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On Business Ethics

A Life of Honor & Leadership: A Conversation With Robert C. Oaks
Emeritus General Authority and Retired Air Force Four-Star General

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General Robert C. Oaks is a retired United States Air Force four-star general and former general authority of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In 1994, he was employed by U.S. Airways, eventually becoming senior vice president, and retiring in 1998. While serving in the military, he received many awards and decorations. Oaks attended Brigham Young University for one year, received a bachelor's degree in military science from the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado (1959), and a master's degree in business administration (1967) from Ohio State University. He then decided to attend and graduate from the Naval War College in 1974.
Brad Agle: It is wonderful to be with General Oaks. He is a wonderful leader. I thought it would be fun to talk about some of his leadership experiences and some of the insights that he has into leadership and honor. I have heard most of his stories and they are wonderful. One of the stories I enjoy is about being shot down as a fighter pilot and the importance of training and preparation. Would you tell us about that?

Robert Oaks: You said you have heard most of my stories and that is not true. I wish we had more time and I would tell you a whole new set of stories. This is a great story about training. I was a captain in an F-100 squadron in Louisiana and we got our orders to go to Vietnam as a squadron. The squadron training officer started putting a training program together for us to go to Vietnam as a squadron. One day he said, “Come on in, I have a movie to show.” He brought us in and he showed us a movie. It was on free fall. It started off with a guy in a balloon at 100,000 feet. You are an astronaut at 100,000 feet. You get your astronaut wings if you go to 100,000 feet. Nobody goes up there. You have to wear a full pressure suit above 50,000 feet. This guy was falling and it showed him tumbling and spinning and then he spread-eagled and smoothed out—it showed you how to free-fall from 100,000 feet. I said to the trainer, “That is crazy. We fly at what, 2,500 feet? We are never up there. Why are you wasting my time?” He said, “I had to show you something.” We went to Vietnam. One morning I was asleep; I was not on the flying schedule that day. I loved to fly. My boss came in, woke me up, and said, “Bobby, can you come take my flight? I am leading a flight of four and we are launching in an hour and a half. I have been up drinking.” I was the designated pilot in this squadron. They knew I was always sober, so I got a lot of these kinds of flights: wake up early in the morning, “Yeah, I will take it.” So I
Robert C. Oaks

ran down and got ready. We went up and we went down into the Mekong Delta and made contact with the forward air controller and we started delivering our ordinance. I came off on about my third pass and I got a fire warning light on. That means just what it says, a fire warning light. I called, “Mayday. Silver 01 off with a fire warning light.” My wingman came up and said, “You are burning badly.” So I started heading for a little outpost. I got up to about 2,500 feet, and I was still in control. The airplane was responding to me. I could not see the flame, so I was feeling pretty good. All of a sudden, the stick went limp in my lap and I knew I had to get out. I had memorized the bail out procedures and the first one is to raise the armrests and that blows the canopy, and the canopy sure enough went. It exposes triggers under each armrest and then the second step is to squeeze triggers. I squeezed the triggers, and it fires a black powder charge and you suddenly become a cannonball, literally. The powder is just like they shoot cannons with. It shoots you out and you are on rails and on the seat. Then you get out and there is a little thing that throws you out of the seat. Well, it threw me out of the seat, and I started tumbling. I was tumbling so violently, and all I could think was, “The human body cannot stand this. It will tear off an arm or a leg.” So I was waiting for an arm or a leg to be torn off. It was that violent. I could not think about the memorized emergency procedures. I could not think; I was there spinning. I had gotten up that morning and prayed. I know my family was praying for me back in the United States. People were praying for me. All of a sudden—I am convinced to this day it was in response to prayers—it was like a TV screen dropped down in front of me. The emergency procedures were there, not only the two that I had already accomplished, but then the whole list of them. Number three was to check parachute. I did not have one and said, “No shoot.” Number four was, “No shoot? Pull ripcord.” There is a D ring that is the ripcord. I pulled the ripcord and I got a parachute just like it was supposed to work. I went through the rest of those things on the TV screen. Five was to deploy seat kit. You have a survival kit strapped to your seat and it is out of fiberglass, hard, you do not want to land with it strapped right to your seat. Deploy seat kit, and I did that because it is
supposed to open automatically. So I hit the ground and afterwards I went to my training officer and I said, “Thanks for showing me that.” What I did not tell you was I had an image in my mind, along with the TV screen, of free-falling from 100,000 feet. It works from 10,000 feet, it works from 1,000 feet, too. You spread-eagle, legs out, arms out, and what does it do? It stops the tumbling just like a spinning skater. What do they do to stop? Stick out their arms and the physics of it is that you stop. Well, I stopped, and then I could think and get ready to land. My survival was the TV screen and the image of the man falling spread-eagle. What is the message of all that? Reach out on training. Train more than you have to and do not listen to the student or the squadron member that says, “I do not need that!” Think and exercise some judgment. Reach out and overtrain rather than undertrain. I was overtrained until all of a sudden I needed it and then I had what I needed.

