

President Joe Biden, Vice President Kamala Harris, Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff CQ Brown, Jr., lay wreath honoring 184 lives lost at Pentagon, marking 23rd anniversary of 9/11 terrorist attacks, September 11, 2024 (DOD/Chad J. McNeeley)

Ethical Leadership Development

Highlights from the Past and a Glimpse of the Future

By Elias Ursitti, Eric J. Weis, and Donald P. Loren

Elias Ursitti is an Associate Professor of Strategic Leadership in the Dwight D. Eisenhower School for National Security and Resource Strategy at the National Defense University (NDU). Eric J. Weis is an Organizational Development Professor at NDU and an Executive Education Consultant (Executive Development Programs) in the Darden Foundation, Darden Business School, at the University of Virginia. Donald P. Loren is Distinguished Professor of Practice in the Eisenhower School.

n enduring advantage of the U.S. military over decades has been its professional development of both officers and enlisted Servicemembers. Central to this advantage is the cultivation of leaders guided by the ethics of the profession of arms and

rooted in character and integrity. Much has changed in society, education, technology, commerce, and government over the past 100 years. What has not changed over this time is the need for ethical leadership development within the military. As the National Defense University's Dwight D. Eisenhower School for National Security and Resource Strategy celebrates its centennial anniversary, a spotlight is on ethical leadership development, an essential component of professional military education (PME) and the profession of arms. Despite technological advances and purported changes in the character of war, developing leaders of character remains paramount.

Delving into the past, we examine how the landscape of ethical leadership development has evolved over the last 100 years, tracing its trajectory from the original founding of the Army Industrial College to the college's redesignation as the Industrial College of the Armed Forces to today's Eisenhower School. As we traverse this extended period, it is beyond our scope to review traditional ethical frameworks and describe the varied systems and processes currently employed across the various institutions of PME. Instead, we first highlight the primary ethical challenges faced by the military over time, along with the respective focus areas of ethical leadership development from those eras. Our focus then shifts to future directions and dimensions for character and leadership development.

In keeping with the structure for this special feature, we have loosely segmented the time periods into 1924 to 1989, 1989 to the present, and prospects for the future. Admittedly, our selected historical highlights merely scratch the surface of vast and complex domestic and international inflection points. Rather than providing a comprehensive historical review, our intention is to prompt curiosity, critical reflection, and creativity in readers as they ponder the next few decades of ethical leadership development.

We seek to prompt readers to engage in thought-provoking discussion with colleagues about the ideas presented herein. Through these discussions, we hope to invigorate and expand the ethical component of military (and other professional) education, training, and character development. While our principal focus is on the military, we recognize that the ethical leadership development concerns and frameworks discussed also apply broadly to the interagency, industry, and international partners who collaborate closely with the military on matters of national security.

Foundations: The Enduring Nature of Ethical Character Development

One way in which military leadership distinguishes itself from other sectors is the requirement for making life-ordeath decisions (often in real-time, stressful conditions). To execute this responsibility ethically while facing intense pressure from the surrounding context requires solid grounding in ethical frameworks. Military members are exposed to such frameworks when joining the service, and these topics are then revisited during subsequent continuing PME. Knowledge, however, is not sufficient for producing ethical behavior. Military leaders must also possess the courage and character to take appropriate actions in any given set of circumstances.1 In challenging situations, clear solutions are rarely evident among the myriad options available. Today's morally ambiguous and complex environments frequently compel leaders to choose from decidedly suboptimal (generally convenient, expedient) alternatives. By examining the collective moral dimensions of a set of problems (time permitting), ethical leaders can employ a professional normative lens to prioritize competing moral principles and make wellinformed decisions.2

Ethical leadership development has evolved through a series of stages, with each subsequent phase including and transcending previous ones. In earlier stages of contemporary warfare (aligned with our 100-year focus of 1924 to 2024), ethical military behavior was generally based on demonstrating personal

courage, following (ideally legitimate) orders, exercising disciplined restraint, and preserving a sense of both personal and collective honor. Of even greater importance during that period, military personnel adhered to a largely unspoken but widely agreed-on code of conduct. Eventually, it became necessary for ethical military leaders to also abide by emergent laws of war, often codified in international treaties such as the Geneva Conventions. These laws of war (or armed conflict) were later augmented with tailored rules of engagement defining ethical military behavior in specific engagements, campaigns, and theaters of operation.

