

The DoD Times (Redacted)

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THIS WEEK'S FEATURE

Two Things Can Be True

One of the more frustrating trends in today's military discourse is the inability—or unwillingness—to accept that two things can be true at the same time.

Lt Col (Ret) Ryan Sweazey

President & Founder, Walk the Talk Foundation

“He’s a great guy.”

One of the more frustrating trends in today's military discourse is the inability—or unwillingness—to accept that two things can be true at the same time.

We see this repeatedly whenever senior leaders are criticized. Raise legitimate concerns about their performance, and almost immediately someone responds with a defense rooted not in outcomes, but in personality.

“He’s a great guy.”

“She really cares about people.”

“He’s flown a ton of hours.”

“Everyone likes her.”

Maybe all of that is true.

But that is not the point.

A car can have an incredible sound system and still be leaking oil. If a buyer points to the puddle underneath and calls it a lemon, no serious person would respond, “Yes, but listen to those speakers!”

Yet that very same logic is routinely applied when discussing military leadership. The presence of admirable personal traits is offered as if it negates professional shortcomings. It does not.

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At Walk the Talk Foundation, we explored this dynamic in a previous piece titled Everybody is a Good Dude. The premise was simple: for nearly every senior leader, there are people who genuinely like them—often many people. They may be personable, generous, funny, compassionate, or loyal.

Great.

But none of those qualities should be the primary metric by which we assess senior military leadership.

THE STANDARD

The standard should, instead, be performance.

Did they improve the organization?

Did they confront dysfunction?

Did they reward candor over conformity?

Did they protect truth-tellers?

Did they leave the institution stronger than they found it?

Those are leadership questions. Those are the questions that matter.

THE CASE OF GENERAL CAINE

Which brings us to our current Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Dan “Raizin” Caine.

There is no need to question General Caine’s patriotism, character, or service. By all accounts, he is a good American, an honorable man, and a dedicated officer.

And he may also be failing as a leader.

Two things can be true.

The office he occupies is not ceremonial. Under Title 10, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is the principal military adviser to the President, the National Security Council, and the Secretary of Defense.

Further, Title 10 assigns the Chairman responsibilities for strategic direction, strategic and contingency planning, preparation of military options, and the assessment of military risk. The Chairman is also responsible for helping the President and Secretary provide strategic direction to the armed forces.

In other words, the statute envisions more than a spokesperson or figurehead. It envisions a leader charged with shaping military strategy, surfacing risk, and providing candid counsel at the highest levels.

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“Two things can be true. General Caine is a good man. And he may also be failing as a leader.”

TWO SIGNIFICANT SHORTCOMINGS

When it comes to Caine, we see two significant shortcomings, neither of which have to do with Dan Caine the person.

First, there has been little visible effort to address an officer and senior officer culture that increasingly rewards caution, careerism, and sycophancy over courage, candor, and independent judgment. This problem is not theoretical. It is discussed privately across formations with growing frequency. Institutions do not self-correct cultures like this without pressure from the top.

Second, there are first-hand accounts of significant matters requiring redress being brushed aside with variations of, “That’s not within my authority.” Or worse yet, in a few cases, being punted to his legion of lawyers who offer the member the same cowardly run-around.

That answer should concern every professional in uniform.

Because while the Chairman does not exercise operational command over combatant forces, the office carries broad advisory, integrative, and institutional responsibilities. Habitual appeals to limited authority can sound less like prudence and more like avoidance.

THE UNCOMFORTABLE QUESTION

There is another uncomfortable question worth asking of those who rush to defend leadership solely on the grounds that someone is a “good dude.”

Have those defenders ever been steamrolled by the star chambers of administrative justice that exist within today’s system?

Have they spent months or years trapped inside opaque Inspector General processes, with little transparency, little accountability, and little practical recourse?

Have they experienced careers damaged by bureaucratic machinery that too often protects itself first and seeks truth second?

No?

Didn’t think so.

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It is easy to praise the humanity of senior leaders when you have never had to rely on the institutions they oversee for fairness. It is easy to applaud decency from a distance when you have never felt the weight of administrative systems that can grind individuals down while leaders look the other way.

And if those systems remain broken, and if senior leaders tolerate them in their current form, that too is part of the leadership record.

“It is easy to applaud decency from a distance when you have never felt the weight of administrative systems that can grind individuals down while leaders look the other way.”

At the same time, many observers have praised General Caine’s public-facing competence—his command presence, polished briefings, and sharp debriefings of operational footage.

Fair enough.

But tactical presentation skills are not the same as strategic leadership. Narrating strike footage may impress audiences, but it does not substitute for confronting corrosive culture, empowering dissent, or correcting institutional drift.

The military community, active and veteran, should be mature enough to distinguish between the two.

Too often, it is not.

TWO THINGS CAN BE TRUE

We have created an environment where criticism of senior leaders is treated as personal disrespect, and where praise of personal decency is used to shield professional performance from scrutiny.

That mindset harms the force.

Because senior leaders should not be evaluated on likability, biography, or storytelling ability. They should be evaluated on whether they led well.

So yes, General Caine is a good man and upstanding officer.

And yes, he is also falling short in the responsibilities that matter most.

Those statements are not contradictory – they are the beginning of honest accountability.

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Lt Col (Ret) Ryan Sweazey is the President and Founder of the Walk the Talk Foundation. All articles are posted on LinkedIn and online at walkthetalkfoundation.org. The Star Chamber podcast is available on [Apple](#), [Spotify](#), and [YouTube](#).

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