

# Is This a One-Mistake Air Force?

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I have lectured to the last 33 classes of the Squadron Officer School, on many occasions to the Air Command and Staff College, and to numerous other service schools. During the question-and-answer period following these presentations an inquiry of almost every group has been, “Is this a one-mistake Air Force?” This view is articulated particularly by those of the rank of major and below but primarily by captains and lieutenants.

To find the answer to this question, I have interviewed senior officers of the Air Force, past and present, and it is clear that the issue of “one mistake” has been around a long, long time—probably as long as we have had an Air Force. The attitude is more prevalent in some time periods than others, but certainly it is a concern of our young officers today.

Is this a one-mistake Air Force? If not, what leads to this perception? If there is such a perception, what problems does just its existence present? If it is not a one-mistake Air Force, but the perception exists, what does one do to persuade those who hold this view that it is not?

Perhaps we should first ask, what difference does it make? Obviously, such an outlook is not helpful to morale. But another even more important concern is that the young officer who is afraid of making a mistake will be reluctant to move out, to use initiative, to be innovative, to exercise imagination, to express ideas, all of which are vital to a truly professional Air Force. The fear of making a mistake presents an atmosphere that is unhealthy and even has the potential for being disastrous to the readiness of the Air Force.

My research has clearly established that there is a perception on the part of many of our young officers that it is a one-mistake Air Force. It is brought on in many cases by supervisors who are not sufficiently sensitive or able to articulate

what the true goals, attitudes, rules, and regulations of the Air Force are. In the absence of such articulation it is easy for that kind of attitude to affect others when it is espoused by those who feel strongly about the matter. The attitude is unquestionably given a boost by those supervisors who are intimidators, who use “a kick in the posterior” as their primary means of handling people, and who use rule through fear rather than leadership as their principal tool for controlling people and controlling behavior in others. There are such people around, and unfortunately there probably always will be.

“In my experience these kinds of people are becoming fewer in numbers, certainly among the higher grades in the Air Force,” commented Gen W. L. Creech, commander of Tactical Air Command from 1978 to 1985.

But when that style is encountered, it does indeed create an attitude among our young officers, that if they do the least little thing wrong, or as they would articulate it make a “mistake,” they will literally be cut off at the knees in the sense that their career would be at a standstill, that there would be career penalties as well as harsh words. I believe some supervisors, not by any means the predominant numbers of supervisors, unwittingly allow the one-mistake view to flourish because they do not address the problem.

First we have to ask, “What is a mistake?” General Creech emphasized the importance of distinguishing between a mistake and a crime. “I have known officers in every grade from second lieutenant up to four-star general,” he said.

who have been known to be very, very prone to break rules, who take a cavalier attitude about rules and regulations. When one willfully and wantonly breaks a regulation, which is in reality a law in the Air Force, *that is a crime*. It cannot be tolerated. The military depends upon the three pillars of integrity, loyalty, and discipline for the success in carrying out its assigned mission of deterring war and prevailing in combat if deterrence fails. It is guided by establishing regulations to be carried out in a reasoned, thoughtful and regulated way, which is absolutely imperative in a professional fighting force.

In his answer to the question on the one-mistake issue, Gen Charles A. Gabriel, Air Force chief of staff from 1982–86, reflected, “The first thing one has to do is to define mistake since there are many different kinds of mistakes. For some mistakes you can easily get thrown out of the Air Force immediately, for example, by being dishonest, doing something to disgrace the uniform, causing an international incident, fraternization, or serious violations of regulations.”

When the same question was asked of Gen David C. Jones, Air Force chief of staff from 1974–78, he replied, “Well, there isn’t a simple yes or no answer to that. Yes, if

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the mistake is one of integrity or improper conduct of the individual. It might be a mistake that would not terminate a career in the literal sense, but certainly make it unlikely of moving ahead in promotion.”

“There is a difference between a mistake and a crime,” was the thought of Gen Robert Russ, present commander of Tactical Air Command. “I learned that from Bill Creech. He put it better than I ever heard it before. He would often say to us, ‘you can tolerate mistakes, but you can’t tolerate a situation where someone goes out and commits a crime.’ ” “How do you define a crime?” continued General Russ.

