

What is the Value of Good Order and Discipline?

KEYSTONE Class 25-1

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ON DISCIPLINE

Above all else, the Department of Defense's most valuable asset and top concern lies with the people who carry out its mission with discipline, good order, and strict adherence to standards.

Discipline is what distinguishes a military from all other forms service and occupation. It may seem to some that bringing discipline to the forefront of leadership effectiveness is a step into the past. However, the following piece by the all-enlisted fellows of Keystone Class 25-1 at the National Defense University highlights the importance of discipline and standards. It reinforces the enduring need to vigilantly sustain and, more importantly, increase its application throughout the Total Force.

This is the first of a continuing series of essays from all future Keystone fellows meant to address timely and timeless concerns of the Joint and Total Force. I want to thank the Keystone course sponsor, the National Defense University, and especially the fellows of Class 25-1 for their contributions to developing our warfighters.

For more information on Keystone, visit keystone.ndu.edu.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "T.E. Black", is positioned above the typed name.

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Train to Fight, Fight to Win

In the rapidly evolving global security landscape, the ability to operate effectively across all domains is indispensable. As articulated in the National Defense Strategy, “future conflicts will demand not only technological superiority but also a steadfast commitment to mission command principles, disciplined initiative, and good order”. These elements are essential for maintaining operational effectiveness in the face of increasingly sophisticated threats in space, cyberspace, and the information environment. Communication disruptions—such as satellite communications (SATCOM) jamming and GPS spoofing—are likely to create chaotic, degraded environments where success hinges on leadership, discipline, and adaptability. In an increasingly complex world where winning the next war means incorporating all domains and working within the Joint Warfighting Concept to pursue victory, our reliance on standards and discipline matters now more than ever. Mistakes have always been costly, but mistakes in the next war may very well mean the difference between winning and waging. Accumulated risk left unchecked may lead to catastrophe, while accumulated success achieved through disciplined initiative and adherence to standards will ensure victory. The value of good order and discipline is equal to the value of a service member’s life and defines the culture and climate of our nation’s military. In situations where seconds count, or where deviation by just a few degrees can mean the difference between mission success and catastrophic failure, strict adherence to standards and discipline is not optional—it is essential.

Which is more critical, standards or discipline?

The Revolutionary War serves as a historical example of the impact of discipline on military effectiveness. George Washington’s forces, though initially disorganized, achieved victory by embracing rigorous training and accountability. This principle remains unchanged—disciplined initiative is the currency of success in war, whether in the trenches of the past or the contested domains of the future. Since then, military forces have served as a deterrent and ensured the nation’s security. To prepare for this, service members must undergo realistic training that equips them to fight across all domains. This training should emphasize not only the development of combat skills but most importantly, the instillation of discipline. Why is discipline so important in the military? It is an essential quality that allows commanders to effectively command and control their forces, regardless of the branch of service.

To ask which is more critical is a bit like asking whether the foundation or the walls are more important when building a house—both are crucial and serve different but complementary purposes. Standards provide the guidelines and expectations for behavior, performance, and operations. They set the bar for what is acceptable and help to maintain consistency and uniformity within the force. Discipline is the enforcement and adherence to those standards. It's the commitment and self-control required to follow the standards, even under extreme pressure or in challenging situations. There is nothing more challenging than fighting and winning a war. We will be tested, and the time to prepare is always now. Without standards, discipline would have no guidelines to enforce, leading to chaos, inconsistency, and failure. Without discipline, standards would be ignored, making them meaningless. Both are critically important as they support and reinforce each other. This essay will focus on four key aspects: Training and Education, Military Values, Combat Effectiveness, and Maintaining Public Trust.

Training and Education

Preparing for future conflict requires training environments that replicate the challenges of communication-degraded and technologically contested scenarios. Leaders must be equipped to make decisions autonomously, guided by clear intent and operational objectives. One effective aspect of instilling war-winning capabilities within the Department of Defense (DoD) while maintaining good order and discipline is through the implementation of comprehensive leadership development programs. Such programs aim to cultivate leaders who embody the principles of good order and discipline while promoting a war-winning mindset. These programs include structured training, mentorship, and assessments that emphasize the importance of ethical leadership, team cohesion, and adaptability to changing operational environments. By developing leaders who can inspire and maintain discipline in their units, the DoD can enhance overall effectiveness and readiness for conflict.

