

**Air University Graduation
May 25, 2006
Remarks by General Charles G. Boyd, USAF (Ret.)**

It was some 29 years ago that I sat where you are now sitting, and waited as patiently as possible for the graduation speaker to finish so that I could get on with my move from Prattville, and my post Air War College life. My expectations were low, and my hope—singular—and fervent—was that the speaker would keep it --- mercifully short. I have no reason to believe your hopes and aspirations are different than mine on that long ago day. But, since your commandant has not yet issued your diplomas you're stuck with me for the next few minutes, so let's see if we can do something useful with the time.

My class of the Air War College, the class of '77, came to Maxwell with a bad hangover from the Vietnam War. Virtually all of us had been a part of that war in one way or another, a large number as direct combatants. Since the war had lasted so long, some measured their involvement—direct and indirect—over a period of nearly 15 years. We were, though no one used the term, vested. Then, to watch something we had so long supported, fought for, watched our friends die for, end ignominiously the year before with the lingering image of desperate, pathetic figures being rescued from the top of the U.S. embassy in Saigon—had not settled well with us.

We were in the very heart of the Vietnam generation of officers—mid grade professionals now, who had gone out to Indo China first as young lieutenants and captains, filled with excitement and energy, eager to test our skills and mettle, as young men are wont to do. But with something else, too—we had all been born in the decade of the 30s, depression era babies, mostly raised in middle or working class families and thus imbued with those values of endurance and tenacity that were a necessary ingredient for our parent's survival. We had not been raised to be quitters.

As youngsters we had witnessed the triumphant conclusion of a great war fought for moral reasons, by a generation now remembered as the greatest, and most of us could recall the death of a beloved, trusted president who had led the country through the twin crises of war and deprivation. We believed in our country, in our political system and in the righteousness of its objectives. For most of us, I think, we went to our war not just because it was a professional obligation, or a youthful adventure, but because it was the right thing to do. To have it end then, as it did, left us deeply troubled.

So our year at the Air War College was in the early period of post war analysis, and included appearances of some of the actors who had played responsible roles, and who now had something to gain or lose in the process. So blame identification, and blame avoidance, a familiar feature of the scene we see all the time in our nation's capital, came to the halls of Air University. With wary eyes, we watched through the course of the year a parade of generals cross this stage with their own versions of what had gone wrong in that war. Some with subtlety, others less so, but all identifying the massive political failures, ignorance, ineptitude, and serial deceit that had gone into the conduct of that war—always at the hands of the politicians.

Finally, late in the year I raised my hand to question a well known 4-star who spoke of the tribulations in executing what he called a “bankrupt policy.” My question, phrased with more respect than I felt, was simply, “If the policy was bankrupt, why didn't you and others resign rather than execute it?” What followed was a sharp look over his shoulder by the commandant to see just who this rude student was, and a good bit of discomfort on the part of the 4-star as he haltingly explained how such an act would have done no good, another would have simply taken his place and carried on.

Subsequent research by a friend in the history department at the Air Force Academy revealed that only two generals in the history of this republic had ever resigned in protest against policy they could not stomach. It has never become part of our military culture, and, unless done massively, probably would be—as the general asserted-- ineffectual. This was probably not the answer. But what then is the answer?

I don't speak for all of my classmates, or perhaps even for most, but I know many of us left our Vietnam redux agonistics with the uneasy feeling that the failures of Vietnam were not all at the hands of our political masters. Some of the blame had to be shared by a quiescent military leadership.

Now your class, that of 2006, has just completed a year, I should think, of deep reflection on another war, certainly one very different from Vietnam, but with troubling echoes of that war just the same. When, early last month, as 7 retired generals took to the TV studios and op-ed pages to call for the resignation of the defense secretary, surely the seminar rooms of this building came alive with excited debate. What did you conclude? Did you reach consensus? Were the retired generals right in their charges? And, more important, were they right to make those charges? I'd like to know your thoughts, and maybe some of you can tell me later,

but for now, I've got the transmitter, so I'll tell you what one more retired general has to say on this subject.

First of all, the press had a field day—week—nearly a month, and they're probably not through with it yet. This was an extraordinary event, they claimed, no one could remember anything like this happening before, truly a revolt of the generals. This was controversy, and of course the press loves controversy. Not that it was *new* controversy. The war in general and Rumsfeld in particular, have grown steadily more controversial almost from the beginning, and certainly since the revelations of Abu Ghraib. But the generals brought a freshness to the controversy, and delighted those who had opposed the war all along. In some circles, at least, they became very popular.

There really wasn't much new in what the generals actually had to say. The public has long had a pretty good picture of Rumsfeld's management style. And all the major mistakes the generals emphasized have been pretty well cataloged over the past couple of years. No, what was new was not what was being said, but who was saying it, plus the fact that the criticism was directed not just at the mistakes, but at the particular official who made them. Coming from these particular sources the charges had real gravity. At least, that is, until some other generals were rounded up by the defense department and the White House to counter the resentful retirees, and defend the secretary.

