



Worshipping at the Altar of Nuclear Perfection

By Mark Stout

Strive for excellence, not perfection. Perfection is God's domain.

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The Air Force's top priority is to restore its nuclear enterprise. This priority has been in place for about a year and accomplishing the task has been an exceedingly challenging endeavor. Just as you don't become physically fit or highly educated overnight, it is similarly difficult to restore a bureaucratic, flaccid, and far flung nuclear enterprise to a pristine condition in a year or two when it has been in a state of institutional decline approaching two decades.

Part of the restoration included creating an Air Force major command to oversee its nuclear forces. This was realized with the recent activation of Global Strike Command and its dedicated focus on the USAF strategic nuclear deterrence mission. However, the activation has made some nostalgic for a modern-day return of the Strategic Air Command, that not-forgotten Air Force within the Air Force. With its bomber and ICBM fleets, SAC provided the preponderance of the nation's nuclear deterrence for 40-plus years until its deactivation in 1992.

SAC was notorious for its mission focus. While normal operations included the day-to-day activities of pulling alerts, training, and testing, there were also major but less frequent activities such as implementing revisions to the nuclear war plan and changing the cryptographic codes. However, for many former SAC warriors, the preeminent memory of the command is probably the many months spent in the "inspection prep" mode, readying oneself or one's organization for a never-ending cycle of inspections and evaluations. First in precedence was the SAC Inspector General, followed by the SAC's command evaluators, with the numbered air force evaluators bringing up the rear. Headquarters Air Force inspectors, you ask? No one ever gave them a second thought.

Inspections and evaluations were SAC's way of proving to itself that the mission was being performed correctly. Within SAC's mission focus, two particular areas were emphasized. The first was readiness and the second was compliance. Compliance, in its extreme form, becomes focused on perfection, which for some epitomized SAC's basic character. However, as with anything, an inordinate preoccupation on perfection can create some unintended consequences which are worthy of exploration.

The first and most dangerous unintended consequence is that any culture which requires exceedingly high achievement as its minimum standard is capable of endangering personal and

institutional integrity. Top-level sporting activities provide any number of excellent examples, with many coaches and athletes in professional football, baseball, cycling, and Olympic sports doing whatever it takes to win. While the analogy is incomplete in that you didn't "win" an inspection, test, or evaluation in SAC, you certainly could lose one. Unqualified or unsatisfactory ratings were able to create dire career consequences that were capable of motivating some to avoid failure "by any means necessary." However, the SAC IG, to its great credit would almost never write errors for program-type discrepancies--even some whoppers--that had been previously self-identified and documented by the unit. SAC wanted integrity to be preserved and felt that could be done with a robust self-examination program that encouraged organizations to first search out and find problems and then, to take action to solve the issues.

Next, a preoccupation with perfection can lead to an overemphasis on rework. Regarding inspections, and while it's unlikely SAC intended things to work out this way, the goal for many units was not to achieve *true-perfection*, but rather, to achieve *inspection-perfection*. For example, regarding nuclear-associated paperwork and documentation, it was never good enough to merely do something right the first time and file it away until it was inspected; rather, the documentation had to be checked again and again and again. With the seldom-ending litany of inspections, re-checking already done work came to be viewed as a sort of insurance that *had* to be purchased. While it could sometimes help avoid poor inspection results, fixing things after the fact (but before they were inspected) could in no way ensure excellence. *Getting* it right to begin with was desirable; *having* it right for the inspection was mandatory. As Bill Creech would tell us, inspecting for quality at the end of a process is generally much more difficult, costly, and time-consuming than building it in throughout the process.

Finally, an overemphasis on perfection can lead to a reduction in initiative. When much of the focus is on rework and checking (and checking the checkers), it can have the unintended detrimental effect of reducing initiative for other important but less urgent work. Even if there were ways to do things cheaper, faster, and better within the nuclear community, the culture was one of extreme compliance and was not one of improvement. While a checklist mentality can be useful, compliance itself is not sufficient for true excellence. In SAC, there was little time or energy left for institutional processes to improve existing nuclear practices.

This discussion on perfection has relevance given the tone of the Air Force's February 2009 Communications Background Sheet on the Nuclear Enterprise. The background sheet states "*Regardless of the size of the nuclear enterprise we are entrusted with, the standard -- perfection -- remains the same.*" Later in the same document, this theme is rephrased as "*Perfection isn't the goal, it is the standard. That's the demand of the business.*" So, is actual perfection a viable standard or is it really a metaphor for excellence and compliance? Certainly that's an area that can be given some literary clean-up as it seems there should be standards other than 1) perfection and 2) failure. Second, if a unit's nuclear program actually *is* perfect, that only means they've met the *minimum* standard. There is lots of stick and very little carrot here, which harkens back to an old SAC-era phrase "Reward is the absence of punishment."

For some time, Air Force leaders have been running away from the nuclear mission. This was no doubt due to a variety of factors. First, with the end of the Cold War, the large cuts in the nation's nuclear weapons inventory signaled the national-level significance of the nuclear

mission had diminished. The Air Force's corresponding de-emphasis--and its consequences--should have been an easily expected and better managed corollary. Second, with the merger of the space operations and missile operations career fields, space and not ICBMs, has become the long-term place to be. Similarly, for bomber crews, conventional and not nuclear missions were preeminent for some time. Third, with more cuts looming in the pending end-of-2009 Nuclear Posture Review and with nuclear modernization serving as a political football, the challenges associated with the long-term viability of the nuclear career fields will be bigger than ever. If the Air Force wants to have enduring and exquisite competencies in the nuclear arena, two elements, promotions and pay, hold the keys and other areas, such as follow-on assignments and education programs will compliment the first two. In the meantime, a reasonable and prudent Airman might see some benefit to moving as far away from a mission area that demands perfection as a minimum standard.

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