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## Spirit of the Offensive

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*U.S. Navy*

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**NAVAL WAR COLLEGE  
REVIEW**

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## **SPIRIT OF THE OFFENSIVE**

A lecture delivered  
at the Naval War College  
on 15 June 1955 by  
*Honorable Charles S. Thomas,*  
*Secretary of the Navy*

**Admiral McCormick, Admiral Yarnell, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, Members of the Graduating Class of the Naval War College:**

To speak at a Naval War College graduation ceremony is certainly both an opportunity and at the same time a challenge.

It is an opportunity in the sense that this carefully selected group of graduates will now move to new and important duty stations throughout the Navy and Marine Corps, some of you to command ships, stations or squadrons; others to assume key billets in Washington, overseas and elsewhere. Thus, it is a chance to try and say something timely and helpful that perhaps can be carried to every ship and station of the Navy and Marine Corps.

Whenever I address myself primarily to the Navy and the Marine Corps (because this is the Naval War College), everything that I say applies to our friends of the Army, the Air Force, and the Coast Guard who are members of this graduating class. I would like to say here that I was the Assistant Secretary of Defense before I became the Secretary of the Navy, and I served intimately with the Air Force and the Army. I think I have just as many friends in the Air Force and in the Army as I have in the Navy and the Marine Corps, and I have just as much respect and affection for your Services as I have for the Navy.

In choosing a subject, today, I have purposely avoided one in the realm of strategy and tactics or logistics, because I know

that you are surfeited on these subjects and that you are just graduating from a very heavy program related to these particular fields.

Instead, I want to speak to you this morning on a theme which I consider paramount to the Navy and the Marine Corps (and that also goes for the other Services, too) — one which has been their traditional motivating force for almost two centuries and one which will be critically important in the eventful days which lie ahead: “The Spirit of the Offensive.”

The spirit of the offensive, so characteristic and so much a part of the tradition of the U. S. Navy and the U. S. Marine Corps, is an illusive and abstract quality, hard to define and difficult to describe, but nonetheless vital and meaningful. For this unseen, yet very real, offensive spirit — the will to win — has made the United States Navy the greatest sea-fighting organization in the history of navies. And if ever there was a military organization suffused with the offensive spirit, I think you will all agree that it is the U. S. Marine Corps.

The offensive spirit has been a vital part of the Navy's and Marine Corps' heritage from the very beginning. I would like to briefly trace the development of this offensive spirit and to show how a rich inheritance has come down to you in direct and recognizable steps from the past to the present.

It was born on a moonlight night in 1779 aboard the foundering hulk of a poor sailing merchantman in the unconquerable spirit of a young naval captain, John Paul Jones. The sea battle he fought had little historical significance and less military value. Even his epic battle cry has been perfumed for history. What was significant and lasting was his gift of the offensive spirit, the indomitable drive for victory.

Aboard the *Bon Homme Richard* that historical evening was an officer whom Jones described as his only competent one —

a man caught up and captured by his captain's invincible spirit — Lieutenant Richard Dale.

It was Dale, you may recall, when some 200 captured British sailors were inadvertently released from the hold, who courageously herded them to the pumps to keep the sinking *Richard* afloat.

Twenty-two years later, Dale was Commodore of a naval squadron which sailed into Tripoli to curb the corsairs of the Barbary Coast. One of his captains was William Bainbridge. Bainbridge was a beneficiary of the original Jones legacy and a creator of the offensive spirit. He was later to command the *Constitution* when she conquered *Java*. During the war with the Barbary States, Captain Bainbridge's first lieutenant was an intrepid gentleman named Stephen Decatur. It was the bold offensive spirit of the aggressive Decatur in Tripoli Harbor in 1804 that resulted in the destruction of the captured *Philadelphia*, a feat which Lord Nelson described as the most daring achievement of the age.

Also serving with Captain Bainbridge was another lieutenant named David Porter. Porter, you will remember, had earlier served as a midshipman aboard the *Constellation* when that frigate captured the *Insurgente* in the most notable action of the naval war with France. In 1814, David Porter was commanding the *Essex* when she made that bold and remarkable raid into the Pacific — the First American man-of-war ever to enter that ocean. Aboard the *Essex* was a lad of only twelve who had been sponsored as a midshipman by a Commodore Porter. The offensive spirit was to be this youth's inheritance. In the battle against two British men-of-war, Porter reported the excellent bravery and conduct of that twelve year old boy. The lad's name was David Glasgow Farragut.

