

Leadership: Objective and Moral Courage

Col Allan W. Howey

Leadership is mostly in the eye of the beholder. Subordinates almost always know a good leader when they see one. During my years in the United States Air Force, I've been most impressed with leaders who "keep their eyes on the prize" (i.e., the "principle of the objective") and have the moral courage to do so. It's not as easy as it sounds.

In the annals of military history, the American Civil War offers many examples of leaders who wouldn't allow distractions to divert them from their ultimate goal. President Abraham Lincoln, America's greatest wartime leader, was one such person. Throughout the war he was beset with opponents who tried to distract him from his efforts to preserve the Union. Although commander in chief, he often had to overcome the petty resistance of even his military subordinates.

In the early years of the war, President Lincoln greatly suffered the indignities of the general in chief of the Union army, Maj Gen George B. McClellan. McClellan felt himself far superior to his commander in chief, whom he called an "idiot" behind the president's back. The general frequently refused to share his operational plans with Lincoln and openly snubbed the president. One evening Lincoln and Secretary of State William Seward walked to McClellan's home, which was only a short distance from the White House. Informed by the general's servant that McClellan was at the wedding of one of his officers, the two Union leaders decided to wait in the parlor for the general's return. When McClellan arrived by the back door some time later, his servant told him of his high-ranking guests. In a remarkable act of discourtesy, the general in chief told his servant that he was tired and went on to bed! Lincoln took the insubordination calmly and returned to the Executive Mansion.¹

Why did Lincoln tolerate such crass disrespect? He was willing to endure McClellan's abuse, because he knew that the general was an outstanding organizer and was helping the Union cause. The Union needed McClellan's talents, whatever his faults! Only later, when Lincoln realized that the outstanding organizer wouldn't send his outstanding organization into battle did he relieve McClellan from command. Regardless of McClellan's insulting behavior, Lincoln kept his eyes on the ultimate objective—saving the Union. It took a great deal of moral courage.

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In the area of moral courage, the Civil War battle of Gettysburg presents many fine examples, but one little-known episode stands out. After the 1970s novel, *Killer Angels*, and the 1990s movie, *Gettysburg*, many Americans came to know the name of Col Joshua Chamberlain. The heroic stand of his 20th Maine Infantry regiment on the southern slope of a hill called "Little Round Top" kept the Army of the Potomac from being outflanked by Confederate Gen Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. Chamberlain's physical and moral courage are unquestioned, but another fine example of moral courage—that of Col Strong Vincent—is often neglected.

Colonel Vincent commanded a brigade of four infantry regiments of which Chamberlain's 20th Maine was a part. On 2 July 1863 Vincent's division commander ordered his brigade to reinforce a threatened part of the Union battle line in a place now known simply as the "Wheatfield." Nearly in place, Vincent flagged down a mounted courier who was desperately searching for troops to defend the hill that Vincent's brigade had marched past just a few minutes before. The hill was unoccupied by Federal soldiers, and its seizure was threatened by advancing Confederates. Vincent instantly realized that the hill, Little Round Top, was the key to the Union defensive line. If the Confederates occupied it, they would turn the Federal left flank and be astride the nearest Union escape routes. The Northern Army would either be trapped or forced to withdraw in a direction that would uncover Washington and Baltimore.

Without waiting for his chain of command to issue the necessary orders, Vincent immediately shifted his brigade to Little Round Top as fast as it could move. He positioned his four regiments, including Chamberlain's 20th Maine, on the southern slope of the crucial eminence. They arrived in the nick of time. Within minutes, Confederate infantry appeared at the base of the hill, determined to take it. Vincent's lone brigade fought desperately and fended off multiple enemy assaults before eventually being reinforced. Chamberlain's well-known fight was heroic, but it was only part of a larger whole instigated by Vincent who risked court-martial for not following his original orders. Vincent's moral courage—knowing what had to be done and taking the initiative to do it despite the risk—saved the Union army. It also cost Vincent his life. He was mortally wounded on the bloody incline and died five days later.²

In more recent years, I served with an officer, Col John A. Warden III, who also focused on the objective and had the moral courage to stay the course whatever the personal cost.

Warden, the Billy Mitchell of the modern era, together with his “Checkmate” staff, developed the air campaign concept that eventually won the Gulf War. Convinced that a strategic air campaign using conventional weapons could achieve victory against Iraq, Warden faced a fractured Air Force hierarchy. The Strategic Air Command (SAC) was primarily responsible for strategic air warfare, but to SAC, “strategic” essentially meant nuclear. The other Air Force warfighting command, Tactical Air Command (TAC), focused nearly exclusively on supporting the US Army on the battlefield by winning air superiority, interdicting enemy supply lines, and providing close air support to the ground troops. No one except Warden and his staff seemed to think in terms of a *war-winning* air campaign that employed *nonnuclear* weapons.

Colonel Warden faced opposition at every turn. TAC, in particular, rejected his ideas, and the organization charged with fighting the air war in the Persian Gulf, Central Command Air Force (CENTAF), agreed with TAC’s line of reasoning. The CENTAF commander, when first presented with Warden’s plan, threw it across the room in disgust! To make matters even worse, Warden’s superior in the Pentagon fought the colonel’s theories with a vengeance. More than once Warden felt his career was over and even gathered boxes in his office in which to pack up and remove his personal effects.

Warden refused to allow “insignificant” distractions, such as career suicide, to keep him from the goal of winning the Gulf War through airpower. He did not fight for his own glorification, he fought to save Coalition ground troops, whose lives would end in violent combat if the air campaign failed. With the moral courage of his convictions, Warden refused to give up, and he fought to preserve his ideas with the civilian leaders of the Air Force and Department of Defense and

those military leaders who were sympathetic. Many ground soldiers are alive today because he had the guts to stay the course.³

Military history—both distant and recent—is rich with examples of superior leadership. All good leaders, through personality, training, or both, develop many different techniques to inspire those whom they lead. What they all have in common is a commitment to the objective, the “big picture,” and the moral courage to follow it to the ends of the earth whatever the cost.

Notes

1. An excellent narrative of this episode may be found in David H. Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 317–20. The original eyewitness account, written by Lincoln aide John Hay, may be found in Tyler Dennett, ed., *Lincoln and the Civil War in the Diaries and Letters of John Hay* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1939), 34–35.

2. For a full summary of the struggle for Little Round Top and Col Strong Vincent’s central role in its defense, read Harry W. Pfanz, *Gettysburg, The Second Day* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 201–40. See also Oliver W. Norton, *The Attack and Defense of Little Round Top* (New York: Neal Publishing Co., 1913), 253–75. Norton, Vincent’s brigade bugler and standard bearer, was never far from the colonel’s side and witnessed all the events cited. His eyewitness account of Vincent’s intercepting the courier and taking responsibility for moving his brigade to Little Round Top is found on page 264.

3. I observed some of these events after I joined the Checkmate staff in September 1990. Two studies published by Air University Press chronicle the opposition to Colonel Warden’s air campaign planning concepts—Edward C. Mann III, Col, USAF, *Thunder and Lightning: Desert Storm and the Airpower Debates* (Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air University Press, 1995) and Richard C. Reynolds, Col, USAF, *Heart of the Storm: The Genesis of the Air Campaign Against Iraq* (Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air University Press, 1995). For an eyewitness account of the CENTAF commander, then: Lt Gen Charles A. Horner, throwing Warden’s briefing slide across the room, see Reynolds, page 91.