

# BY OUR ORTHODOXIES SHALL YE KNOW US

By MICHAEL VLAHOS

**W**e all need orthodoxy. In America the word orthodox smells of rigidity and righteousness, of small thoughts. But the definition sounds all right: *belief in, and agreement with what is, or is currently held to be right.*

What's wrong with having common ground for reality, what is more important than having shared values and beliefs? Group members must experience things together, or else they make a pretty sorry group. This is true for what we call society, and it goes doubly for military culture.

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So it's all right for us to move along the same path, to march to the same drummer. How do we do it? Partly by following a good script and, as any movie producer can tell you, what sells a good script is good language.

But how are good movies remembered and understood? Do we rely upon tabloid reviews or publicity blurbs? No, we repeat the one classic line that captures the spirit of a film forever. Now think of the real world as a movie, and we are in it. How do we tell others—as well as ourselves—who we are and where we are going? Remember, we too have a script, even if it's shelved in our unconscious. We read from it every day. And we constantly use words or special phrases to communicate with one another about who we are as a group in the here and now. Call these *grail words*.

I don't mean mottoes like *Semper Fi*, which are almost sacred markers of military culture. They resound across time and space, they are forever. No, I am talking about who we are right now, in our movie. For what we are about is our story line. Hence the grail metaphor. It's what drives and defines us, and it gives our story coherence and focus.

Grail words provide a better insight into ourselves than actual orthodoxy which, after all, is just the official documentation of what we believe. Grail words are actual expressions of belief.

What are some of the grail words of the past?

- ▼ for the Navy of the 1890s, it was *steam engineering*
- ▼ for the Army during the 1920s, *mechanization*
- ▼ for the Air Force in the 1950s, *strategic*
- ▼ for the Army during the 1950s, *atomic*
- ▼ for the Navy of the 1950s, *nuclear power*

Today our grail word is *jointness*. So what's the point of all this? What import do these words have for us? They tell us how we

relate to society, where America is going, and whether our vision is moving in step with the society around us.

It is important to understand that grail words have far greater substance than they appear to. In the 1890s, *steam engineering* didn't mean just naval engineering. It meant a new world view—professionalism—and a new identity that fit the spirit of the age. It was the Progressive Era, and the Navy was changing along with the scientific (take a look at the number of naval articles in the *Scientific American* circa 1912), forward-looking, reform agenda of American society at large.

And grail words tell us how the Army, Navy, and Air Force imagine their special place in a changing national agenda. In the 1950s, for instance, the Air Force liked the word *strategic* since it signified that it was the premiere, necessary service—the instrument of victory. American strategy was the *Strategic Air Command*.

During the same period the Army, once the centerpiece of American arms, was fighting marginality. The word *atomic* announced, “we’re relevant; we use the same big weapons.” And it also said, “we can survive and play a role in war, even on an atomic battlefield.”

The Navy following World War II was suddenly the old-tech service. It had to show that it was on the cutting edge just like the Air Force. What better way than to link the future of the Navy to the American way of

life: were not our entire lives about to be reborn through the miracle of *nuclear power*?

What does *jointness* say about military culture today? First, jointness is about peacetime. Its meaning is more like the grail words

*steam engineering* than *strategic* or *atomic* in an earlier age. Strategic and atomic were once part of society’s grail words: *the Cold War*. America’s vision of itself in the 1950s was of a world-on-a-string, and it was a warlike vision. The Army, Navy, and Air Force were at the center of that vision. But at the turn of the century, America’s vision was all about renewal: the Nation transforming itself, becoming modern, more civilized. Steam engineering was the Navy’s path to sharing in that vision.

Second, jointness is about an America looking inward. Jointness is a concept steeped in self-improvement, in the process of becoming better (like Clinton’s revealing statement, *we can do better!*). America’s spirit today is intent on getting the national act together or—in more traditional language—in reforming itself. In this quest the services will follow, not lead; for the military lives at the margins, not at the center. America’s center will be, at least for the next decade, itself.

Third, jointness is about the survival—of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force—as a single military culture. It strongly suggests an awareness that interservice squabbles cannot be brooked in a long peace unless the services are willing to risk mutual evisceration. There is also a sense—even if unspoken—that military power as we have known it may wither away. A single, unified military culture will survive longer, be able to make its case longer, stay healthy longer than if the services bicker over ever-thinner gruel.

This may be interesting but again, so what? What’s wrong? Is there a real problem? In a word, yes. If jointness is our grail word, if it corresponds to the spirit of a new age, if America’s spirit is inward-looking, then it means by implication that we are not thinking about the next war.

Sure, we talk about responding to future conflicts, but enshrining jointness means that the outside world and its problems are *defined down*. An era dominated by a quest for jointness means that we are allowing ourselves the mental luxury of thinking in terms of a stable world; we are assuming that serious military challenges will remain moderate for the near-term and generic for the long-term.

The problem is simple: we are defining who we are and what we do according to the agenda of society. This is good in a certain sense because American military culture must mirror the Nation as a whole. But it is bad in another, because it quietly encourages us to see the world as a constant so that we can be part of the *big change* at home. America today isn’t worried about the world because for now the world is not big and bad enough to really preoccupy us.

The problem is that the world is changing faster than we are able to grasp. And perversely the greatest push for change is coming

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from the United States—in two ways. First, change in this country could become turbulent, with real political and social upheaval. What happens here will be closely watched abroad, and the international scene will be affected by how that change turns out.

But there is a second effect. Right now we are quitting the stage as the world's leader, and it is probably not possible to reverse that decision. The American people have made it, and there is no Stalin around to change their minds. Nor will the rest of the world hang around waiting for us to have a change of heart; they will watch what happens and go their own ways. In ten or twenty years we will find a very different world, and we may not like what we see.

You will find no predictions here; I don't know who might challenge us decades hence, I don't know how a grand crisis might arise. But I do know three things:

▼ there will be some very big powers out there with a military potential that grows closer to ours each year and over which we have little influence

▼ the technological revolution will mean that if those powers want they will be able to own weapons as wonderful and hideous as our own

▼ the only thing which will keep countries from hurting us will be their attitude toward us, and shifts from friend to foe could come as quickly as a new idea taking root or a new movement igniting opposition against us.

Jointness is not the wrong vision—by all means, be joint. Let jointness be a grail word for the next twenty years. But let's be clear: jointness does not focus our minds on the next challenger or the next war.

My suggestion is to find a second grail word for this period of peace, however long it lasts. And let's make sure that it focuses our attention on the future, to real challenges to the United States—not to the residual gunboat chores that the Cold War left behind.

This means bucking the spirit of the age a bit. But we are not paid to enjoy peacetime—even if urged on by the benefits of self-improvement. Hard as it is, our real job is the next war. **JFQ**