

Duty, Honor, Country: The Important Distinction Between Duties and Rights



By Nathan MacPherson

As the son of a West Point graduate, I am well aware of the motto, adopted in 1898, of the United States Military

Academy: *Duty, Honor, Country*.

This motto, drilled into me not so much by my father's words as by his actions in exemplifying the motto, became known throughout our Republic perhaps due to the famous 1962 speech by General Douglas MacArthur, "*Duty, honor, country: Those three hallowed words reverently dictate what you ought to be, what you can be, what you will be.*"

But why speaks Gen. MacArthur of duty and not of rights?

It has been said – and rightly so – that a duty is a right and a right is a duty; they are flip sides of the same coin.

It is a matter of perspective (more on this later). Unfortunately, rights/duties have been confused and conflated with entitlements or privileges, often falsely referred to as "rights."

Our Declaration of Independence refers to "certain unalienable rights" such as "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Locke referred to these as "life, liberty, and estate" or "life, health, liberty, and possessions" and Blackstone as "life, liberty, and property." We learn from the Declaration that it is the proper role of government "to secure these rights" and from Locke that "Man being born, as has been proved, with a title to perfect freedom... hath by nature a power... to preserve his property, that is his life, liberty, and estate..."

It is clear, then, that these natural rights are also duties, as above stated. Take, for instance, the Second Amendment, which protects against government interference the "right of the people to keep and bear arms." This is not a "right" in the sense of "privilege" or "entitlement," but rather a duty to preserve life, liberty, and property.

As noted by Dr. Joel McDurmon in his 12/7/15 article in *The American Vision*, Locke stated it best:

"Every one, as he is bound to preserve himself... so by the like reason, when his own preservation comes not in competition, ought he, as much as he can, to preserve the rest of mankind, and may not, unless it be to do justice on an offender, take away, or impair the life, or what tends to the preservation of the life, the liberty, health, limb, or goods of another."

Thus, we have a duty to preserve life, liberty, and property, not only our own but also that of our neighbor. The Constitution prohibits the federal government from interfering with that duty. Thus the matter of perspective: a right, in the sense used in our Declaration and Constitution, is from our perspective a duty or obligation and, from another's perspective, something with which no man or group of men – such as the government – has the authority to interfere. We have neither the authority to shirk said duties, nor to "give up our rights," nor to "waive our rights"; others, such as government, have no authority to interfere with our exercise of our rights, that is, carrying out our duties.

Entitlements or privileges, on the other hand, are not, from our perspective, duties, but rather benefits. From the perspective of others, these require

interference: to provide such "rights" as, for instance, "free" healthcare, the government must take by force from those who have in order to give to those who have not. (By the way, according to these people (whoever "they" are), those who have, have no "right" to keep what they have. They are obligated to "share" for the benefit of others.)

Returning to General MacArthur, in whose funeral my father and uncle, as West Point cadets, were privileged to march, we see that he spoke of real rights, rights of the kind mentioned in the Declaration and Constitution. He spoke of duty, honor, and country. But he did not merely speak of them, he lived them. He practiced them.

MacArthur is the most-decorated soldier in history, earning over 100 medals including the Medal of Honor. To MacArthur, these words taught, "not to substitute words for actions, not to seek the path of comfort, but to face the stress and spur of difficulty and challenge; to learn to stand up in the storm, but to have compassion on those who fall; to master yourself before you seek to master others..."

Rather than focusing on getting, we ought to focus on giving. As President Kennedy put it, "And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." This includes not merely looking to politicians to restore our Republic. "Let none hear you idly saying, 'there is nothing I can do,' while the multitudes are dying, and the Master calls for you."

This month we celebrate the birth of our Savior, the ultimate Creator and preserver of life, the ultimate example of focusing on duty rather than entitle-

ment, on giving and sacrificing rather than getting and taking. "Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross." Indeed, in ultimate obedience to His duty, Jesus preserved all life by giving up His own on the cross and rising again from the dead. "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

General MacArthur put it this way: "*The soldier, above all other men, is required to practice the greatest act of religious training--sacrifice. In battle, and in the face of danger and death, he discloses those divine attributes which his Maker gave when He created man in His own image. No physical courage and no greater strength can take the place of the divine help which alone can sustain him. However hard the incidents of war may be, the soldier who is called upon to offer and to give his life for his country is the noblest development of mankind.*"

Although we have veterans to thank for the freedoms we enjoy, most of us are, by the grace of God, not called to make such sacrifices; God has called us to much easier duties. ("For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments: and His commandments are not burdensome.") If we would all diligently perform those duties to which our Creator has called us – starting at home, we would bring honor to ourselves and our families and we would restore our country to the freedom for which our forefathers sacrificed "their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor."