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Legacy of a Soldier

**Memorial Service
USAFA Class of 1973, 50th anniversary
September 29, 2023
Rev. Msgr. Stephen J. Rossetti Class of '73**

Not long ago, at the annual Character in Leadership seminar, my brother, from the class of '70, and I were speaking with two young cadets. We were reflecting on why young men and women come to the Academy. Both of the cadets volunteered that they came because they felt, in their words, "called." As they discussed this "call," for them it was clearly a spiritual reality. They believed they were coming to the USAF Academy in response to a Divine calling.

In the news these days, there has been much about the Wagner Group, Russian's mercenary soldiers. Also we read about Putin's war in the Ukraine and his attempts to rally Russians around the cause to "defend Mother Russia." What is the difference between the young men and women who have hallowed these halls for over 50 years, and those who have marched into the Ukraine to quote Vladimir Putin: liberate it from neo-nazis? It is good for us to ponder these realities, as we remember our classmates who served so faithfully, and as we think about our own service.

In 10th century France, there was a sacred ritual to create a Knight. After a lengthy time of formation, the soon-to-be Knight went off in solitude and prayed. After this retreat, there was a sacred ceremony and blessing. The blessing was said over the new Knight and also over his sword. In the ancient blessing for the sword, the presiding cleric prayed:

“May it be a protection of churches, widows, orphans and all Thy servants” against cruelty and evil-doers. It was clear that the Knight and his sword was to be used to protect those who could not protect themselves, to fight against injustice, cruelty and evil.

Combatants on both sides of conflicts and wars typically clothe themselves in such righteous language. They bless their swords and use lofty language to justify their actions. To many in our modern world, this might seem a bit arcane. But is there an objective truth and a higher justice which we all must search for and uphold? In our day in which subjectivism is often taken to an extreme, the question presses itself upon us: is there an objective good, an objective right and that which is truly just? Can one legitimately enter this service academy and claim to be “called”? Conversely, can one fight and find oneself on the wrong side of justice?

When evil rears its head in this world, it clothes itself in self-justifying righteousness. To quote Alexander Solzhenitsyn: “To do evil, a human being must first of all believe that what he’s doing is good.” On the surface, evil is much like the good but with a slight twist; a slight deviation; just a hairline crack but one which leads its proponents into the darkness.

In 1920, the Red Army was advancing on Warsaw with a far superior force in manpower and equipment. In the Poles’ 21st Division, for example, the commander lamented that almost half of his soldiers were barefoot. One photo of volunteer Polish soldiers show them wielding scythes. The Poles’ weaponry was limited and inferior to the Red Army.

There were two especially key battles in the overall “Battle of Warsaw.” In these battles, the Russians retreated in a panic. Interestingly enough, diaries from many participants, Russian and Polish, attribute the victory to a miraculous apparition on the battlefield. They said it was clear that this divine messenger was sent to defend the Poles. This panicked the Russians and they fled. The Battle of Warsaw is also called

“The Miracle on the Vistula” for many reasons, the reported divine intervention being one. Historians call this one of the most important battles in history. Had Poland fallen, Germany was next. In Warsaw, the spread of communism into Europe was stopped and the Polish nation survived.

Reflecting on the Battle of Warsaw, it is difficult not to make connections to today’s Battle for the Ukraine. There are many similarities. I would wager that future generations will judge the Russian army to, once again, be on the wrong side of history.

Does God care who wins some wars? I think there is little doubt that there are moments when a manifestly evil force arises and threatens innocent people. Pope Pius XII thought that Hitler was possessed by an evil spirit. He actually performed the ritual of exorcism several times in the Vatican. It obviously failed. They say an exorcism doesn’t work on those who do not want to be liberated.

Can we believe that the young women and men who are commissioned from this place, this Academy, and enter the service of arms to be called by the Divine? Do they deserve to be blessed, as our Knights of today? What is key, I believe, is that they too, like the Knights of old, use the instruments of warfare to protect those who cannot protect themselves, to fight against injustice, cruelty and evil.

My brother mentioned to me that when coming back to the Academy he is inspired when speaking with today’s cadets. He finds their selfless commitment and dedication inspiring. These young women and men are the best of what this country has to offer.

We owe them something, something very important. They are dedicating themselves to selfless service of our nation. Assuredly, some will pay the ultimate price. We owe them a nation of the highest values, a country of integrity striving for all that is objectively true and good. If we do not, then they are in danger of becoming no better than

mercenaries. They could then find themselves, through no fault of their own, on the wrong side of history.

This quest for honesty, integrity and justice is a difficult one. Just when you think it is yours, that you've arrived, cracks and fissures come to the fore. Our history is not a perfect one. My Lai and Abu Ghraib remind us of how morally fragile the bearing of arms can be. And so we repent, we self-correct, and try again. Righteousness is a gossamer cloak easily torn. Yet it is one that we must strive, again and again, with each succeeding generation, to build so that the young people of today can pledge to support and defend this country and its constitution with a clear conscience.

Today we honor our classmates who have gone before us. Their faces come to the fore. Our hearts are filled with fond memories and with pride. We honor all those who have served this higher cause-- including their spouses and families.

Some of us who came to this Academy felt explicitly called. For some others, it was something not fully articulated but an inchoate sense and followed nonetheless. In that service, we found our calling, we found our best selves, we were taken up into a higher reality, searching for that which is truly good and right, truly beautiful, truly just.

These 100 did their best to build such a just society of free women and men. This is their legacy and ours. Let us continue this calling with the time left to us, and then pass on the torch. May the Spirit of God guide this nation so that we might discern rightly that which is truly good and truly just. May God bless all-- the Knights of today and the Knights of tomorrow.