I know all of you are well acquainted with Admiral Farragut's bold offensive spirit; how he accepted grave risks to achieve

a notable victory during the Civil War. But I wonder if you know that one of the officers who served with Farragut in those days was a youthful lieutenant named George Dewey. Dewey was later to say, "Farragut has always been my ideal."

It was Dewey's offensive spirit that won the resounding Battle of Manila Bay and that, too, is well known to you. But I wonder if you know that in 1902, when Admiral Dewey was making his final cruise, that one of the ensigns who served with him was named Ernest J. King. King also served as an aide to Admiral W. S. Sims, who led our Navy during World War I.

I am also sure you know (many of you personally and from first-hand contact) of Admirals King's aggressive spirit of the offensive. His drive and determination were reflected and reinforced by Admiral Nimitz and further reflected by Admiral Halsey, with whom Admiral Carney served so long, and by Admiral Mitcher, whose Chief of Staff was Admiral Burke, who is here with us today.

You, then, are the inheritors of a rich and remarkable legacy of naval heritage, this spirit of the offensive. The same legacy can be traced in Marine Corps history from the Revolutionary War to Korea; it can also be traced in the other Services' history. It will be your responsibility to preserve it and pass it on in the same manner it has been given to you.

Let us examine and dissect this all-important inheritance. Why has our Navy been blessed with it and many other navies have not? Why do we still have it while some other navies have lost it? And exactly what is this spirit of the offensive?

First of all, it is the spirit of youthfulness — not youth, necessarily, but always the spirit of youthfulness. It is an attitude which can reckon the cost and which can strike a total of pro's and con's; it is a calculating spirit tempered by prudence and sobered by reasonable caution. But the spirit of the offensive is never shackled or weakened by any one of these. It is a willingness

to take calculated risks for victory; it is a spirit of dedication and selflessness which thinks more about victory than it does about numbers or sizes; it is the spirit which thinks more of duty and service than rights and benefits. It is the spirit which never becomes obsessed by what has been aptly called "the distorting prism of pure arithmetic." It is the spirit which refuses to be awed by mere numbers, the greater size of an enemy force, or dispirited by any atomic equation.

The spirit of the offensive is an aggressive spirit but not a belligerent one. It is not one which starts wars; but once started, wins them. It is a spirit of initiative, of innovation, and of experimentation. It is not a spirit of continuously following the book, and asking, "What's my authority?"; but rather it is a spirit which solves its own problems. It is a spirit based on confidence, knowledge and experience.

It is a spirit supported and guided by sensible doctrine. But the spirit of the offensive is not restricted by doctrine, for doctrine can often be deadly. You must have it and you must use it but it must never command you, only guide you. The offensive-spirited naval officer must know doctrine and he must know *why* it is doctrine. But he must also know when to discard doctrine, when to think for himself and when to strike out on his own.

But, most important of all, the spirit of the offensive is the spirit which says that *nothing less than victory is acceptable*.

Who creates and who perpetuates this spirit of the offensive? The answer to that is the real leaders. I have already mentioned a few of the many leaders in the Navy's past who created this intangible spirit of the offensive. There are many others who create it today, some of you sitting here. Those who make it may be unconscious that they are doing so. It is created and perpetuated mainly by commanding officers, those of your rank and service, the officers who command ships and squadrons, those who daily and directly deal with our men.



But every officer in the Navy and Marine Corps can and should perpetuate and practice this spirit of the offensive because it is so important to a vigorous and victorious Navy and Marine Corps and so vital to the security and safety of our country.

First of all, it confers several advantages. It often confers the inestimable advantage of surprise. It usually confers the important factor of initiative. And it always confers the psychological advantage of knowing that somehow, in some way, victory will be achieved.

In actual fact, our Navy and Marine Corps traditional offensive spirit has always enabled us to carry the fight to the enemies' shores rather than having to fight them on our own. In the atomic age now upon us the offensive spirit will be still more important, for the seas have taken fresh and increased importance as the highroads for carrying the battle to an aggressor's territory. War in the future, if it ever unfortunately comes, will never be won by staying at our bases, sitting in our foxholes or manning a fixed defense line.