Sometimes it is difficult to distinguish between the two. That’s when you have to make the judgments. Some cases are very clear, others are not. For example, in an aircraft accident, a pilot forgets to turn on a switch and it results in an accident, he made a mistake. Did he do it on purpose? No. Do we need to train him some more? Yes. Should he be fired? Probably not.

On the other hand a pilot buzzes his hometown, does a loop, clips a tree, and crashes an airplane. That is a crime because it’s against all the rules and regulations. The pilot knew that before he did it, therefore, it was premeditated. If an aircrew directly violates the rules and regulations, that is a crime, and tough action is in order.

When Gen Bennie Davis, commander in chief of Strategic Air Command (CINCSAC) from 1977 to 1983, was interviewed he also made a distinction between a mistake and a crime. “Let me give you an example of a crime—drug abuse,” he said. “If an airman basic or first-term airman is caught using marijuana, he could be placed on probation to permit a chance for rehabilitation. Yes, a terrible mistake in discipline is made in using the drug, but all is not lost. But for someone who knows better, an officer, or senior NCO, there is no second chance. It is a crime and cannot be tolerated.”

What leads to the perception of a one-mistake Air Force? Aircrews are the ones who most often talk about a one-mistake Air Force. Perhaps their squadron commander was relieved from duty after an accident, and the wing commander was fired. It may appear to the members of the squadron that it was an isolated incident. They say to themselves or others, “I don’t understand why they did that.” What they don’t know at that level of rank is that firing might have occurred because the wing commander did not understand what was going on, or the wing commander wasn’t able to differentiate between a mistake and a crime, or—more important after it happened, the wing commander did not have any notion of why it happened or did not take corrective action to prevent it from happening again. It’s one thing to make a mistake; another, once you make a mistake, not to know how to correct it.

“If I ask a wing commander after an accident, ‘What would you do to prevent that accident from happening again?’ and he says ‘I think we did the right thing, I’d do the same thing again,’ that’s the wrong answer,” commented General Russ. “A man is killed and an airplane lost. You have got to do something to prevent that from happening again. When you get into the situation where a mistake has

occurred and the commander doesn’t know why, you have to get somebody else to run that particular organization.”

This sort of dialogue is going on among the commanders. It is not ongoing with the young officers in the squadron who only see that their boss has been relieved. There are different levels of mistakes. There are small ones that go unnoticed in the humdrum of day-to-day affairs, and there are big ones. Someone gets relieved and the rumors are after the person was fired that the person made one mistake and was fired. In reality, it was instead the culmination of several matters of poor judgment; but those at the lower ranks are not aware of the reason. Thus, sometimes there is a perception that there was a single mistake that resulted in a firing or reassignment, but instead it was an accumulation of mistakes.

While a (single) crime is not tolerated, it is quite different with mistakes. I interviewed 15 four-star generals in researching the issue of the so-called one-mistake Air Force. All of them made mistakes throughout their careers on the way to the top. The present Air Force chief of staff, Gen Larry D. Welch, in response to my inquiry commented, “In a one-mistake Air Force I never would have been promoted to major.” Gen Alton Slay, former commander of Systems Command, replied, “I don’t know of any senior officers who haven’t made mistakes along the way.” I asked him if he would relate any specific mistakes he made. He said, “We don’t have that much time.”

“I was a young major flying on my own crew,” recalled General Davis, “preparing for the bombing competition. I made a mistake which resulted in a major aircraft accident in a B-47. I didn’t destroy the airplane, but it was unflyable after that. My spot majority was removed, I was taken off instructor pilot status. These were Curt LeMay days—in 1957. But six months later, I was back as an instructor pilot and again recommended for a spot promotion to major. I had worked my way out of the problem.”

Gen John W. Roberts in reflecting on his career said, “I crashed two aircraft when I was a captain, a B-25 and later an F-86. Both were pilot error. I cracked up the F-86 in the woods in Michigan where the only thing left after the crash were the engine and me.”

