

Sacrifice, Duty, and Honor

An Interview with General Mark A. Milley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, U.S. Department of Defense

EDITORS' NOTE General Mark Milley is the 20th Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the nation's highest-ranking military officer, and the principal military advisor to the President, Secretary of Defense, and National Security Council. Prior to becoming Chairman on October 1, 2019, General Milley served as the 39th Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army. A native of Massachusetts, General Milley graduated from Princeton University in 1980, where he received his commission from Army ROTC. He has had multiple command and staff positions in eight divisions and Special Forces throughout the past 42 years which include command of the 1st Battalion, 506th Infantry, 2nd Infantry Division; the 2nd Brigade, 10th Mountain Division; Deputy Commanding General, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault); Commanding General, 10th Mountain Division; Commanding General, III Corps; and Commanding General, U.S. Army Forces Command. While serving as the Commanding General, III Corps, General Milley deployed as the Commanding General, International Security Assistance Force Joint Command and Deputy Commanding General, U.S. Forces Afghanistan. His joint assignments also include the Joint Staff operations directorate and as a Military Assistant to the Secretary of Defense. General Milley's operational deployments include the Multi-National Force and Observers, Sinai, Egypt; Operation Just Cause, Panama; Operation Uphold Democracy, Haiti; Operation Joint Endeavor, Bosnia-Herzegovina; Operation Iraqi Freedom, Iraq; and three tours during Operation Enduring Freedom, Afghanistan. In addition to his bachelor's degree in political science from Princeton University, General Milley has a master's degree in international relations from Columbia University and one from the U.S. Naval War College in national security and strategic studies. He is also a graduate of the MIT Seminar XXI National Security Studies Program.



General Mark A. Milley

the wounded coming back from the war. They were both very patriotic Americans and they raised me in that manner. My father saw a lot of combat, but he very rarely talked about specifics. Yet, they both always spoke about service and a personal duty to our Nation.

I am also a product of the 1960s and 1970s. I grew up in a very patriotic neighborhood in the Boston area where most folks served in World War II. All around me, I saw men and women who sacrificed for

others and who committed their life to their community. My formative years growing up were during the Vietnam War. I remember the protests and the public unrest. One of my earliest memories is of President Kennedy's assassination. This was a very turbulent time and that shaped my world views on sacrifice, duty, and honor.

All these factors gave me a deep sense of service. I knew that I was very lucky to be an American. I knew I was blessed to attend a good high school and college. At my very core, I felt that I had opportunity, and it was my duty to pay it forward to others through service. Yet, I did not intend to make the military a career. I did not intend to stay four and a half decades. I just intended to serve, and I think that comes from my father and mother.

How did your career journey prepare you for the role of Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff?

I never set my mind on becoming a General Officer and I never imagined serving in this role. I was never focused on something that might happen 20 or 30 years in the future. If you do this, then you risk losing sight of your priorities today. You cannot become a senior leader in any organization unless you master the basics and develop a true command of the foundational skills. The basics of shooting, moving, communicating, protecting, sustaining, and training were important to me as a Lieutenant and they are still important in my role as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Never forget the basics.

I also owe everything to my commanders, Sergeants, and mentors. I was very blessed to have amazing noncommissioned officers and company and battalion commanders as a young Army officer. They were a wealth of knowledge honed through many years of experience.

Their competence and character molded me over time. No one ever gets anywhere alone. As I grew in rank, I was blessed to have senior mentors. I learned by watching them, listening to them, and following their example. I would not be sitting here today were it not for their advice and mentorship.

How has the military shaped your views on leadership and teamwork?

Obviously, the military has impacted my worldview because I have spent my adult professional life in uniform. Although, I also owe a lot to my parents, family, teachers, and coaches. At Belmont Hill, our hockey coach Ken Martin put steel in our spine. He taught our team to face challenges head on and to come away with our integrity intact. Ken Martin was the winningest coach in Massachusetts history, but you would never know that fact. He was a man of deep humility who never bragged about himself. Our hockey team was built in Ken Martin's image of humility and living by example. He demonstrated that success is not about personal accolades, but is about team achievements. Leadership is about the impact you have on others and the legacy that others leave behind. Ken Martin's example has stuck with me to today.

Belmont Hill, Princeton, and the military also taught me what it truly means to be a citizen of this country. They all taught me that this country is an idea. It is an idea enshrined in our Constitution, our founding document in this experiment in liberty we call the United States. It is an idea that many soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines, and guardians have sacrificed for and that all of us in uniform swore an oath to support and defend.

This idea says that you and I, no matter who you are, are free and equal in the eyes of the law. It does not matter if you are male or female. It does not matter if you are Black, White, Asian, or Indian. None of that matters. It does not matter if you are rich, poor, famous, or common. Whether you are Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Jewish, or you choose not to believe at all – none of that matters. What matters is that you are an American. You are going to rise and fall based on your merit – your skills, knowledge, and attributes. You are going to be judged by the content of your character, not the color of your skin. *E Pluribus Unum*; the motto of our country – from the many come one. That is the fundamental organizing principle of what



General Milley visits with a veteran at the Iron Mike Ceremony at La Fiere Bridge in Normandy, France, on June 5, 2022

it means to be American. That is how we, as Americans, should all lead and that is what this Nation is truly about – that all Americans are free and equal with opportunity to enjoy the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity.