Robert Oaks: I was on the Incidents at Sea negotiations team. It was a navy operation, and I was the only U.S. Air Force representative there. I was a colonel at the time and I was on this with five admirals. We went to Moscow to negotiate with the Russians on Incidents at Sea things and then we went up to Leningrad. At Leningrad we were at a dinner table, and the commander of the Leningrad naval district was running the dinner. The Russians are big drinkers so we ate our dinner quickly so they could get to their toasting. They got to their toasting, and, well, I made a mistake. They toast with vodka, which looks like water, and I could have had a glass of water and gotten just smooth through this. I had some kind of pink lemonade substitute, non-alcoholic thing they gave me, and I said, “That is fine.” So I raised my pink lemonade. I was sitting clear in the back of the room and the admiral was sitting in

Brad Agle: Ethics is oftentimes about dealing with difficult issues and ones where your values are challenged. You have talked about during the Cold War, you had to negotiate with soviet generals. You have told the story of how in one of those meetings, the soviet general wanted to toast everyone with vodka. You were not doing it and it was a little tense. Tell us about that.
the front and he looked out and he saw me. I do not know how he saw my pink lemonade, but he did. He said (through a translator), “You! Get your vodka!” I said, “I am okay. I am okay.” He said, “We are not going on until you get your vodka.” I had a KGB guy who was my escort, and he was under the gun and said, “Get your vodka!” He knew I did not drink. We had been together for a couple of weeks. He knew I did not drink but he said, “Get your vodka!” I said, “I am okay.” The admiral said, “We are not going on.” My U.S. Navy guys were starting to look over their shoulder at me and were mumbling, “Get your vodka.” I said the shortest prayer, without bowing my head, without closing my eyes: “God help me.” Instantly the Russian army captain who was the translator sitting at the elbow of the four-star admiral said, “It is because of his religion.” Because he had asked me, “Why don’t you drink?” I told him and we had had a conversation about it. So he knew and he said, “It is because of his religion.” The admiral said, “Okay, let us go on.” It solved the problem instantly and we went on. That whole thing that has taken me this long to talk about probably took ten seconds, and it was solved. We went on. I never heard anything more about it from the Russians. Before that, in Moscow, there was the same kind of tension and the admiral down in Moscow said, “Get your vodka.” I was back to pink lemonade and I said, “I am okay.” And he said, “You are a pilot.” I said, “I am a pilot.” He said, “All pilots drink.” I said, “Not the great ones.” My escort was a navy Russian two-star who was a real drunkard. Everybody knew he was a real drunkard among drunkards. So immediately when I said, “Not the great ones,” they all turned to him and the whole focus was there. So the Lord helps us. Now what is the useful thing of that in leadership? Pick what you are and be what you are and live with it. All sorts of bad things could have happened to my career and they obviously did not.

Brad Agle: You were a four-star general in charge of U.S. air forces in Europe, the Cold War ended, you were waiting for Washington, DC, to tell you what to do, and then you had an epiphany. Tell us about the epiphany.

Robert Oaks: If I went to my briefcase and got out my notes on leadership, I
would have several words. The first word on leadership is ‘vision.’ The leader’s job is to have a vision of where the organization, regardless of what it is, should be going. The leader should have a vision and then share that vision with everybody in the organization so they are all working toward the same goal. Now let me go back and answer the question. I was commander of United States air forces in Europe and Allied air forces in Central Europe. The wall comes down and what is going to happen? I had John McCain, Patsy Schroeder, probably ten congressional members come to my office and I sat and briefed them at different times. I sat for an hour with the King of Norway and told him what should happen to NATO. Everybody wanted to know. “What is NATO going to do now? The war is over. What is NATO going to do?” The congressional people all universally said, “We want the peace dividend. We want to bring home all the troops out of Europe now. We want to get out of NATO.” We said, “Crazy. What is the history of Europe? The history of Europe is a history of war, especially between the Germans and the French, and now for the last 60 years, what has been the history of Europe? Peace. What was it under? It was under the umbrella of Europe, under the leadership of the United States and now you want to get out? You want it to go back like it was for 1,000 years?” I said, “That is crazy. We have got to preserve.” Then I sat back in my chair in Ramstein, Germany and said, “What do they want us to do?” We had 88,000 troops under us, air force troops, and where do they want us to go? I waited and waited for three months with no word from Washington. “What are we supposed to do?” I did not get anything from the Pentagon of any substance of what to do. One day I said, “Wait a minute, what am I waiting for? Who knows more about what the United States air forces in Europe should look like and how we should be structured and configured and distributed than me?” That was not an egotistical thing: I was the boss! I was the commander. I had been sitting back wasting time, not understanding my responsibility for vision. I called three two-star-numbered air force commanders, my two-star planner, and the chief of staff. The five of us met around the table for a day and decided what United States air forces in Europe should look like in terms of how many troops we
needed, what kind of airplanes, what kind of force structure, and where they should be. At the end of the day, we had a plan, a very concrete plan that we all felt good about. Why did it take me three months to sit back and finally decide, “I am supposed to be doing this!”? That goes back to vision. I should have been doing it right from the start, but we got it. Incidentally since that time, all of the actions that have taken place by air force in Europe have taken place off of those bases and out of that force structure that we put together that one day. I do not say that boastfully; it is just that we had the right people together to make those decisions and it was our responsibility to make those decisions. We made them and it has worked. It works beautifully. And it will! Getting the right people together is a key thing.