While the secretary's defenders helped confuse the issue, it was the action of the President that told us what the retirees had actually accomplished. The issue of Rumsfeld's competence had long been debated on the Hill and in the press, and among the chattering classes. But when the retirees entered the debate the issue switched from one of SecDef competence to one of civilian control of the military. The President, even if he wanted to fire his defense secretary, now could not—at least in the near term. And the President told us that in his very strong defense of the secretary. He would not cave in to pressure from his military—active duty or retired.

So, that's the pragmatic aspect of what these men accomplished—not what they set out to achieve. End of story, or is it? What should we make of this that might be helpful as a guide to professional behavior?

All of those retired generals—and some silent active duty types who agree with them as well—are good and well intentioned men. They earned their right to hold critical views—some, up close and very personal. And they spoke out with no trace of a motive of personal gain. They spoke because of their deep concern—in some cases,

agony—for the direction of this war, and the way it's being executed. Nor is there any law against retired military officers speaking out. The question is not if they can, but if they should.

I think the answer to that is—no. And not just for the pragmatic reason mentioned before. It's very difficult for a general to take off his uniform—even if he wants to. He has professional knowledge, he has experience relating to an arcane subject, little known or understood by the average civilian, he is likely to have borne risk in execution of his duties, and so when he speaks he has a special kind of credibility. And because his knowledge may relate to a hugely important issue involving lives, and treasure and national objectives, he may feel very passionate—compelled, even, to speak. Yet when he does, if he does so in criticism of a political policy, or of a particular politician, he—himself—immediately becomes politicized. His nobility of purpose is lost in the ensuing, inevitable, counter attack. His retired status becomes obscured—he is a military man involved in a political debate. While the public knows there is a legal distinction between the active duty and retired officer's right to speak out publicly, when the retired officer does so in what becomes useful to one side in partisan debate, the substance of his argument takes on political taint—and, to a degree, the military's purity as a whole is diminished.

That purity is the most important virtue this profession has. You know, though sometimes your families need to be reminded, that you follow a profession that is held in high esteem by the American people—higher than any other—medicine, law, the clergy—business, education, journalism, politics. It comes to you for a combination of reasons—first and foremost for the unlimited liability clause in your professional contract. You are asked to commit everything, up to and including your life if necessary. No other profession asks that of its adherents. You sacrifice some of your civil liberties to serve, you take an obligation of obedience unlike any other profession, you do not profit—in monetary terms—from the quality of your ideas and the skill of your management. And—you accept an ethical responsibility to remain aloof from politics—you don't run for office, campaign for others, endorse candidates, or participate in partisan public debate. Accordingly, you are assumed to have a purity of motive unlike any other in the society.

But what good is this esteem, this wonderful credibility, if it can't be used? If military officers can't speak out publicly in criticism of incompetent leaders or bankrupt strategies, and protest resignations are likely to be ineffectual, what other means do you have?

You have only one, and this is your cross to bear. Your voice, esteemed and credible though it is, has an effect—is only truly effective—when it is used inside the corridors of the policy formulation process—inside the government you serve.

This is a very difficult challenge, made the more so by the subservient nature of your culture. You say sir or ma'am to those senior to you, and while that courtesy has considerable value, it also makes it harder to speak in counter argument to your seniors. You are taught from the beginning of your officer training of the intrinsic merit in the maintenance of civilian control over the military. Acceptance of that subordination doesn't make it easier to tell your superior when he or she is wrong. But this you must do, and if you don't you forfeit the right to criticize the flawed policy your silence helped make possible.

Those generals pacing this stage in the mid 70s, we suspected then and now know—through careful research by scholars such as H. R. McMaster in Dereliction of Duty—did not speak forcefully to their civilian masters in opposition to what they knew was wrong. And the generals of recent “revolt” had a much greater chance of affecting troop strengths, about which they now complain, had they stood up to their bosses when the policy was being made.

I know how hard it sometimes can be to oppose strong willed bosses even when you're certain you are right. You work hard, you have talent and want to advance, and yet you know a vindictive boss can stifle you, or worse, truncate your career. But this is the only professional—indeed, ethical—course available to you.

In the autumn of your years, as you reflect on the mark you have left, you will be proudest of those times you took the risk to do the right thing and not the expedient. And you will be most ashamed to recall the times you remained silent when you should have stated your mind.

Your generation of military professionals is facing a more complex and dangerous security environment than anyone envisioned at the end of the cold war—perhaps more dangerous than any we faced before, precisely because we don't yet understand the motivations of those who threaten us—and they are legion—nor how to defend against their weapons of choice.

Many of you have already fought, and you will continue to fight—and lead others to fight. Many of you will find yourself in the role of advising civilians who are placed in positions of authority over you. They will know less than you about the science and craft of your profession, they will lack your training and education in this

arcane business, yet sometimes hold strong views about its application. Your task—indeed your responsibility—is to help them make the right decisions. With all the power of persuasion you can muster, and at whatever personal risk you perceive that may require, you must tell your bosses what your professional judgment dictates. It is then—before the decisions are made—that you are most effective, not in the TV studios and on the op-ed pages later, after you failed, or worse, did not try, to alter a bankrupt course of action.

You have great challenges—and opportunities—ahead. I wish you well, and Godspeed.