Post-World War I Through the Cold War: 1924 to 1989

During the decade following World War I (the interwar period), militaries sought to understand and integrate the technological changes that characterized the late stages of that extensive conflict (often described as the first modern war, "the war to end all wars").3 Technological advances during the conflict included tanks, aircraft and aerial combat, submarine warfare, machine guns, increasingly powerful artillery pieces, and radio communication systems that permitted command and control over greater distances. Perhaps the most pernicious development during that period was the largescale use of chemical weapons (such as mustard gas and chlorine) to break the stalemate of trench warfare, leading to horrific casualties.4 As a result, military leaders and strategists began to grapple with the ethical dimensions of using these early weapons of mass destruction in balancing tactical advantage against humanitarian values.⁵ Additionally, a focus for ethical leadership development during the interwar period included education on international law and the Geneva Conventions.

If World War I introduced mankind to modern warfare, then World War II was the epitome of total war (or nearly pure war as described by Carl von Clausewitz⁶) on a cross-continental scale.⁷ Strategic bombing campaigns,

including the firebombing of cities like Dresden and Tokyo, raised ethical concerns about targeting civilian areas and causing massive civilian losses. Similarly, the morality and necessity of the decision by the United States to use atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki remain hotly debated. Moreover, the actions of Nazi officers during the atrocities of the Holocaust, as well as the handling of civilian populations and prisoners of war by the Japanese, challenged the legitimacy of the defense of "just following orders" and led to accountability for war crimes ("command responsibility") at the Nuremberg and Tokyo war crimes trials.8 Meanwhile, guerrilla warfare and resistance movements blurred the distinction between combatants and noncombatants and highlighted the responsibility for ethical treatment of both civilians and prisoners of war. Significantly, the U.S. military was still racially segregated throughout the war. Black Servicemembers often faced discrimination, leading to ethical questions regarding the fair treatment of all uniformed personnel.9

The experiences of World War II significantly expanded the emphasis on adhering to the Geneva Conventions and international law. Leaders were trained to understand and commit to these rules. especially concerning the treatment of prisoners of war and noncombatants. The Nuremberg and Tokyo trials conducted after the war underscored the importance of accountability in military leadership roles. The trials clearly demonstrated to leaders that they would be held responsible for their actions and decisions in warfare.¹⁰ The moral dilemmas faced during the war, such as decisions about bombing civilians and using the atomic bomb, led to a greater awareness of ethical decisionmaking in balancing military necessity with humanitarian concerns. Finally, the racial desegregation of the Armed Forces in 1948 by President Harry Truman was a significant event for the military. Ethical training during that period emphasized the equal treatment of Servicemembers and the elimination of discrimination within the ranks—elusive ideals that continue to demand attention.

During the Cold War, the risk of nuclear annihilation kept global populations on edge. The ethical dimensions of employing nuclear weapons were hotly contested, and most hoped that the doctrine of mutually assured destruction would prevent triggering a nuclear war. An important emphasis for ethical leadership development during that period was preventing a mistaken or accidental nuclear exchange. In fact, history offers several examples on both sides of the Iron Curtain where cooler heads prevailed and chose to ignore nuclear launch alarms.11

During the Korean and Vietnam wars, the military was engaged in ideological battles and geopolitical contests as part of Cold War proxy struggles. Civilian atrocities, such as the My Lai massacre in 1968, the use of Agent Orange, the carpet bombing of civilian areas, the mistreatment and torture of prisoners of war, and other human rights abuses in the Vietnam campaign, led to a resurgence in the need to focus on ethics and developing leaders of character in the military. Leadership responsibility and accountability at all levels of the chain of command received renewed emphasis, while rules of engagement were often debated as being either too restrictive or too permissive. 12 Training on the proper treatment of prisoners was also reinforced.