How critical is it for the military to continue to adapt and innovate to be prepared for the threats of the future?

Fundamental change is occurring right now. At this very moment, a fundamental change in the character of war is underway. The nature of warfare is not going to change. It is immutable. It is still a political act. It is a decision by humans to impose their political will on their opponent through the use of violence. However, the character of war – how, where, and with what weapons and technologies wars are fought – is changing significantly, and it is changing rapidly. Advancing technologies, including ubiquitous sensing, artificial intelligence, quantum computing, long range fires, and new space capabilities, are profoundly changing the character of war. With the advancements in these technologies, we must also modernize our military systems to capitalize on these capabilities. The country that can harness these technologies and integrate them together with strategy will have a competitive advantage in the next war. The organizations, weapons, and doctrines of the militaries between 2025 and 2050 will be fundamentally different than what we see today.

The United States is facing two global powers, China and Russia, each with significant military capabilities. Both countries intend to fundamentally change the current rules-based global order. Therefore, our military and our Nation must adapt. The United States must continue to grow our competitive edge in the military domain, but also in diplomacy, science, technology, and economic vitality. We must focus our time and energy to strengthen our Nation. These are very difficult and potentially unstable times. Yet, conflict is not inevitable. Our military

might makes war less likely by allowing us to deter across the spectrum of conflict. Keeping America strong and specifically ensuring our military remains the most powerful and capable force in the world is absolutely critical to keep our country secure and the world more stable.

How important has resilience been throughout your career?

Grit is one of the most important character traits in life. I have been through many challenges in life and the ability to deal with the stress and tough times is what got me through. We must never lose sight of our North Star and never sacrifice our ethics and morals. The people who excelled around me were not the smartest, strongest, or fastest. They were not the people that always looked the best on paper. They were not always the people with pedigree. They were the people who truly understood sacrifice and maintained their moral compass. One of the biggest predictors of success was having the character traits of resilience and grit. These individuals developed these skills through repeated trials and repeated challenges. Only through true struggle can you learn to master emotions, manage stress, and push through your mental limits and stay true to and stay centered on your moral compass. At the end of the day, it is worth remembering that we all came from dust and unto dust we shall return, and it is your resilience and your character that will be your legacy with all those you touch throughout our short lives on this earth.

Do you feel that resilience can be learned or is it a trait a person is born with?

Resilience is something you learn through trial, sacrifice, and failure. It is learned, but only if you are truly willing to be vulnerable and to challenge yourself. Military training does this very well through basic training, tactical schools, and exercises. You will fail in these controlled environments so that you can learn how to address challenges, both internally and externally. This builds up “scar tissue” so that when you are in

uncontrolled environments, like war, you know how to manage stress and you know how to take a punch and keep moving.

Yet, the military is not the only place to learn this. Sports and school are very important for the development of our youth. In my case, it was hockey, baseball, and football. Part of this growth is learning to be a member of a team. These activities teach you that when you get knocked down, you get back up. It teaches resiliency, teamwork, and humility because you are always making mistakes. You learn from these mistakes. It also teaches you to strive for excellence and to play by the rules within the boundaries that are set.

What do you tell young people about pursuing a career in the military?

I would encourage those who are interested in the military to consider joining, but military service is not for everyone. It is extraordinarily hard and requires you committing to a cause greater than self. Service to our Nation does not have to be in the military, and I do think we should all serve in some capacity whether in business, government, or nonprofits. I believe we should all keep in mind our obligation to society, our obligation to our community, and our obligation to others. There is more to life than making a buck and we should be motivated by a higher calling. All our Nation’s freedoms – freedom of the press, freedom of speech, freedom of religion – are paid for in sacrifice and blood of those that went before us. We must honor that sacrifice. We must reflect on these privileges no matter what we choose to do in life.

I always tell young people two things. One, never lose sight of your North Star. What matters is your integrity. What matters are your values. Your integrity and values – your character – are more important than anything else. Do not ever lose sight of your inner core, your North Star. There will be many challenges in life. It will not be easy. There will be criticism. There will be pain and suffering. No matter what happens – never turn your back on your North Star.

Second, we must always remember our commitment to the U.S. Constitution. It is the single document that gives meaning to who we are as a Nation. It established not only the government, but it also established our value system. It laid out the rules and it laid out the limits for our society. It is the very idea that is America. My dad hit the beach at Iwo Jima where nearly 7,000 Marines died in only 19 days. That is an incredible cost. Think of the thousands of lives lost in Iraq and Afghanistan. Go back to the days of the Revolutionary War and Civil War and the thousands that were killed in those battles. People have given their lives to protect and defend the idea that is America and to protect the Constitution. I have been in a lot of combat and many of my soldiers paid the ultimate sacrifice on the altar of liberty. We must always be true to the cause for which they died – the cause of supporting and defending the Constitution. Their sacrifice shall not have been in vain. The Preamble also says that we are to pass this liberty on to our posterity. So, no matter what, we should all serve, and we should all protect and defend that idea that is America. ●