Brad Agle: I had the opportunity to speak to all the graduating army cadets from BYU, the University of Utah, and Weber State, and so I used some of my wisdom from my general friend and I said, “One of the things I have always remembered about General Oaks is he said, ‘Leadership is about people. So if you do not like people, get out of the leadership business.”

Robert Oaks: That is true. If you do not like people, then you are in the wrong business as a leader.

Brad Agle: The second thing is General Oaks said that he learned leadership from his mother. I will let him tell you what he means by that.

Robert Oaks: They asked me to BYU to talk to the ROTC cadets on leadership, so I was putting together a talk on leadership and I thought, “Where did I learn that?” I was a three-star general at the time, I think, so I had some leadership credentials, but I said, “Where did I learn that?” I went to Ohio State and took leadership classes, and I had read leadership things all my life, and I said, “Did I learn out of those books? Where did I learn that?” As I really pressed myself I realized I learned leadership from my mother. How? She taught me how to treat people. She said, “Treat them kindly, treat them fairly, treat them honestly, treat them like you would like to be treated.” That is the core of leadership: treat people kindly and thoughtfully and honestly, how you would like
to be treated. I really believe that. I was looking into my soul putting that thought together, and I had to be honest. My mother taught me the core, basic leadership values that I was able to reflect throughout my life.

Brad Agle: As long as we are talking about the importance of women, I would like you to reflect on the importance of your wife, Gloria, and the teamwork that you had and how that played into your success in your career and in life.

Robert Oaks: Let me shorten your question just a little bit. My wife has saved my life. She has saved my life five times. I mean, I was dying and she has saved my life five times. That is the beginning, but also she has supported me. I have moved her around the world a lot and we have lived in great places and some other places. We will not go into that. She has been a team, a great supporter, and that is an important leadership principle: build a team. Build a team that complements you. Marriage does it naturally, builds a complementary team, but it does not always happen that way. If you are a planner and not a speaker, get a vice commander who is a speaker and who can convey and communicate; if you are a communicator but not a planner, find a planner. You build the team. It is a thoughtful process. Where do you start? What am I? What are my strengths and what are my weaknesses? What do I need to complement my weaknesses? You build that team. Now I did not approach my marriage that way, but that is in fact what you do. You say, “I want someone that will be a good mother to my children.” Think of it in those terms. That is a basic leadership principle: when you get an assignment as a leader, look around. What is there to work with and what is not there? Go find somebody. I have had great, marvelous successes by looking and saying, “What do I need?” Go find the person that fills that vacancy in your team because you are going to lead as a team. It might be a team of all tied ends or it might be a balanced team of 11 different qualities.

Brad Agle: You have said before that when you were a Seventy and you were called to be the Area President of Europe, that you looked and realized that your entire career had prepared you for what the Lord needed you to do at that time. Can you tell us about that?
Robert Oaks: The Lord works in interesting ways. You have had your own private experiences to that. I was sitting as commander of the United States air forces in Europe. I had Europe and I had all these bases and countries in which I was responsible for all air force activities and interfaces. Later I got called as the Area President in the Europe central area. One time, I was sitting in my office as president of the Europe area, and I looked up at the map on the wall of my area of responsibility in the church. It was exactly the same as what I had when I was commander of the United States air forces in Europe, except as Area President I did not have Turkey. So I knew. I knew all the friction points between the Greeks and the Turks, and I just knew Europe. It was amazing to me. I told President Eyring about that one time and he said, “And you thought the air force just happened to have you there in Europe.” I did, but it was obviously more. So I was able to approach that job in the church with that background of having served there in the air force.

Brad Agle: He added a question to my list and that is to define leadership. You talked earlier about vision, you also talked to me about the importance of training, equipping, and motivating.

Robert Oaks: It is interesting to find a definition. I looked for definitions and stuff written on honor, but to me, after all of the banging around and talking, leadership is vision as I have explained. It is vision, and it is training, and it is equipping, and it is motivating, and if you do not do those, your troops will be frustrated and ineffective. Tie all that training, equipping, and motivating together under the vision of where we fit into the bigger organization and that is leadership.

Brad Agle: How are we going to get the principles we are talking about to the end of the row? How are we going to get it implemented?

Robert Oaks: It starts with example. It starts with example. Getting it to the end of the row is a nice euphemism, but the corn stalks are looking up to see how the leader is acting. So example is a good place to start to get it to the end of the row. It is highly
variant in different organizations. Organizations have highly varying methods of communication. Example is like honor or like integrity and ethics. If those cornstalks look up and see integrity at the top, that is a great start to getting it to the end of the row. There is consistency, so we are all singing off the same sheet of music. If you are the CEO, every time one of your vice presidents goes out and talks about a new product, they have got to sing off the same sheet. That is important. That communication and consistency is an important part of answering your question.