In general, the Vietnam era was characterized by the breakdown of trust and cohesion of many military units, racial strife, and alcohol and drug abuse. These dynamics would ultimately lead to a future generation of military leadership committing itself to revitalizing the standards of professionalism, ethical conduct, and civil-military relations. These reforms resulted in the well-trained and equipped, professional, all-volunteer force that would dominate and decimate Saddam Hussein's Iraqi army in the first Gulf War. 13

To the Present

The last 30 years or so have been a period sometimes referred to as a "unipolar moment."14 A major event that marked this period was the first Gulf War. During that conflict, the U.S.-led



coalition ejected Saddam's army, which was billed as the fourth-largest in the world at that time, from its occupation of Kuwait.15 Historians may one day view the campaign as the final instance in our lifetime where a sizable joint and combined force, spearheaded by large tank formations, was used to achieve full, decisive military victory over a conventional enemy while ostensibly accomplishing the direct political objectives of the campaign. 16 Little discussed to this day, but worthy of continuing, critical ethical scrutiny, is the enduring question of whether the massive lethality and destruction unleashed by the United States and its allies represented disproportionate, indiscriminate force.



Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the 1990s were largely characterized by renewed nationalism and violent struggles to redraw national borders. These conflicts resulted in many brutal atrocities. For example, much of the world was outraged by the impotence of peacekeeping forces, such as United Nations forces in Srebrenica, which stood by as thousands of civilians were systematically slaughtered.¹⁷ Naturally, this moral failure raised ethical questions over the duty to protect noncombatants from flagrant violations of law and humanitarian standards of conduct. Not long afterward, the international community refused to intervene in the Rwandan civil war, resulting in the brutal murder of

hundreds of thousands of people based on their tribal affiliations. Consequently, ethical training for the military during this period addressed decisionmaking regarding where, when, and how to intervene when serving in operations other than war.¹⁸

As often stated, everything changed on September 11, 2001.¹⁹ A stunned and outraged America was ready to inflict punishment and exact justice for the brazen and completely unprecedented scale and effect of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Overconfidence born of "total victory" over Saddam led to overreach in political objectives that characterized the "forever wars" that followed 9/11 in Afghanistan,

Iraq, and the greater Middle East. Developments in the rapidly changing character of war during this time included asymmetric warfare, counterinsurgencies, cyber warfare, drones and autonomous weapons, sophisticated information warfare, and, some would argue, even pandemics and climate-induced catastrophes. An ethically fraught aspect of these conflicts was the unprecedented scale and lack of accountability of private security firms and other military contractors. Operating largely in the shadows, they followed their own rules of engagement and were often driven by profit motives.²⁰

Ethical challenges associated with the forever wars included proportionality, civilian protection, and the ethical use of

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force in complex urban environments. Other ethical challenges were related to "enhanced interrogation" and nontraditional forms of detainment (often using a "ticking timebomb" rationalization), along with scandalous ethical failures that shocked the world (for example, Guantánamo, Abu Ghraib, Haditha). Furthermore, the ethical issues associated with the use of autonomous drones, not least for extralegal targeted assassinations, raised many questions related to legality in international law as well as risks of collateral damage. This period was also the beginning of recognizing the tremendous psychological burden that began to take a toll on Airmen who "piloted" drones in distant theaters of operations from the "safety" of remote locations and then returned home to their families when their shifts ended and expected to function normally.²¹ Similarly, frequent deployments to Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria were having a major impact on the readiness, resilience, and mental health of U.S. Servicemembers.²²

Ethical leadership development during this period was strengthened through the establishment of leader and character development centers at each of the Service academies: the Simon Center for the Professional Military Ethic at the U.S. Military Academy, the Stockdale Center for Ethical Leadership at the U.S. Naval Academy, the Center for Character and Leadership Development at the U.S. Air Force Academy, and the Loy Institute for Leadership at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy. Each of these institutions is dedicated to forging leaders of character through the education and training of cadets and midshipmen, faculty, and staff. In addition to the usual focus areas of ethical leadership development curricula and training, other prominent themes in the current era's discourse include the proper role of advanced esoteric weapons technologies (drones, cyber weaponry, and even weather modification) in warfare, accountability and appropriate limits on the extensive use of private military contractors, and the need for international law and ethical standards to evolve to keep up with a wide range of instrumentalities associated with the

exercise of power (cyber, intervention, sanctions, intelligence, covert action, and government secrecy among them).23 Finally, since most contemporary military operations have involved coalitions of multinational forces, there has also been a focus on ensuring that U.S. military leaders are prepared to operate within a framework that respects cross-cultural norms and adheres to international ethical standards.24

