

Values and the American Soldier

Secretary of the Army John O. Marsh Jr.

Then Secretary of the Army John O. Marsh Jr. contributed the following article to open the November 1986 edition of Military Review. The secretary addresses “values,” the Army theme for 1986, and perhaps explains why the All-Volunteer Force was ultimately the success it is today.

IN 1981, we sought to revitalize the spirit of the US Army with the first Army theme: “Yorktown—Spirit of Victory.” Succeeding themes emphasized the need for the Army to remain physically fit at all times, the excellence the American public expects of soldiers and our commitment to families and to leadership. Army themes are designed to draw attention to a particular facet of our institution and, each year, earlier themes were “rolled up” into the new theme. Therefore, the spirit of Yorktown continues in today’s Army.

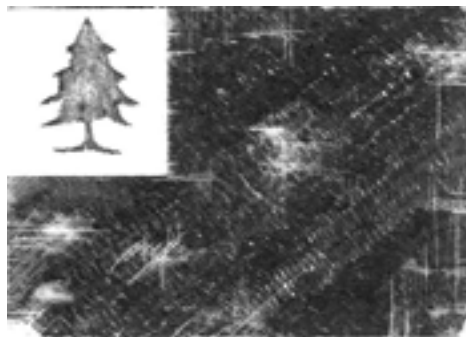
That spirit is distinctively American and springs from a fabric of native values that together have produced an Army with special qualities that are its strength and the strength of the nation. To understand such concepts as victory, caring and leadership, one must understand values and be able to make value judgments. Those are two reasons General John A. Wickham Jr. and I chose “Values” as the 1986 Army theme.

Why does a soldier serve? What makes our system of government and our way of life something worth living and possibly dying for? Are we, as a society, any different from other societies around the world? Finally, if we are different, how, in what ways, and what does this distinctiveness mean to our military service? The answers to these questions are wrapped up in this year’s theme. Values show us where we have been as a people and help direct us into the future.

We are in the closing years of the 20th century, little more than 13 years to the second millennium. No one believes that, in the year 2000, events in Central America, Africa, Central and Eastern Europe and the Middle

East will remain the same as they are today. How they change will be determined, in large measure, by what we do or fail to do within the next few years.

We actually have the capability to influence the course of the next century as we face the struggle of contrasting values between the world’s two great social systems. While our country holds the innate worth of the individual and proclaims a nation that is “of the people, by the people and for the people,” the Soviets hold the state as supreme.



Bunker Hill flag, 1775

As we examine values in our Armed Forces, we recognize two separate tiers. Tier one values are systemic to all military organizations of all nations. Tier two values are distinctly American and make our soldiers unique.

Armies of all nations embrace values such as discipline, stamina, technical and tactical skills, loyalty, duty and courage. During the American Revolution, British soldiers were ordered up Bunker (Breed’s) Hill.

Those soldiers, carrying 75 pounds of equipment in hot weather, were ultimately successful despite withering colonial fire. The discipline and stamina they demonstrated are essential values in any military force.



Sons of Liberty flag

Another key value in the military is professional competence—that is, proficiency in tactical and technical skills. Throughout history, soldiers and their leaders have always been expected to know the profession of arms and to be skillful at it.

But the American soldier is different from these soldiers of other lands and other times. The American soldier has embraced these tier one values because of his profession, but he is also an exemplar of what I call tier two values. These values are uniquely American. Our military has its genesis in the American Revolution—a revolution that was not just a political upheaval. It marked a radical change in the social structure of nations and individuals.

The roots of the American experience go back to our Judeo-Christian heritage to such statements of values as the Ten Commandments and the golden rule. In the Beatitudes is the great statement that “the meek shall inherit the earth.” That simple statement is not a power doctrine as found in some other nations. In our own country, we have the Declaration of Independence which proclaims that “all men are created equal . . . that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.”

Some 11 years after the Declaration of Independence was signed, the Founding Fathers again met in Philadelphia and conceded the need to “secure the blessings of liberty” in the approved draft of the Constitution. The Bill of Rights established the freedoms of religion, speech and press, and the rights which protect American citizens. These freedoms and rights are values which also form part of the American experience.

