

## INSIGHTS

# Character in the Age of AI

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We need Guardians who do the right thing. Why? For one, doing the right things attracts the right partners to help us win the next war. It is also a generative energy that fuels the warfighter and bonds people together – ultimately, we fight for the guardian to our left and right. It is a strategic advantage, and it behooves us to practice and develop character just as we develop our intellect and physique. How? By practice. Doing the right – and often difficult – things even when “No good deed goes unpunished.” In the dawn of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and quantum physics, character will play an outsized role in who wins the next war.

The word Character in Greek is *kharakter*, which means “a distinctive mark.” It is something that distinguishes one thing from another. *Kharakter* was a stamping tool used to distinguish an object and set it apart – lending it a unique identity derived from its essence. It is not only one of the Space Force’s four values but also the most elevated one. According to the Space Force Guardian Spirit Handbook (SPFH 1-1), Character is “above all.” As a matter of fact, at the annual Space Force Heritage Dinner hosted at CORONA Fall by the Chief of Space Operations, General B. Chance Saltzman, there are four candles at each dinner table, but one of the candles is always taller than the other three in order to represent Character Above All.

The SPFH 1-1 defines character as our “inner moral compass” that we rely on to pursue the mission. And first among the three traits (or personas) of the Guardian is a Principled Public Servant: “Guardians who exhibit the Guardian Spirit are principled members of the profession of arms who possess Character beyond question.” Webster’s dictionary defines the word principled as “acting in accordance with morality and showing recognition of right and wrong.” Distinguishing between right and wrong is essential to competitive endurance since one of its three tenets is to “conduct *responsible* counterspace campaigning.” So threaded throughout United States Space Force (USSF) doctrine, we see that character lies at the heart of mission success. It is part of our identity (principled public servant), and it is literally a mark of distinction. So how might we get after it? And, what’s at stake?

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Critical thinking plays no small role in how we might deliberately develop character. In September 2024, approximately 120 operators from Delta 9 participated in a professional development event led by a cross-functional team from the Naval War College, Naval Post Graduate School, and NAVSEA Warfare Center Carderock. They participated in a condensed version of an executive leadership course on metacognition – essentially thinking about thinking. Minding our mind. It challenged Guardians to step outside of themselves (figuratively speaking) and observe how they perceive and draw conclusions. Ultimately what it reveals is that our minds and perceptions sometimes deceive us. And being aware of how we can critically think through a situation, and develop muscle memory over time through practice, can heighten our ability to make better choices – and more ethical choices. In essence, deliberately engaging in the ancient practice of metanoia, which is a noun meaning “a fundamental change in character or outlook.” The word meta means “beyond” and noia means “perception,” where one changes how they perceive the world around them and interprets the signals differently in order to make a wiser decision. In the Bible, the Greek word metanoia is interpreted as repentance since there is a powerful transformation that occurs in one’s identity when they begin to perceive the world in a different way.

Warren Buffet, the owner of Berkshire Hathaway and a renowned business management guru, has famously declared that integrity is the most important character trait he looks for in people when hiring new employees. He goes on to observe that if you don’t have integrity, the other two qualities he looks for in people – intelligence and energy – will be harmful. The authors of this article believe there are military advantages to exercising character: it attracts partners to win the next fight, serves as a generative energy for the warfighter, and builds trust and camaraderie.

In his famous Moon Speech given in 1962 at Rice University, President John F. Kennedy urged the nation to

seek “preeminence in space.” Not superiority or supremacy – but preeminence. The word comes from the Old French for “prominent” or “rising above others,” and, in the 16th century, came to mean “distinguished in character.” It also comes from the Medieval Latin *preeminare*, which means “to transcend, excel, rise above.” Not literally in the physical sense of being higher above but rather in character and moral distinction. In fact, in the Catholic Church, cardinals are addressed as “Your Eminence” to show respect for cardinals who are seen as set apart. In his speech, JFK talks about how “space science, like nuclear science and all technology, has no conscience of its own” and urges Americans to lead with a conscience: “Whether [space science] will become a force for good or ill depends on man, and only if the United States occupies a position of pre-eminence can we help decide whether this new ocean will be a sea of peace or a new terrifying theater of war.” And here is the caveat – the real politic: “I do not say that we should or will go unprotected against the hostile misuse of space any more than we go unprotected against the hostile use of land or sea, but I do say that space can be explored and mastered without feeding the fires of war, without repeating the mistakes that man has made in extending his writ around this globe of ours.”

