

Duty, Honor, Country – and the Price of Failure

"One night past some 30,000 tons of ships went hurtling at each other through the darkness. When they had met, 2,000 tons of ship and 176 men lay at the bottom of the sea in a far off place."

"Now comes the cruel business of accountability. Those who were there, those who are left from those who were there, must answer how it happened and whose was the error that made it happen."

The above is the beginning of a Wall Street Journal editorial, published in May, 1952, concerning the collision of the USS Wasp and USS Hobson on April 26, 1952. The entire text of the editorial may be found here ([link to follow](#)). This editorial has been well-known to generations of American military, and Navy personnel in particular.

The author of the editorial does not attempt to review facts or place blame. Rather, he focuses on the military traditions of Responsibility, Authority and Accountability. Leaders who are given great responsibility are also given great authority. But hovering over all of it is the principle of accountability, that the leader must provide an explanation and justification for his conduct and the outcomes of his efforts.

The U.S. military has a long history of success, and an equally long history of intolerance of failure. After the disaster of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, three senior leaders – two Navy and one Army – were replaced almost immediately. One of the three, Admiral Husband Kimmel, the Commander-In-Chief, Pacific Fleet, was replaced by Admiral Chester Nimitz before the New Year.

These men were replaced not as the result of a long legal investigation or a government commission study. They were replaced because they were in charge when the attack occurred, and nothing else mattered. The investigation (the Roberts Commission) came later.

The WSJ editorial continues:

"This accountability is not for the intentions but for the deed. The captain of a ship, like the captain of a state, is given honor and privileges and trust beyond other men. But let him set the wrong course, let him touch ground, let him bring disaster to his ship or to his men, and he must answer for what he has done. He cannot escape...."

Every Navy ship captain knows that he cannot avoid this responsibility, regardless of the details. If it happens while you are the captain, it is your fault, period. In my Navy career, which included command at sea, I personally saw this happen twice. Neither captain remained in command for more than a week after the particular incident. In one case (a grounding, with no damage or

injuries), the new captain was waiting on the pier when the ship made dock 3 days later. If you consider this to be harsh, arbitrary and unforgiving, don't take the job.

Now, to my present purpose. General Austin and General Milley are obviously career military officers, having, I believe, some 80 years of service between them. The debacle in Afghanistan occurred on their watch. They, better than most, should understand the need for absolute accountability. It was their responsibility, and they failed. There is nothing else we need know, no mitigating circumstances that can assuage their failure. They must leave and leave immediately.

They must be replaced not because they need to be punished. They must be replaced in order to keep faith with the members of our military, who deserve successful commanders and intelligent, aggressive responses to our nation's enemies. To be the authors, even unwillingly, of a catastrophe of this magnitude, and to thereafter remain in command, would violate the most basic tenants of military leadership, and contribute to further erosion of our morale and war-fighting capability.

The editorial concludes:

"It is cruel, this accountability of good and well-intentioned men. But the choice is that or an end of responsibility and finally, as the cruel scene has taught, an end to the confidence and trust in the men who lead, for men will not long trust leaders who feel themselves beyond accountability for what they do."

"And when men lose confidence and trust in those who lead, order disintegrates into chaos and purposeful ships into uncontrollable derelicts."

There may be in our government civilians who bear some measure of responsibility for the events in Afghanistan. This is not about them. This is about what our military should do, MUST do, to remain true to itself, to those who have fought, and to those who will fight in the future.

Finally, an excerpt from General Douglas MacArthur's farewell speech to the Corps of Cadets at West Point, May 12, 1962:

You are the leaven which binds together the entire fabric of our national system of defense. From your ranks come the great captains who hold the Nation's destiny in their hands the moment the war tocsin sounds.

The long gray line has never failed us. Were you to do so, a million ghosts in olive drab, in brown khaki, in blue and gray, would rise from their white crosses, thundering those magic words: Duty, Honor, Country.

Generals Austin and Milley would do well to pay heed to those voices.