The American Constitution is unique in the congressional supremacy it establishes over the executive

branch. The power to declare war and raise armies is vested in the Congress, creating a system of civilian control over the military—a system which is a national value. We have also incorporated into the military justice system—the Uniform Code of Military Justice—unique values which are different from every other nation. The individual in the military is protected in ways that reflect our attitudes toward the individual in the citizenry at large.

The values that impact on the American soldier also establish a national ethic for our country. For instance, the United States is not an aggressive nation intent on national aggrandizement. At Arlington National Cemetery is an inscription which reads: “Not for fame or reward, not for place or for rank, not lured by ambition or goaded by necessity, but in simple obedience to duty as they understood it, these men suffered all, sacrificed all, dared all, and died.”

We have not sought to build empires. Also, after engaging in conflict we have historically extended the olive branch to our former foes. For example, Germany was devastated after World War II. Shortly after the surrender was signed, we began a process of rebuilding,



Continental Colors (modified British Red Ensign), 1775-1777

pouring millions of dollars into helping that country rebuild. Today, West Germany is recognized for its strong economy.

Wickham has expressed the values of the American soldier as forming a triangle. On the first leg of the triangle is a soldier’s self-development or self-improvement—that is, learning a skill, broadening his educational background and improving himself as a soldier and as an individual. These values are inward and relate to the individual and how he performs.

The second leg of the triangle deals with values that run horizontally and involve a soldier’s loyalties

to other people. In no other organization is loyalty to others more important than in the Army, and this is a rich seedbed of bonding. We need that loyalty to others to have interdependent relationships.

Finally, at the base of the triangle, the individual must be dedicated or committed to some higher principle or purpose. This part of the triangle deals with values that run upward and include a soldier's service for his country.



"A new constellation"—flag law of 14 June 1777

Leaders at every level should help their soldiers answer three questions: What do I want to be? Why do I want to be that? How do I expect to achieve that goal?

The reason we want soldiers to consider carefully "what" they want to be is that such a question takes the soldier into areas of goals and achievements. These are value expressions.

Requiring a soldier to answer "why" forces the soldier to reason his choice to himself and be able to defend it. One reason that many people are embarrassed about patriotism or some patriotic act is that they are unable to explain or articulate their patriotism. In today's world of contrasting values and challenges to our ideals, it is important to be able to defend our choices reasonably and logically.

Finally, in considering "how" he achieves these goals, the soldier is again in a values arena. Will the individual achieve his goals through cheating or through determination, perseverance and hard work? The answer to such a question marks the measure of a person's character and ethical position.

Next year, our country will celebrate the 200th anniversary of the signing of the Constitution, a great expression of values. Within its Preamble are a number of essential infinitives—to form a more perfect union, to establish justice, to ensure domestic tranquility, to provide for the common defense, to promote the general welfare and to secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity. These are some of the value statements that form the heart of our American experience.

The 40 signers of that document—men who wrestled with the enormous challenges of creating a new government—subordinated many of their interests to achieve the primary goal of creating a strong central government. Twenty-three of those men had served in the militias or in the Continental Army, and the experience of the Revolution changed them.

These military men could have seized the country and imposed their own form of government on it. However, the values held by these men, which were forged by their backgrounds and experience, convinced them that 13 separate, individual states could not survive without a central government that was founded on the principles that are our heritage.

A recruiting song that is being heard around the country sums up many of these values:

*If you want to find out who we are,
Just ask us where we've been—
From the frozen fields of Valley Forge
To the trail called Ho Chi Minh.
Through the glory and the sacrifice
We do our job each day.
We are citizens and soldiers
And Army all the way!
When we were needed we were there,
We were there when we were needed,
We were there.
No, it wasn't always easy
And it wasn't always fair;
But when freedom called we answered
We were there!*

And, in keeping with our historic values, we will continue to be there. **MR**

John O. Marsh Jr. is chairman of the Department of Defense Task Force on Quality of Life and has a private law practice in Winchester, Virginia. He was secretary of the Army from 1981 to 1989—the longest term of any Army secretary. Other positions he has held include chairman, Reserve Forces Policy Board from 1989 to 1994; congressman, for four terms, from Virginia's 7th District; assistant secretary of defense for legislative affairs; and assistant for national security affairs and counselor to President Gerald R. Ford. He published one other article in Military Review, in February 1989, titled "Comments on Low-Intensity Conflict."