Gen Bryce Poe II, former commander of Logistics Command, remembered, “As a lieutenant I received two Article 104s for things I did wrong with my airplane. For example, I received a fine and extra duty for making 14 low-level runs down a crowded beach within a RF-80 on a photo mission where I only had film for three runs. I got my tail kicked.”

I could go on and on describing mistakes made by senior officers in their careers. If there is a perception of a one-mistake Air Force, what problems do just its existence present? These mistakes certainly did not end their careers. The issue of one-mistake needs to be addressed because it could inhibit initiative and risk taking. Certainly, initiative must be strongly encouraged; it is vital to excellence in leadership. “I tried to create and communicate with their ideas, to create an atmosphere that was receptive to creativity,” reflected

General Jones. “Even if the ideas were not good, I didn’t just dismiss them. I didn’t want to discourage my men, so I would explain to them why the idea wasn’t good or suggest how it could be adapted to work.”

“For initiative,” continued General Jones, “you need a balance between being a maverick and a conformist if you want to accomplish something. There are other professions where you can be a maverick, but not in the military, which is a system that requires discipline. I always tried to be a bit nonconformist but was careful not to be a maverick that alienated the system. There are some officers who go too far and are complete mavericks. You have to be careful how you conduct yourself, to be perceptive on how far you go.”

General Gabriel gave an example of initiative. When he was assigned to Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) in 1967, as a lieutenant colonel, “I could have just sat back, taken what came into the office and handled it very easily. I could have had a soft, comfortable life. Many SHAPE officers did that,” he said, “but they missed out.”

You’ve got to go out and stir things up. Although I was in plans, I worked with the people in operations and I turned things around a little. We had an archaic system and I said to myself, “What do you do about it!” It’s hard to move a big outfit like that. How do you make an elephant dance? You keep poking at it. You could sit back and keep your nose clean and go right along, probably getting just a good report, but I went out and looked for work. I wanted to learn. I wanted to improve. Who is the best guy for the Air Force? The officer who goes out and looks for work. Actually, when you expose yourself in using initiative you’re going to make some mistakes, but you will also accomplish a lot more.

“As a young first lieutenant during the Korean War I was always busy flying,” said General Davis.

I was the only first lieutenant in the bomb wing that became an aircraft commander and instructor pilot. Most of the aircraft commanders were captains, majors, or lieutenant colonels. Why so early for me? Because in my first flying assignment out of pilot training, I used to volunteer to fly extra. I mastered my profession so I could become an aircraft commander, and I did—in a year and a half. I flew days, nights, and weekends. I had a lot of good current flying time so they made me wing standardization evaluation crew checking all the senior crews, because I was willing to give 8, 10, 12, 14 hours a day; and it took that.

Once when he was CINCSAC, Gen Curtis E. LeMay went to a base that happened to be a pretty rigid outfit. There was a lieutenant who used exceptional initiative, who stuck his neck way out—far above what you’d expect of a lieutenant—with superior results. After being briefed on this lieutenant’s performance, General LeMay turned to his aide, then Maj David C. Jones, and said, “Get me some captain’s bars.” Major Jones got some captain’s bars and General LeMay pinned the captain’s bars on this lieutenant right on the spot, shook his hand and walked off. “We had a centralized promotion system,” explained General Jones,

so when I got back to Omaha I had to call SAC personnel people, who had to call Washington, following up on the promotion. It was a battle. The colonel in personnel in Washington at Headquarters USAF said, “General LeMay has no authority to do that.” I said,

“Well, do you want to tell him, he’s in the next room?” He didn’t. General LeMay only did that once I know of, so he never abused it. He wouldn’t have done it if he thought there were lots of lieutenants who had shown such initiative. That was possible then, but it’s not possible now. It was possible by virtue of General LeMay’s personality. He had higher headquarters intimidated. That’s a wonderful thing if you can accomplish it, self-confidence without being arrogant, looking for the best of the outfit. I think there are lots of opportunities for people if they are not self-limiting.