Within the military Services, this period has also been marked by a significant emphasis on diversity, equity, and inclusion, as well as the prevention of pervasive sexual harassment and assault. Additionally, the Services have grappled with the phenomenon of toxic leaders while seeking ways to mitigate their adverse impact on units.25 This has, among other things, led the Army to adopt more stringent talent management protocols such as the Command Assessment Program in 2020.26 Finally, recognizing, normalizing, and treating the mental and moral injuries of war, such as posttraumatic stress disorder, brain trauma, and other psychological stressors from extended and repeated combat deployments, have become a timely and relevant aspect of ethical leadership development.²⁷ In summary, the foregoing topics have played prominent roles in ethical discourse, education, training, and operational activities throughout the military.

Prospects for the Future

Looking ahead to the next decade and beyond, the character of war almost assuredly will continue evolving, with implications for the effective training and education of leaders of character. Likewise, the boundaries that have separated military life from civilian life in varying degrees over time will undoubtedly be with us in ever greater measure, thereby engendering continuing concerns about ethical, social, and political divergence and convergence. The points that follow, accordingly, are meant not to be alarmist but rather to help readers expand their conceptual frameworks about what it will take to develop leaders of character and integrity who can measure up, ethically, to

the foreseeable and unforeseeable challenges ahead.

Disruptive Technology and the *Human Factor.* In the near future, it is likely that swarms of remote and unmanned autonomous machines will dominate operations in each of the military domains: land, sea, air, space, and cyber. These machines will kill targets with alarming efficiency, with and without human intervention. The ethical concerns of this development include collateral damage, misidentification (or false identification) of targets, violations of international law and national sovereignty, and policy miscalculations and accountability concerns that inevitably accompany the relative ease and low risk of using such instruments. Policymakers and military leaders will need to collaborate with international allies and partners to develop guardrails for the ethical and humane use of such ultra-advanced technologies. These mechanisms will surely include finding ways to keep human judgment in the so-called kill loop.

Geopolitical Escalation. An optimist may hope that if legions of machines are standing by to defend against military intruders, then the likelihood of largescale conflict may be diminished. On the other end of the spectrum, if a full-scale conflict occurs with a peer competitor, the massive loss of life in the Armed Forces will present a shock to not only the military ranks but also the public. This will require leaders to demonstrate stellar character, embodying courage, compassion, and all the core values of the profession of arms. Furthermore, there remains the renewed risk of the use of tactical nuclear weapons by a Vladimir Putin-led Russian regime that considers defeat in Ukraine an existential threat. Whether the Kremlin's nuclear posturing is intended simply to intimidate the West into backing down or to be a genuine possibility is largely unknowable.²⁸ Yet the response to both saber-rattling and actual prospective nuclear use presents some of the most consequential ethical choices since the height of the Cold War.

Domestic Whirlwinds. Within our own borders, there is the continued risk that domestic political extremism and



Oath of Office is projected on screen behind ROTC cadet as he takes Oath at Clemson University during Army and Air Force ROTC joint ceremony to commission 33 second lieutenants into military service, May 11, 2022 (U.S. Army/Ken Scar)

polarization could turn violent on an unprecedented scale.²⁹ Throughout its history, the United States has repeatedly experienced periodic violent clashes between protestors and civil authorities as well as targeted attacks on police, military members, and other law enforcement agencies.³⁰ Depending on the scale and nature of domestic violence, the military might be directed to intervene through invocation of the Insurrection Act.31 In such situations, civil and military leaders alike will absolutely have to fully understand relevant statutes (for example, posse comitatus) and limitations (the drift to authoritarianism) and recognize that their loyalty is to the rule of law and our system of constitutional government. Ethical leadership development will therefore need to emphasize first principles.32

Along these lines, a relatively new initiative at the U.S. Air Force Academy is the Oath Project, a cadet-led program designed to promote understanding of

the oath of office and bolster appropriate civil-military norms and values in an apolitical military.³³ In a potential domestic crisis where the military receives conflicting guidance from legitimate civilian authorities, leaders will need firm guiding principles to maintain public trust and confidence in government institutions and ensure the continued functioning of essential government services.

