



# CHIEF's Sight Picture

28 June 2005

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## **Airmen, Spiritual Strength and Core Values**

Our lives changed when we took the oath to defend our nation and put on the uniform of an Airman. But what was that change? Was it merely symbols – uniform, rank, and badges? No, it was a transformation from whoever we were before to someone vested in higher order values, a transformation into a part of something bigger than ourselves. We come from all walks of life, from every part of our Nation. We are different people from diverse backgrounds and with our diversity we bring different sets of values. We have different hopes and aspirations, different goals and different beliefs. It is perhaps our Nation's greatest strength that, since its founding, we can stand shoulder to shoulder with people of different origins and beliefs for a single purpose – to serve.

As part of our service in the United States Air Force we are expected to embrace its Core Values: Integrity First, Service Before Self and Excellence In All We Do. These Values are a guide that binds us together, even as we fight for the right to be different in so many other ways. We use the word "Core" because we expect these values to be fundamental to our service, to guide our commitment to our country and our mission, and to serve as a test for the decisions we make in both our personal and professional lives. Our commitment to these Core Values means that they are more than just words posted on a wall or recited by rote. They reside in the front row of our daily lives to help us wrestle with our toughest decisions and to guide us on our path of service as Airmen.

At our Air Force Academy, we have experienced issues with expressions of religious beliefs and with perceptions that one set of beliefs is favored over others. Remember Service Before Self. Religion is intensely personal and disagreements can detract from the teamwork necessary for Air Force units. In particular, sharing personal beliefs in a professional setting, one where leaders are performing their duties in a chain of command or in a superior-subordinate relationship, can easily become improper influence about personal matters. Furthermore, it can be resented. A friend of mine recently expressed it this way: "The core task of every leader in the profession of arms is uniting his or her people into a strong team, with levels of trust and commitment so high the unit keeps working well even under extreme pressure. Everyone in a unit contributes to that task." Anything that detracts from that teamwork ultimately detracts from the mission.

What does this mean about how leaders should approach spiritual strength? Spiritual strength is an integral part of leadership. Our greatest leaders are able to elevate the human spirit and inspire extraordinary performance. Spiritual strength is what drives us to make sacrifices for others, for our Nation, and for the greater good. For some, a commitment to a specific religious faith is a source for that spiritual strength, but not for all. For some, it is their heritage and the

experience of a community of people within our human family. For others, it is the way they were touched as individuals by a family member, teacher, or leader's work of faith or charity. As we stress our Core Value of Service Before Self, we see spiritual strength as its foundation, whether or not an individual sees himself or herself as religious.

Faith and religious freedom were fundamental to the founding of this Nation. Chaplains are part of our profession of arms and have a unique charter: to minister to those who share their specific faith, to facilitate ministry to those of other faiths, and to care for all – including those whose spiritual strength does not come from religious belief. Our chaplains should set the example for mutual respect among different faiths and beliefs. Service Before Self.

There will be more specific guidance about expressions of personal religious beliefs. This guidance will emphasize mutual respect and the wingman culture fundamental to all Airmen. The expression of personal preferences to subordinates, especially in a professional setting or at mandatory events, is inappropriate. More importantly, we should always be guided by our Core Values. That's what makes us the superb Airmen that we are.