I interviewed one senior officer who, when he was a young officer, every few months used to write notes to himself of his impressions of how he saw things, good and bad. He would review these thoughts later, and going back over what he had written earlier he noticed how his perceptions had changed. Many young officers think everything ought to be changed; but as they grow older, move up in rank and seniority, and gain more experience, they become more resistant to change and stay away from extremes. They realize with time that there was some wisdom involved in what seemed to them early in their careers to be wrong.

When initiative is used there is often an element of risk involved, and often mistakes are made when risks are taken. The Air Force wants officers who will take risks, but risk taking must be put into perspective.

“Certainly an important concept for a young officer is to perform within the framework of the regulations,” was General Jones’s thought on this.

I was much more a conformist when I was in a junior position, since I was in the learning mold. I tried very carefully to work within the rules that were set. As a major and a commander of a bomber squadron, there was plenty I could do within the existing regulations. I tried to do my best within the parameters given to me; to communicate with the people, to let them know what was going on. But things were clearly spelled out by me and by the regulations. I don’t think I realized it at the time, but I spent a lot of time as a young officer reflecting on leadership and what I wanted to try to do if I got a higher position. I transitioned as I received higher rank and went on from trying to satisfy others to satisfying myself.

“We are not looking for high risk taking in our young officers,” said General Jones, “but as one goes higher up in the rank system, risks become more appropriate. You don’t want a lieutenant thinking he should be a general or a young captain thinking he knows everything and can straighten out the whole wing. Before a young officer moves out too much he needs the feel, the experience, the judgment that comes through a period of time of learning his job. When you are inexperienced the number one thing you ought to do is to learn.”

The attitude that young officers should perform within the framework of regulations has been around a long time. There have been times when it was much more prevalent than others—much like that of the attitude of the one-mistake Air Force. And again, it is because of the attitude of organizations or the senior supervisors within them. The view that there is not latitude for initiative, where people are reluctant to take the responsibility for the consequences of their actions, is unjustified in most cases.

“Let me amplify on this,” reflected General Creech.

There is no question that one could get the feeling of having little latitude within a very highly centralized organization whenever decisions are made on high. We have had periods in our Air Force where organizational approaches have helped foster that notion and in some cases we truly have robbed those down below of authority that more properly belonged at the lower level. There are still some supervisors who do not intend to give a lot of latitude to their subordinates. These officers have to understand that they must give true latitude, to wit, authority to those under them if they expect to have a dynamic, creative, hard-charging, and highly motivated force.

“I never really felt a lack of latitude,” General Creech continued,

as a wing commander, as a squadron commander, or when I ran a jet aerobatic team which was baby squadron size. I commanded two fighter wings and I never felt a lack of latitude in any of these positions. I’ll tell a story that I think may illuminate this phenomenon. After I had taken over the second of two fighter wings in Europe, I moved from Germany to Madrid, Spain. Soon after the change of station I remember going back to Germany for a commander’s conference. After this conference, five of the wing commanders happened to meet in the lobby of the hotel where we were staying. We went in the bar for a cocktail, to compare notes and so forth, and as the conversation unfolded it turned out that three of those present were articulating in the most vehement terms how chafed they felt because of a lack of latitude, or lack of authority. There were two of us who quite honestly didn’t know what they were talking about. Some of the things that they mentioned they did not have latitude to do, I was in fact doing. I think it’s not surprising that the two of us who felt that we had lots of latitude, were doing dynamic and innovative things with our wings. We did not feel hemmed in, and we were the two of that group of five who became general officers. The other three fell by the wayside. I always thought I had every bit of latitude that wasn’t absolutely nailed down. I wasn’t going to violate any rules or regulations, but if it wasn’t nailed down I figured within that, it was my authority. I could do anything and everything I wanted to. Even if there was a rule, if I believed that it had to be changed, I would get on the telephone and talk with my boss and tell him why I thought we ought to do it some other way and what my justification was. And more often than not, he’d say go ahead, and if he had to get additional authority he would do so.

