



SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
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MEMORANDUM FOR SECRETARIES OF THE MILITARY DEPARTMENTS
CHIEFS OF THE MILITARY SERVICES
COMMANDERS OF THE COMBATANT COMMANDS

SUBJECT: Discipline and Lethality

As we aggressively execute our National Defense Strategy and make our force more lethal, I remind you that enhanced lethality demands more than increasing the size of our formations and obtaining newer, more advanced equipment – it also requires having a more disciplined force.

General Washington once commanded an outmanned and outgunned group of patriots that defeated Great Britain, then the strongest military in the world. He observed: “Discipline is the soul of an army. It makes small numbers formidable; procures success to the weak, and esteem to all.”

Today, *we* are the most powerful military in the world and find ourselves in a competition among great powers. Our National Defense Strategy requires us to expand the competitive space to challenge those competitors. We *must* have better individual and unit discipline than our enemies.

It is incumbent on our leaders to ensure that American Forces are always the most disciplined on the battlefield, whatever the domain might be. The discipline of today includes vigilant operational security, protection of electronic equipment, and responsible social media activity. We must demonstrate respect for all Service members, build trust, and remove the cancer of sexual misconduct from our ranks. All Service members learn to fight well by doing the little things perfectly, otherwise they cannot possibly get the big things right when all goes wrong.

Enforcing standards is a critical component of making our force more lethal. Our leaders must uphold proven standards. They should know the difference between a mistake and a lack of discipline. If a subordinate makes a mistake, leaders should learn to coach them better. But we must not tolerate or ignore lapses in discipline, for our enemies will benefit if we do not correct and appropriately punish substandard conduct. Time, inconvenience, or administrative burdens are no excuse for allowing substandard conduct to persist.

The military justice system is a powerful tool that preserves good order and discipline while protecting the civil rights of Service members. It is a commander’s duty to use it. Military leaders must not interfere with individual cases, but fairness to the accused does not prevent military officers from appropriately condemning and eradicating malignant *behavior* from our ranks. Leaders must be willing to choose the harder right over the easier wrong. Administrative actions should not be the default method to address illicit conduct simply because it is less burdensome than the military justice system. Leaders cannot be so risk-averse that they lose their focus on forging disciplined troops ready to ferociously and ethically defeat our enemies on the battlefield.

We have no God-given right to victory. Discipline is a competitive edge we must seek and maintain each day if we are to keep America safe from its enemies. As General Washington learned first-hand, discipline will make us stronger and more lethal. Therefore, let *nothing* prevent us from becoming the most disciplined force this world has ever known.

cc:
CJCS