Stewardship in, from, and to the domain is necessary for our nation to maintain access to space and freedom of movement within. Access and movement are decisive advantages in any coming conflict – particularly when the adversary might outnumber us. Losing access to space has an asymmetric impact on nations at war if our adversary outnumbers – or out resources – us. That’s why in C-note 16, General Saltzman declares the Guardian’s dual function of protecting both the security *and* prosperity that the nation derives from space. That dual function lends the Guardian a dual identity of Sentinel-Steward. So, the first “I Will” statement in the Guardian Commitment states: “I will act with integrity, honesty, candor, fairness, and transparency.” It is the first of 12 “I Will” statements and applies to team leaders and members. It is a solemn promise.

There is a duality about the Sentinel-Steward that distinguishes the warfighter. They are always vigilant not only for threats and challenges but also for opportunities. They are not simply looking to dodge the opponent's punch but see it as an opening for a counter-punch. Christian Brose writes in the *Kill Chain* that the U.S. Department of Defense culture does not make an important distinction between preventing bad things from happening and enabling good things to happen. He says this is an important distinction and one that is necessary for advantage in warfare. The Sentinel-Steward does both. Like the Greek demigod, Bootes – who graces the 72nd ISRS/Detachment 5 patch – the Sentinel-Steward wields a spear (defensive tool) in one hand and a sickle (harvesting tool) in the other. Bootes, also known as The Ploughman in mythology, is the ancient gardener; he keeps the wolves at bay with one hand and keeps the fig trees prospering with the other. It is no small coincidence that the word Guardian comes from the Old French for gardener.

In an age where the word morality or ethics might sound quaint, it is also making a resurgent comeback thanks to the advent of AI and quantum physics. With heightened computing power and speed, there are also heightened tensions around whether having the human in the decision loop is an asset or a liability. As the USSF endeavors to gain pre-eminence in space, it must not shirk but rather embrace the responsibility that comes with it – to grapple with these important issues of morality and conscience to role model what leadership in space looks like and, as a consequence, help humanity redefine its relationship with the cosmos.

The ethical use of AI to address these technically complex situations will require Guardians at all levels to develop a new set of ethical skill sets and battle drills to ensure they are trained and ready to lead with integrity in the age of AI and Quantum computing. Moral choices are the cornerstone for building trust within the USSF, the Department of Defense, and our allies and

partners, setting an important precedent in the global space and technology domains.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) has introduced an Ethics of Computing class that is available to undergraduate and graduate school students. Students grapple with the question “How do we make sure that a machine does what we want, and only what we want?” Naval Post-graduate School (NPS) teaches an “AI at War” course that looks at mobilizing a community through conversation, where computer science meets human science to enable the adoption of new technology in a manner that aligns with purpose, vision, and values. Guardians coming out of the Commit Phase of Space Force's Space Force Generation (SPAFOR-GEN) model can take these courses during the Prepare and/or Ready Phases in order to bring the newly gained perspective back to the fight.

The potential dilemmas AI presents are not easy to recognize; therefore, Guardians must become proficient in developing ethical skill sets guided by a moral code to ensure they can identify the right course of action. To accomplish this, now is the time for the USSF to ensure every Guardian receives AI-based ethical training designed to equip members with the necessary skills to recognize ethical challenges when they arise and the knowledge and experience to resolve them successfully. In an era of the current geo-political environment and collaboration in space exploration, character guided by ethical skill sets can distinguish Guardians as principled leaders who prioritize the greater good over short-term gain.

There are numerous situations daily where one's character and/or cherished values might conflict. These potential “gray zones” represent situations that do not easily fall into either a “right” or “wrong” category. What do Guardians do if and/or when asked to choose between two competing values: for instance, developing AI algorithms and automated systems to detect potential adversaries versus the importance of main-

taining human oversight in these system during critical decision-making? Helping Guardians resolve these values-based challenges not only impacts the mission but their holistic wellness.

Equipping Guardians with AI-based ethical training can ensure they are ready to leverage AI and Quan-

tum-based technologies to meet mission requirements aligned with our USSF and national values. Ultimately, a commitment to character and the ethical use of AI and Quantum can empower Guardians to lead decisively and ethically while embodying their dual roles of Sentinels and Stewards in safeguarding the security and prosperity we all derive from the space domain.