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## Principled Leadership

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# Principled Leadership

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Saturday May 7, 2022

By Eric F. Spina

***(University of Dayton President Eric F. Spina offered this keynote address to the UD ROTC class of 2022 at its commissioning ceremony on May 7.)***

Thank you, Lieutenant Colonel Clementz!

I'm so honored and privileged to address our country's newest commissioned Army officers today and offer you my warmest congratulations and deepest hopes for your future.

I want to express a sincere thank you to the parents, families, and loved ones of our new Army officers. The sense of civic duty and degree of selflessness that voluntary military possess can always be traced, at least in part, to the parents and the home environment. We're grateful for the support that the families have provided to these soon-to-be UD graduates and commissioned officers; they literally could not have done it without you. (Commissionees, please give your loved ones a rousing round of applause.)

Thanks also to the leadership and staff of the Fighting Flyer Battalion, which is not only one of the longest running but also one of the best ROTC cadres in the country.

Most ROTC programs would be thrilled to graduate one or two cadets who receive the designation *Distinguished Military Graduate*. This spring, we graduate from your class **six** Distinguished Military Graduates and **four cadets in the top 100 nationally**. That speaks to the challenging yet supportive environment in our ROTC program and on our campus, one that truly provides the education, the strength, and the fortitude that new Army officers require.

I'd like to share two ideas today — one about the expectations we hold for you as graduates of a Catholic, Marianist university, and the other a bit of personal advice from a WWII veteran and my hero — my father.

From time to time, someone from the community or an alumnus will ask me why the University of Dayton offers a ROTC program. They tell me it seems incongruent that we would train warfighters given that we are a Catholic university.

My response is very simple: I believe that the United States Armed Forces are critical for our national security and protection of our freedoms, and often provide vital defense and support of our allies. Given the importance of the Armed Forces, we must ensure that our military units are led by officers who are broadly and effectively well trained. Certainly, this training includes military tactics, military history, and leadership skills.

But if we are to be worthy of the ideals of our nation, we must provide more than that. At the University of Dayton, a broad, liberal-arts education helps future Army officers to understand both human history and humanity, comprehend the role and limits of technology, appreciate that there are important and enriching differences between cultures, and understand how to interact with others and build community. So, yes, as the president of a \*university\*, I am proud that we host an Army ROTC detachment.

But, we are not just any university; we are a Catholic and Marianist university. Emblazoned on the University of Dayton's seal that appears on your soon-to-be-granted diploma are the words, *Pro Deo et Patria*, meaning "For God and Country."

As I see it, that puts us in the perfect position to prepare the BEST Army officers for our country. You've received a valuable, holistic Catholic, Marianist education that's equipped you with critical thinking skills, the ability to adapt and change, and an ethical compass that will guide your leadership of men and women under your command and help inform how to engage opposing forces and how to treat a vanquished foe.

This type of principled leadership is important to us as a country. It's an expectation handed down from our country's founders, and it's embedded in Americans' DNA. It's why UD-formed Army officers are the ones I want to lead our country in times of conflict and in times

of peace, as I know that you will lead with character, values, and a strong sense of ethics. As you safeguard the peace and security of our nation, you will do so honorably and with integrity.

My expectations of you, then, are relatively straightforward: conduct yourself at all times and in all situations honorably and with integrity. Keep in mind all you have learned at UD and all that has formed you: in ROTC instruction, on the training grounds, and in each of your academic classes. Model the Marianists and other faith-filled faculty and staff.

You embody what it means to be servant-leaders in the Marianist tradition and will leave the University of Dayton equipped with an invaluable education and an ethical compass. Always use both.

Now, some personal advice from me — well, actually through me, and from my father.

Now, who, you might ask, is my father to give you, well-educated and well-trained Army officers, advice? My father is the son of immigrants born just before the Great Depression. He served in the European Theatre in WWII, and was part of the Greatest Generation who grew this country's economy and greatness in the years following the war. He will be 97 in July, and is as fit as a fiddle: sharp of mind, healthy of body, and as active as any of us.

In WWII, my father was, in his own words, a grunt: PFC Joe Spina with a battlefield promotion to corporal. He was an infantryman who served mostly in armored divisions including the famed 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division, and was under the command of Generals Patton and Bradley at different times during the war. He participated in more battles than he would have liked, including St. Vith and the Battle of the Bulge, and his life was once saved by a Lockheed P-38 Lightning that appeared out of the blue to take out an enemy artillery battery. I guess you could say my life was saved that day, too. I will stop with the biography now and get to the point, but I think my dad's life story is important because you will have command of MANY PFC Joe Spinass. Soon. Sometimes (let's hope \*always\*) in peace, but perhaps sometimes in war.

About a month ago, when I began thinking about what I might say to you today, I had the sudden brainstorm to ask my father, as that battle- and time-tested Private First Class, what advice he would give you, as new officers, if he had the chance. Now, mind you, when my father was a private in the Army, no one ever asked him to give advice to the officers (!!!), but I thought you could benefit from some wisdom from a man who is both my personal hero and a role model.

As I framed my request for my Dad, I said I just wanted to plant a seed, allow him to think it over, and then later in the week he could give me his response. He immediately indicated that he did not have to mull it over; he knew immediately what primary advice he wanted to give you based upon some of his experiences that remain very much in his mind from nearly 80 years ago.

And this is it: Treat your charges as knowledgeable, sentient people by providing them with key information about their situation, including the objectives and the rationale behind the approach and strategy. Don't leave your troops in the dark, because uninformed soldiers will lose morale and that's when missions fail. In a word, communicate. And communicate often. The men and women under your command deserve that and will repay your trust in kind.

Now, I daresay that you have heard this from your instructors, but here it is coming from a WWII veteran who wishes you well and knows that, educated at the University of Dayton, you will be highly effective, courageous military leaders who will be put in situations where you need to discern, make judgment calls — and communicate clearly and effectively.

And I might add that the truth of my father's advice has been seen in recent weeks as Russian soldiers — without knowledge of the truth of their mission and the objectives of their military action — have failed time and time again during the invasion of Ukraine.

In closing, I congratulate you and sincerely thank you. Thank you for adding such value to UD over the past four years. Thank you for your selfless and dedicated service you will give to your country. Thank you for your willingness to defend America's values and the individual freedoms that we cherish.

Stay safe and well. And carry yourself as the newest and finest 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenants in the country — because you are! Go Flyers! Go Army!