Similarly, General Jones said,

I always had a philosophy that, don’t ask if you can’t afford to know. Go ahead and have it well thought out, and unless it was absolutely prohibited, feel that you have the latitude. I found commanders too often wouldn’t do it unless something was spelled out stating that he had the authority. I realize, though, that there is nothing that gives you latitude like success. There are some commanders that you really, wanted to tow the line, who you would have stuck right to the letter of things because they were not that good. Others, because they were more successful—took more initiative—so I gave them more latitude. One of the problems was that some people want everything given to them; to have a risk-free environment. You’ve got to earn the latitude and when you do, you gain wider responsibility and opportunity. The majority of our officers are going to end up below the senior ranks; maybe only one out of the one hundred may make general, perhaps even less than that. It is a highly competitive process and the system has ways of differentiating people; having initiative and being a risk taker is one way.

Regulations are often used as an excuse for not using initiative or taking risks. “There were some rules I didn’t like as a young officer,” said General Creech, “some regulations

I thought needed to be changed and this I did when I reached higher positions of responsibility. But as I came up through the system I felt that within the limits of the rules and regulations I had all the latitude I could exercise. I wasn’t afraid of failing, of goofing up a little, as long as I could stand up and be counted.”

“With any job you have there are certain parameters within which you must operate,” reflected General Russ. “Those parameters such as safety regulations are set down, establishing how you handle your personnel business and many other facets. Within this there is a lot of flexibility. I was one of those people who wanted to try something new, to move ahead, to use my imagination. It is easy to stay in that box and not make any movement, to be stifled by the regulations. As one who had innovative ideas, I could work all kinds of things in that box, not outside that box, but inside. “

It is no different in combat. Gen John W. Roberts, as a colonel and wing commander in Vietnam stated,

I knew what the regulations were. You work within the regulations. When I went to Vietnam as a wing commander there were guys in the wing I took over who were violating the rules. I didn’t tolerate that; I informed them, we are going to comply with the regulations. If we didn’t like them, and if there was good reason, I’d try to change them. Until they were changed we would comply with them. I changed a lot of regulations in my life as a senior officer and had a role in changing them as a younger officer on the way up.

General Russ had the same thought. “I tell my commanders that regulations are written by people like us—we write regulations. It’s not somebody up there who writes the regulations, it’s us and we can also change them.” Again, perspective on risk taking is very important.

General Jones’s philosophy on risk taking was to think matters through. “I’ve seen a lot of cases,” he said, “where people hadn’t thought things through as to what they wanted to do; who’d go off half-prepared. They think they’ve got all the answers and they do some things that aren’t very smart. They get slapped down and in a lot of cases rightly so. You need the perception or feel of when, where, and how to approach problems. Many people clearly get turned off by the system when they want to do something different in a self-serving way—to get personal credit for something. I have always had the philosophy that you can accomplish almost anything if you don’t care who gets the credit,” said General Jones.

A lot of people are looking for credit or praise. I’ve always believed in what I call reflective credit, a quiet credit, where someone under me would come in unsolicited, not trying to make points, and say, “General Jones, we’ve got a superb wing commander who is as tough as can be, he’s got high standards; he is fair and looks after his people; he’s straight and he’s honest.” You could always tell when somebody was trying to snow you. You could get a feel of which commanders had the respect of their troops and those whose people had some degree of fear, the latter being a poor approach to leadership.

We have a different Air Force today than when we separated from the Army in 1947. General Poe, in a description of his earlier years stated,

When I was a lieutenant in the immediate post-World War II era, few officers had college degrees, still fewer were Academy graduates. More than a few had character faults—excessive drinking, womanizing, fiscal irresponsibility, even fighting in the club, etc., that took them out of competition. In addition, a number were also noncompetitive because they did not take their professional responsibilities seriously—training, flying skills, study, etc. It was a predominately male, bachelor force where social life centered in the club, often in the stag bar. The stakes were not so high—if I busted a Mustang or even an F-80 we just went back and got a new one (just as well since our 1946 accident rate was 61).