Military Values

"You deserve what you tolerate." As the world's premier war-winning organization, we cannot afford to tolerate substandard actions or behaviors regardless of their perceived superficiality or intent. Our profession of arms demands we continually strive for perfection. After all, if we hold ourselves and those around us to the highest standards, there is no need to tolerate anything less than perfection. Ignoring undisciplined behavior is equivalent to condoning it. When standards are enforced, everyone is held accountable, which fosters a culture of responsibility, dependability, and success. Good order and discipline create an environment where values such as loyalty, integrity, and selflessness thrive. These values are not abstract ideals, but practical necessities that underpin every successful military operation. Leaders at every level must set the example, holding themselves and their teams to the highest standards. By doing so, they ensure that discipline becomes second nature, enabling service members to execute tasks with precision, even under the most challenging circumstances.

Combat Effectiveness

The DoD serves as the Nation's deterrence; however, if deterrence fails, then the Department must be ready and capable of defending the sovereignty of the United States. Make no mistake, service members are in the war winning business regardless of service or component. The value of good order and discipline lies in its role as the foundation for organizational effectiveness, cohesion, and success. Effective order ensures that all members part of the organization understand and adhere to established norms, rules, and expectations, creating an atmosphere of respect and trust. It can also facilitate a culture of accountability. Discipline reinforces this order by promoting self-control, accountability, and the ability to prioritize collective goals over personal desires. The right priorities contribute significantly to mission and organizational success, even under challenging circumstances.

Good order and discipline are essential for operational success in the military. The conclusion paragraph of the National Military Strategy states, "The success of this strategy depends on the innovation and discipline of the Joint Force and its leaders at every rank." Good order and discipline ensure that tasks are performed with precision and coordination. In environments where SATCOM is jammed and GPS signals are potentially spoofed, the ability to act decisively and adaptively in alignment with mission objectives becomes critical. The Joint Force will win because of disciplined initiative—a principle that echoes the lessons of global wars of the past, where decentralized decision-making and adherence to commander's intent proved decisive. Without these principles, it often leads to chaos, inefficiency, and conflict, which may undermine the mission and compromise the group's integrity. Scholars like L. Curry (2003) emphasize that discipline is not just about punishment, but about cultivating a commitment to values and standards that guide our individual and collective behaviors toward positive outcomes. Within any successful organization, you're likely to find both good order and discipline without having to search very hard for evidence that they exist.

Maintaining Public Trust is a Leadership Imperative

Maintaining high standards through discipline reflects positively on the military's image and public perception. This is important because our most senior military leaders must request resources from Congress. Increasing time focused on what capabilities we need and less on one of our ethical or professional missteps will lead to a better-resourced force. Furthermore, increased efforts to showcase the positive impacts and achievements of our amazing service members will build trust with key stakeholders like Congress and the American public. Part of the reason is our uncompromisingly high standards of execution and discipline. Leaders of all levels are taking responsibility to ensure we hold each other accountable to the DoD's philosophy of professionalism while creating history. The simplest ways to maintain this image are often the most visible: uncompromising standards of dress, personal appearance, and professional conduct. These outward symbols of discipline are more than ceremonial—they are the bedrock of an effective military force.

Conclusion

Discipline is not unique to a single service but shared across the Joint Force. Reflecting on an example from when the United States was last in a Congressionally declared war, we may take inspiration from General George C. Marshall, who served as both the 15th Chief of Staff of the Army in World War II and later as the 3rd Secretary of Defense:

"Discipline is not an end in itself, but a means to an end. ... Military discipline, intelligently administered, can be a great creative and positive force."

Additionally, Marine Corps Commandant (CMC) General Eric M. Smith, in his previous role as the Assistant CMC, released White Letter 1-23, which states in part:

"In my 36 years as a Marine, the best units I have seen in combat were the ones that took pride in their high standards, rigorous training, and ironclad discipline. Discipline is the currency of our Corps. Our orders and regulations, developed over hundreds of campaigns and battles, make us better warriors. They force us to pay attention to detail each day so that we do so automatically in combat, where precision matters most."

Finally, the current Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, U.S. Air Force General Charles Q. Brown, Jr., noted how discipline in all aspects of service, even in an Army-Navy football game for the Commander-in-Chief's Trophy, drives our force to greatness:

"I admire the discipline & character these future leaders of Sailors, Marines, & Soldiers showed both on and off the field. Although they may have been rivals today, soon they will be working side by side as a Joint Force in defense of our Nation."

These statements reflect that discipline and adherence to standards are critical not only for operational success but also for maintaining the trust of the American people and allies. They capture the essence of Joint Force unity and the imperative of disciplined leadership in complex, multi-domain environments. Our National Security requires every service member, regardless of service, component, or status to embrace, embody, and enforce the highest level of standards, good order, and discipline.

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