Natural and Man-Made Disasters, Cyber Intrusions, and Black Swan Events. It is likely that in the next decade, national and international institutions and communities will face continued threats from a wide range of natural and man-made disasters. In such situations, military leaders may be called on to make choices about whether, where, and how to deploy limited assets to rescue civilian populations and protect essential military and government infrastructure. A similar scenario could arise during another global pandemic (or simultaneous pandemics). Additionally, a partial or total collapse

(even temporary) of financial markets (such as one instigated by a wide-scale, aggressive cyberattack) could lead to mass panic.³⁴ Events such as these (or similar unanticipated, counterintuitive black swan events) that threaten to overwhelm civilian coping mechanisms would naturally thrust the military onto the scene to restore order and provide essential emergency services. In such situations, military leadership will be tested in new ways, requiring additional dimensions of ethical grounding.

Human Resource Disruption. As disruptive technologies continue to advance, there is a high likelihood that many traditional military roles will be performed either by generative artificial intelligence or through new forms of human-machine interaction. Such developments will be accelerated by the recruiting crisis faced by the Armed Forces. Talso is unclear when the declining health and physical fitness (due to obesity, diabetes, heart disease, cancer,

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cognitive decline, and mental health issues) of increasingly younger segments of the general population will have crippling impacts on the human resources of both potential recruits and existing military Servicemembers. As such, the traditional emphasis on physical fitness in the military will need to be more aggressively expanded to include whole-person fitness that encompasses mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual health and well-being.

Similarly, a recent trend facing both industry and the military is the increasing number of personnel declining to take leadership positions or compete for command.36 This trend could affect ethical leadership development opportunities, especially if there is a deficit of personnel able or willing to carry out the demanding duties of leadership. Navigating the whole range and intensity of demands that military leaders and Servicemembers will face on the horizon requires a focus not only on building resilience (including advanced nervous system regulation skills) but also on increasing human capacity through elevated states of consciousness.37 Such challenges will be both physiological and biological in nature as well as ethical in heightened measure.

Broad Ethical Leadership Development for the Future

As the national and global security environments evolve in the years ahead, it will be crucial to adapt and expand frameworks and mindsets regarding military ethics and ethical leadership development. It will also be necessary to incorporate leading-edge leadership development concepts that can support the process of building leaders of character for the present and future. What follows are several ideas that could provide the foundation for an ethical leadership development roadmap for the future, while at the same time fostering robust inquiry, discourse, internalization, and socialization.

Some Recommended Shifts in Prevailing "Mindsets."

• Change the understanding of military ethics from a compliance-based

- to a values-based approach designed to create comparative strategic advantage. This advantage would emerge from building trust and confidence within units, formations, nations, coalitions, and other collective stakeholder arrangements based on shared liberal democratic values and ethical frameworks.
- Change from focusing on so-called disruptive technologies in vacuo by including an enhanced and enriched focus on ethical, psychological, emotional, spiritual, intuitive, and cross-cultural factors, thereby placing more emphasis on exploring what it really means to be a human in collaboration with advanced machines and generative artificial intelligence. As humans in general are pushed to keep pace with rapidly advancing technology, the military can take a leading role in supporting such an undertaking through expanded emphasis on whole-person well-being.
- Change from thinking about ethics as an isolated individual topic to framing it as a team "sport," with leaders serving as team trainers, coaches, and ethical fitness advisers.

Contours of an Ethical Leadership Development Program. Leadership development frameworks inherently revolve around cultivating knowledge, skills, abilities, attributes, attitudes, and selfawareness. However, development also involves learning through experience and having the support of mentors, coaches, peers, and refashioned reciprocating subordinates and superiors. Ethical leadership development for military members naturally includes these components as well. The following ideas seek to broaden and deepen what traditionally has been a rather limited focus for ethical development in the military.

Formal education (long-term intellectual development) for military members should be continued at all levels of PME on just war theory, the laws of war, and dominant ethical theories, principles, and paradigms. Additionally, discussions on ethical standards and behavior should

be expanded by integrating them into the delivery of other curricular topics. It would be beneficial, too, to make ethics a regular topic of continuing education, deliberation, and discussion, rather than an isolated "once and done" topic designed to fulfill command-directed training requirements. Finally, the tacitly accepted construct of ethical leadership should be broadened to include more of the elements that lead to effective, adaptive, and sustainable organizational cultures.