Today we have an entirely different situation. The college degree is the base line. Not too long after entry, work begins on an advanced degree, often acquired on one's own time. The parties and roughhousing expected of active young men occur but are not meanspirited or carried to excess. The force has a different makeup, with more nonrated and women officers who do not feel required to "do it all" before something happens to them. The center of gravity has shifted from the "Happy Hour" to the family. If you eject from an F-15 there's no replacement—you've just lost a piece of national treasure.

One cannot deny that a mistake can have an adverse impact upon an officer's career in today's Air Force. The Air Force is a very talented, rich organization; and the attitude that it is a one-mistake Air Force is heightened by the fact that it is a very, very competitive force. There are few professions, if any, that can match the US Air Force in its high caliber of personnel. There are people standing in line to join the officer corps. It has some of the best and brightest minds our country has to offer. It has officers who are dedicated, competent, industrious, and innovative. Because of this highly competitive corps, if an officer stumbles it can be a discriminator in such a talented group of people.

General Jones stated, "I think what we're really getting at is a system of up or out. Here we have a real problem. It is not just the Air Force, it's in all our military services, because the effectiveness report system has become so inflated that far more people get perfect effectiveness reports than can be promoted. The promotion board is faced not so much in finding out who should be promoted, but who shouldn't be promoted. It's very difficult if somebody has a bad knock on his record to promote that person and not to promote somebody who doesn't have a bad knock on his record. Ten years ago we tried the controlled OER system," continued General Jones. "The intent of it was to make sure we didn't have a one-mistake Air Force. You could take risk, you could fail, but you could work your way back because there wasn't the tremendous inflation. We underestimated the problem of implementation; however, the Air Force is now taking another look at the OER system and how to reduce that degree of inflation. I would have preferred as I came up through the system as a junior officer a much tougher OER system. In the early days it wasn't inflated as much as it has become now.

We do not want careers to turn on a single mistake but as any promotion board member can tell you, the quality is so high that 'tiebreakers' are in order," commented General Poe. "The board member sees a tiny number that sort of pop out of the top—an engineering test pilot on a key system, who solved a major problem, a support expert who saved

millions, and an even smaller group with records so bad you don't understand why they are still aboard. In between you have hundreds of superbly qualified officers for relatively few slots—promotion, school, and so forth. You score these and may find the same score achieved for a thousand more than the quota allowed. The weeding out begins and thus the search for tiebreakers."

So that is the situation. What are the results? First, on the plus side, is the obvious recognition by Air Force leadership that there is a perception of a one-mistake Air Force and strenuous efforts are being made to overcome it. It is always in the minds of the best senior colonels and generals, and they are working on the problem.

"There is certainly no intent to have a one-mistake Air Force," stated General Welch, present Air Force chief of staff.

Every single senior leader you will talk to in the Air Force will tell you, "No, we don't want a one-mistake Air Force." Let me tell you why we have the perception and in some respects it's a fact. It's the cause of inflation in the OER system. A lot of effort went into redefining a new, more useful OER system. Over the years, inflation eventually worked on the OER system to the point that it is difficult to differentiate on the basis of performance. Consequently, the individual has great difficulty overcoming a black mark. So what has happened to us is that we had reached the point where one black mark could result in a passover and once passed was little chance of overcoming the black mark with performance. The only way to then be saved from that black mark was for a higher authority who believed that person worthy and who was willing to make an extraordinary effort to rescue him. That's in part where the perception of the one-mistake Air Force comes from. The temporary solution was to bail out those who need rescue efforts. A lot of time passovers are indeed rescued, because of the realization of the problem. We restructured the OER system so that the normal record of performance becomes the key driver in the record, instead of all those peripheral things like: Do you have a master's degree? Did you go to command and staff school in residence or did you get it exactly when you should? or Do you have any kind of black mark because you were an eager young risk taker? All of these kinds of things become peripheral issues if we have a solid way to measure the individual's performance in the job, because that's the most valid basis for promotion. So I would have to say that because of the inflation, the one mistake that impacts career progression requires extraordinary efforts to overcome.