Finally, how can we maintain the spirit of the offensive? This precious spirit can be lost and is can become rusty and neglected. It can be nurtured in time of war, but it can be easily lost in time of peace. Like a handful of sand, it can imperceptibly slip away.

Today, our Navy is experiencing an evolution of a magnitude never before known in its history. In the short space of ten years since the end of World War II naval warfare has encompassed nuclear weapons, jet and rocket power for supersonic speeds, guided missiles, atomic propulsion, helicopters, jet seaplanes and true submersibles. The age of automation and electronics is well advanced. Future years will undoubtedly add to this array of almost magic equipment.

In this turbulent period, therefore, we must not allow this all-important spirit of the offensive to be lost or become rusty. Rather, it must permeate our planning, our doctrine, and our engineering designs as well as our strategy and tactics.

We can maintain this spirit of the offensive in several ways. First of all, and most important of all, by aggressive foresighted leadership, the kind which is never self-satisfied by its condition or readiness. It can be kept by education, self-study and self-criticism, such as you gentlemen have been undergoing at the Naval War College. The offensive spirit can be fostered by a study of our naval history, which teaches the advantages of an offensive spirit and which transmits the inspiration and tradition of the past to those of the present and future. The spirit of the offensive can be maintained in our training programs, in our joint and combined exercises and in our practice cruises. It must be practiced in working ships, in planes which fly, in guns that shoot.

Most important of all, the spirit of the offensive can be perpetuated by the senior commanders of our Navy and Marine Corps exercising initiative in dealing with their juniors. The spirit can be fostered by selecting our future leaders with equal attention given to their future potential as to their past performance. Seniors must not merely *allow* the display of initiative, they must *encourage* and *demand* it. Encourage the junior officers to bring the ship alongside, to refuel, to replenish, to make the buoy. Encourage the junior aviators to lead the flight. Encourage new ideas, experimentation, and new approaches. The fear of being penalized for an honest mistake must not be permitted to stifle the offensive spirit.

Gentlemen, as you graduate this morning, take along with your diploma this priceless legacy of the offensive spirit, and remember that in your service life ahead it will be your personal responsibility to see that it is preserved and perpetuated.

**Thank you very much!**

## **BIOGRAPHIC SKETCH**

### **Honorable Charles S. Thomas, Secretary of the Navy**

Secretary Thomas was born in Independence, Missouri, in 1897. He attended the University of California and Cornell University. In World War I, during his junior year at Cornell, Mr. Thomas joined the U. S. Naval Reserve as a Naval aviator. At the conclusion of his active service in 1919, he joined the George H. Burr Company, an investment house. In 1925, he became a partner and vice-president of George H. Burr, Conrad E. Broom, Inc. In 1932, Mr. Thomas became vice-president and general manager of Foreman & Clark, Inc., later becoming its president and a director in 1937.

In 1942, after the United States had entered World War II, Mr. Thomas was called to Washington, D. C., as a special civilian assistant to Artemus Gates, Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Air. A year later, he became special assistant to the Secretary of the Navy, James V. Forrestal. In that capacity, he set up the Navy's inventory control program and represented Mr. Forrestal in the Navy's logistic program. He was also concerned with procurement of aircraft. He is credited with initiating "incentive-type" contracts providing bonuses for saving on costs. He also developed a program for assigning trained negotiators to assist the Navy's contracting officers.

In early 1945, at the special request of Mr. Forrestal, Mr. Thomas made a 30,000 mile "morale and recreational survey" of the Navy's Pacific bases. For "outstanding service" in the field of Navy procurement and logistics, Mr. Thomas was decorated with the Distinguished Civilian Service Award and was awarded the Presidential Medal for Merit.

He resumed duties as president and director of Foreman and Clark in 1945. Mr. Thomas was airport commissioner for Los Angeles from 1945 to 1950 and concurrently served as the president of the eleventh region of the Navy League and vice-president of the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce. His active participation

in local, state and national politics began in this period. From 1949 to 1952, Mr. Thomas was Chairman of the California Republican Finance Committee; he has also been a member of the National Finance Committee.

After taking office, President Eisenhower named Robert B. Anderson as Secretary of the Navy and nominated Mr. Thomas as Under Secretary of the Navy. Mr. Thomas became Assistant Secretary of Defense in charge of supply and logistics in 1953 and he was sworn in as Secretary of the Navy in May, 1954.