Within the training realm, synergy can be achieved by incorporating ethical dilemmas into existing exercises and war games. These training dilemmas would capture the essence of the moral choices decisionmakers could face (with generative artificial intelligence being leveraged to help create relevant scenarios). Leaders and their organizations must face these types of dilemmas before confronting them in real-world operational activities. By doing so, they can start maturing existing mental models and building the teamwork required to quickly generate creative approaches to expected and unexpected dilemmas.

To support realistic ethics training, the Services could produce ethical dilemma battle drills, such as those currently used by the special operating forces to enhance operational effectiveness.38 Teams can also conduct "ethical risk management" matrices before embarking on operations to foresee moral challenges and develop mitigation measures. Operational units could also incorporate key ethics themes into post-operation after-action reviews. Finally, lessons-learned functions could capture and disseminate decisions made, risks balanced, and other relevant ethical considerations.

There are many stakeholders and participants in ethical leadership development including the Armed Forces themselves, joint PME institutions, interagency teammates, allies, and partners. Cross-organizational conferences and working groups can serve as forums to discuss curricula, training, best practices, and other innovative leadership development initiatives to keep pace with the evolving character of war and the

dynamic operating environment. Military leaders can promote awareness vis-à-vis the ethical frameworks employed by competitors and adversaries by employing "strategic empathy," which could help in balancing operational risk.³⁹ The ethics centers at each of the Service academies, mid-level colleges, and war colleges can take the lead in organizing broad learning communities to harvest lessons and promote extended learning.

The ultra-fast pace of military operations without adequate recovery time can diminish vitality and cause burnout at individual and unit levels. Such conditions can lead to moral exhaustion and an associated inability to successfully navigate ethical dilemmas (choosing the easier wrong over the harder right or choosing the best among a menu of decidedly suboptimal options). To address this reality, personal development should include a greater focus on psychological strength and resilience. The effectiveness of this approach can be dramatically increased with consistent coaching by trained professionals, whether internal or external. Coaching can also help uncover ethical blind spots and toxic leadership patterns that could otherwise derail leaders. When correctly applied, coaching can promote reflective practices that enable leaders to identify and implement ethical guardrails, such as peer accountability, to counter the most common ethical pitfalls to which senior leaders tend to succumb.40

As noted, an important element of ethical leader development is focusing on developing ethically healthy organizational cultures. Research clearly shows that an organization's culture and climate shape the ethical inclinations and practices of its members.⁴¹ This dynamic can lead to either a virtuous circle or a vicious cycle, as the ethical climate is largely determined by senior leadership's behaviors and mindsets.⁴² Ethically healthy cultures encourage critical thinking (including strategic empathy and red-teaming), creative thinking (escaping "either/or" approaches to foreseeing ethical dilemmas), and speaking up (or pushing back) when members witness behaviors that violate

the professional standards, norms, or aspirational values of the organization. To promote this kind of healthy climate, ethical leaders have a responsibility to solicit feedback and foster a safe environment for organizational members to express their concerns. Leaders can also deliberately reward members who demonstrate courage in defending organizational values.43 Finally, creating an ethical organizational culture requires appropriate degrees of intercultural sensitivity to understand and incorporate the viewpoints of internal group members and external clientele from nondominant backgrounds.44

An Uncertain Future

Much can be learned from the past by analyzing historical ethical behavior. Meanwhile, the future of ethical leadership development remains unwritten. Even by the time these words are published, the relevance of the topics discussed here may already be outdated to some degree. Yet developing leaders of character is a timeless, worthy, and essential endeavor for the military profession, and it will remain of paramount importance regardless of ongoing developments in the character of war and surrounding domestic and international social, cultural, and political environments. In any future conflict, the pressure to sideline ethical considerations will be immense. The only way to surmount such pressures will be through deep, thorough, repeated, and continuous grounding in the ethics of the profession of arms.

In his farewell address in 1989, President Ronald Reagan stated, "For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us."45 The stakes have never been higher for the future of the rules-based international order and liberal democracy. Many still look to the example America sets in providing ethical global leadership. When the future version of this article is written for the 150-year anniversary of the Eisenhower School, what story will be told? JFQ

Notes

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