Suppose a young officer who uses initiative or takes a risk has a poor leader for a supervisor? How does he or she cope with this situation? Particularly an officer who has ability, the capacity for hard work, who has ideas, but who works for a loser of a boss, one who is a small individual. How does an officer cope with this? The officer may or may not be right in that perception, it may just be a young officer's inexperience, his impatience, but you do run into it. "One thing I picked up early in life," responded General Jones to these questions,

was that life is a learning experience. You can learn from good and bad leaders; you can learn just as much from a bad leader as you can a good one, by learning what not to do. I was fortunate in having mainly good ones, but I had some, very few for whom I didn't have much respect. But the chances are that in the Air Force you won't work for any one person for more than a year and a half, or two years. So, number one is: you learn. Psychologists say that most child abusers were abused as children. I submit that probably most

bad leaders had role models of bad leadership. So what you've got to do is be careful that you learn the right thing from a leader. You say to yourself here's a test tube of leadership, let me see how that leader works and how he turns people off. Number two is: try to understand the guy you're working for. You have more responsibility for understanding the person you work for than that person has for his subordinates.

General Creech offered insight into the bad leader. "One of the interesting things about a career in the Air Force," he stated, "is that you're going to run into a lot of different kinds of supervisors. You're going to run into some excellent ones, some average ones, and some below average ones. I ran into some that I didn't think were very good. I learned a lot from them, by the way; they were good role models in the sense that I learned things not to do." He also suggested that bad leadership offers more than an example of how not to lead. "You have to remember that if you're going to move ahead in the Air Force if everybody was perfect the system wouldn't need you at higher grades because it would have so many other options and choices. So, in a sense, the opportunity to excel is in part dependent upon the fact that not everyone is an absolute first-rate supervisor. I think there is less of that in the Air Force than in any other services. I think we do an extraordinarily good job but it is not perfect. We need to continue to work on getting our leaders to truly delegate authority downward and also to provide latitude to wing commanders in the Air Force."

One of the important aspects of initiative or risk taking is self-confidence. Successful officers who are not obsessed with their own careers realize they have talent and ability. If things don't work out in the Air Force, they know they can be successful in civilian life. They know they can achieve elsewhere, so they don't worry too much about the OER system or taking risks. "I might get into trouble, but so what, if I give it my best—I can always do something else. This officer is willing to move out, use initiative, take a risk without cautiously saying, "I better not do this because if I fail then I'll get a bad effectiveness report." This is the type of officer the Air Force doesn't want to lose.

We can't have an undisciplined mob in the Air Force any more than we can tolerate it in the infantry, artillery, or any combat arms. When one goes out and breaks flying regulations or regulations on the ground, it is not only an illegal act but can be a dishonest act if the person tries to cover it up, tries to get by with it, and is living a lie. "When I was a commander of TAC," said General Creech, "I came to grips with this. I took every opportunity when I was out in the field to explain my position. When I'd meet pilots and others to explain that this was not a one-mistake Air Force, was not a one-mistake command, that we could be tolerant of mistakes, but that it was a one-crime Air Force. A mistake is not a crime and a crime is not a mistake, but that a willful and wanton violation of regulations would be treated as a crime, and the punishment would certainly be proportional to the crime. I made every effort in my actions, as well as my words," he continued, "to make sure that mistakes were tol-

erated, that people were forgiven for honest mistakes. But we would crack down in an appropriate way on anyone committing a crime. Sometimes that involved losing a rank. That is really the only way the Force can be run in a sensible way, because one can't have regulations and allow selective, haphazard acceptance of those regulations. If one looks the other way you're merely conditioning people to indulge in selective acceptance and selective adherence to those rules and regulations." So where do we go from here?

"I have never, ever seen a case of a young officer being penalized when he made a mistake," reflected General Davis. "That's how we learn. That was a part of my fundamental pitch in all my school talks to the young officers—that we learn from our mistakes. We make them every day, not just young officers, but older officers. It depends upon the gravity of the mistake. Certainly it is anything but a one-mistake Air Force."

