, and Family members are at their best when they embrace their own faith.

If you are a Commander at any echelon in the U.S. Army, your leadership and your relationship with God sets the example for the presence and balance your people emulate as they persevere through life's challenges.

## Leadership and Spirituality

Spirituality is a personal and complicated subject, but that does not mean spiritual conversations of faith should be considered forbidden or controversial in your organization.

Although the Army defines the “Spiritual Dimension” as one of its Five Dimensions of Personal Readiness,<sup>2</sup> I have observed Commanders who are hesitant to promote this pillar of well-being. Why this hesitancy?

I believe there are leaders who avoid conversations about religion, and in particular avoid sharing their own experiences. Perhaps they focus on potentially negative outcomes, such as complaints of offense by those who do not share their beliefs. Commanders understandably do not want to be

perceived as using their position of authority to proselytize to others.

The reasons for this type of risk aversion are not lost on me; religion is rightfully protected by the Army's equal opportunity program, and freedom of religion is the very first guarantee in the U.S. Constitution. Commanders are conditioned to look at their environment through the lens of risk, and some may decide the risk of violating these principles—and in turn, their Soldiers' trust—is not worth taking.

However, I want you to know that by using the traits that helped you become a Commander (such as your ability to listen with empathy, and communicate with respect), you can easily navigate potential risks without eliminating the “Spiritual Dimension” from your conversations.

I will illustrate my point with a physical fitness analogy, as I am prone to do. Although I am a fitness nut, my personal preference is not to run marathons, power-lift extreme weights, or follow an especially restrictive diet. However, I have learned healthy, interesting, and useful lessons from friends and teammates who practice these lifestyles. Some of their stretches, form adjustments, and recipes have found a place in my own routines. While other practices may not resonate with me personally, they nonetheless make for stimulating conversations and experiences.

Conversations about spirituality hold the same potential. Those with a strong connection to faith have the powerful opportunity to reveal techniques and practices that may help their teammates build resilience. Leaders may, likewise, help build bonds through shared experiences when they show a healthy interest in the spiritual lives of those around them. And this can happen in the same way we show healthy interests in one another's families, hometowns, hobbies, goals, and passions.

I encourage Commanders to build a climate where such conversations are welcome. I want, however, you as a Commander to emphasize—perhaps explicitly—that the Commander's religion is not the command's religion. Spiritual discussions within your teams should serve to spark and create inclusion and inspiration, as opposed to exclusion and condemnation. Your Chaplain is not only well-prepared to coach you through leading these types of conversations; they are also well-positioned to receive, transmit, and translate candid feedback from your Soldiers.

### **Resurgence of Faith**

While the Pew Research Center reports that Americans' religious affiliation is declining,<sup>3</sup> I have anecdotally observed a resurgence of faith inside the U.S. Army, or at the very least that Soldiers demonstrate increased ease with expressing their own individual beliefs. This trend I am seeing encourages me, because I find there is a basic human

connection between one's faith and the life-and-death business of warfighting. Through almost four decades of commissioned service, I have witnessed the transition from battalion and brigade leaders of the late 1980s and '90s who avoided discussing religion with their formations, to today's Army where I see leaders who are willing to share their personal experiences with faith.

Whether this transition is attributable to the past 20 years of combat deployments, or other cultural and even generational factors, the collective impact reflects the "People First" Army we are committed to building and sustaining. The only way to put "People" first in our formations, is by prioritizing that which is inherently personal.

What I believe this means for today's company, battalion, and brigade Commanders who get more frequent touchpoints with the same groups of Soldiers than I do at the four-star level, is that you operate in a spiritually permissive environment. Your Soldiers are likely comfortable with, if not actively open to, the positive ways that religion can impact their lives. Even your Soldiers who are among the three-in-ten U.S. adults who consider themselves religiously unaffiliated<sup>4</sup> have something to gain from the moral code, sense of community, and prospects for hope and optimism that are present in most major religions.

## The Power of Your Personal Example

When I was preparing to become a battalion Commander, I received the wise advice to carefully consider which unit member I would first meet with after assuming command. All eyes are on the new Commander, and it made sense to me that my first meeting would send a message about my focus and priorities.

My first meeting was with my Chaplain because I wanted to show, not simply tell, the unit that my relationship with God is an important pillar in my leadership philosophy; and that I valued the Chaplain's unique role to and access within the battalion.

I am convinced that personal example is the only effective way to lead others, especially in our Army where young men and women deserve to see leaders willing to sweat and bleed at their side. One of the many ways I have strived to lead by personal example is through modeling the benefits of prayer and spiritual fitness, so that others could feel comfortable expressing their own personal faith.

Through my career, I have sought opportunities to grow in my personal faith, and to send Soldiers an encouraging, welcoming message about the importance of religion in their own lives. As Commander of U.S. Army Central, I even made the effort to attend mass in the Middle East's major cities any time I found myself spending

the weekend in a permissive partner nation. By dedicating some of my time to praise, confession, and reflection, it was my hope that the Soldiers I visited felt equally empowered to take time for their own spiritual health—and specifically for religious expression, if they felt called to do so.

Beyond merely meeting with your Chaplain, I encourage you as Commanders to make them your partner in formulating the spiritual example you will set. Their experience and judgment will inform the opportunities you take to practice and discuss faith. Perhaps more importantly, your Chaplain will bolster the personal peace and perspective you gain from these opportunities.

As I wrote in this article's opening, command inevitably involves isolating moments. In such time, where will you turn? Some choose to labor excessively long days or find fleeting satisfaction in recreational outlets, while still others may turn to unhealthy vices that destroy careers, relationships, and unit culture.

Even in our loneliest or most stressful times, a leader's responsibility is to model healthy behavior across all domains. When we show grace—the kind of grace I receive when I am right with God—during challenging times, we lead Soldiers to know it is possible (and expected) for them to do the same. In this context, the power of your personal example depends on the alignment between how you are seen practicing spiritual fitness, and how that spiritual

fitness helps you walk a positive, respectful life.

When I was selected to become a four-star general in the Army, General Joseph Votel, a leader I deeply respect and at the time my boss at U.S. Central Command, reminded me to “use my rank for good.” By this he meant I should seek opportunities to be a “happy general,” to give Soldiers and teammates positive interactions and memories, and to actively seek chances to help people attain opportunities they are bold enough to pursue.

I encourage this article's readers—and any leader in our Army—to use their rank for good, and, even more importantly, to use their faith for good. You are in a unique, once-in-a-lifetime position to make a lasting impact on the people who will fight and win the Nation's wars, and go on to lead Soldiers and communities of their own.

I pray you choose to make spiritual fitness a part of your personal leadership example. With candor, humility, and presence, you will find there is very little risk—and a great deal of reward—in acknowledging faith's powerful connection with our profession of arms.

So help me, God.

## NOTES

1 Headquarters, Department of the Army, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, ADP 6-22 (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2019), Table 3-1, [https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR\\_pubs/DR\\_a/ARN20039-ADP\\_6-22-001-WEB-0.pdf](https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN20039-ADP_6-22-001-WEB-0.pdf).

2 Headquarters, Department of the Army, *Comprehensive Soldier and Family Fitness*, Army Regulation 350-53 (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2014), 2-5, [https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR\\_pubs/DR\\_a/pdf/web/r350\\_53.pdf](https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/r350_53.pdf).

3 Gregory A. Smith, "About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated," Pew Research Center, December 14, 2021, <https://www.pewforum.org/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/>.

4 *Ibid.*