Although the Air Force doesn't reward mistakes, any officer who has tried to move out will have tried things that didn't work, that can be called mistakes—sometimes large mistakes. "The Air Force," commented General Gabriel, "above all the services, takes the position that if you are going to get anywhere there are going to be mistakes along the way. You should at least get out there and try. The worst thing to do is to sit back and not do anything for fear of making a mistake."

General Slay added, "Everybody makes mistakes. I made many in my career. Mistakes are a fact of life with any endeavor. The individual who is afraid to make a mistake is not going to amount to much. The thing to do is to forge ahead and do the best one can. The Air Force puts faith and confidence in an officer, gives him the rank and says, OK, 'move out.' The absolute worst possible outcome for us is an attitude of a one-mistake Air Force. You cannot afford an officer corps that is afraid to make mistakes. We'll stifle ourselves. Making a mistake never occurred to me; I just did the best I could."

General Russ stated, "I expect to make errors and mistakes. If you don't make mistakes you may not be pushing hard enough. I'd much rather have a guy out in front charging, stumbling every once in a while, but still charging, than have a guy who never does anything. Because then we never progress."

General Roberts, commander in chief of Air Training Command, reflected, "The ones who feel like they are being subdued are the ones who don't like to get out in front anyway. The officers I promoted were the ones who took their chances. Sure, some of them made mistakes, and some were big ones. If they consistently made mistakes then you tried somebody else. But, the officers who were afraid of making mistakes I didn't need around anyway. It was more the nature of an excuse than it was a fact of life." Gen Russell E. Dougherty, former commander in chief of SAC from 1974 through 1977, reacted to the one-mistake Air Force issue, "God help us if it ever becomes that."

“The attitude of the one-mistake Air Force creates in many officers what I call, ‘The Fogbottom Syndrome’,” concluded General Poe. “You may remember Senator Fogbottom of the comic strip Lil’ Abner. He ran for political office, and was elected on the platform, ‘You can’t say I ever did anything wrong because I never did anything.’ This is the most serious problem of all—otherwise, outstanding officers would avoid certain duty, such as command, so as not to jeopardize their career. This is dreadful and I consider that kind of officer beneath contempt.”

In conclusion, none of the 15 senior four-stars interviewed have a one-mistake Air Force. Certainly, none of them want a one-mistake Air Force. That doesn’t mean there is not a problem with the erroneous perception that persists among some of our young officers, and it must be that there are times when a mistake can be prejudicial to one’s career. Clearly it will be if the mistake is a crime. But, it depends on the seriousness of the mistake, the time it occurs in an officer’s career, whether it is an accumulation of a number of matters of bad judgment and the officer’s overall record of performance.

This one-mistake issue is something that every leader in the Air Force must keep in mind and continually address. The Air Force is constantly improving, but it needs to make its people understand it is *not* a one-mistake Air Force. If your intentions are honorable, such as looking out for your

people—fighting to improve their life-style and their contribution to making a better Air Force—rather than your being self-serving; trying hard, working hard, and giving your job your best; these mistakes can be and are accepted here are any number of cases involving officers, flying personnel, where errors were made and accidents happened, but they were genuine, honest mistakes. The officers’ careers were not penalized; they were promoted with their contemporaries, because the errors were honest mistakes.

No, it is not a one-mistake Air Force, and it never should be. Our present chief of staff, General Welch, has made it clear it isn’t and that we don’t want it to be. “I am very concerned about the pressures to conform. We must have Air Force officers who will use initiative, who will take risks.” A new OER system is being implemented by the Air Force to curtail inflation.

Supervisors who either wittingly or unwittingly convey the impression that it is a one-mistake Air Force should become more sensitive than they are now to this issue in word and deed, to dispel that notion in our officers. It is bad and is bad for the feeling of spontaneity, the urge to be creative, to use initiative, to be imaginative, to be willing to take risks, all of which are vital to our having and keeping the US Air Force the best in the world.