Our Contribution to the Fight

Our Corps

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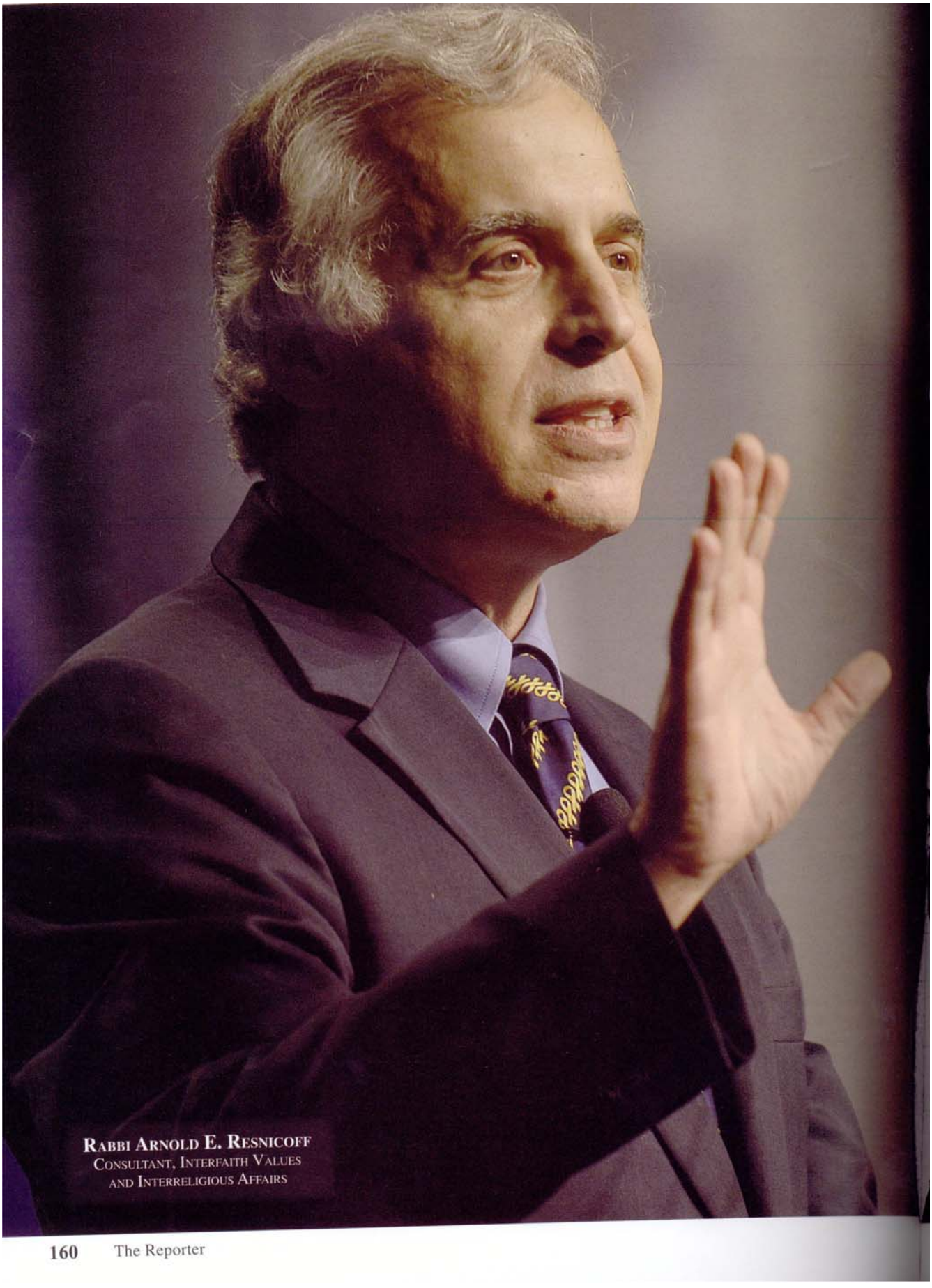

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The Three Pillars of Leadership

Realtors sometimes say the three most important factors in real estate are: location, location, and location. Today, I want to address the three most important factors in leadership and service: vision, vision, and vision. Bill Brien, a past CEO of Hanover Trust, once said a "visionary leader" is not someone who gives speeches about vision; instead, he or she is someone who makes day-to-day decisions with a vision in mind. And so, our vision—in three parts:

THE VISION OF OUR NATION

There is a story about a man at an airport, and one of the specialties of the snack bar is sugar cookies. He bought a bag of three sugar cookies and a newspaper. He threw his cookies, newspaper, and jacket down, and he went to get a drink of water. When he came back, he saw his jacket and the newspaper on one chair, and on the next chair, there was a young, disheveled guy holding the bag of the cookies in his hand, and he was eating one of the cookies. The man did not want to get too mad, so he sat down and started reading his newspaper. All of a sudden, the other guy reaches over and offered him a cookie. This just made the man madder. Then the young, disheveled guy finally finished the cookies and walked away. The man was just fuming. As the time for his flight approached, the man got up, took the rest of his newspaper and his coat, and underneath he saw his bag of cookies! All of a sudden, he realized the younger guy had his own bag of cookies. He had to rewind the whole "film" in his mind . . . and every action of the other person must be understood differently.

One of the challenges we face is to understand that there are too many people around us who believe it is "their cookie," and therefore it is a "zero-sum game." Letting anyone else have a taste or have something to eat causes us to lose something. Instead of understanding that there are more cookies than we think to go around. We all bring some cookies—different cookies—to the table.

Martin Marty, a sociologist, uses the word "story" to talk about the foundation of a culture, of a people, or of a religion. What is the basic story we have that defines this people or that one?

Marty asks, "What is the story of America?" Is the story of America the story of a country that goes back to the Pilgrims and the Mayflower? Or is that just one small part of a larger story? Does America's story also include the story of slave ships that brought men and women in chains? Does it include slave laborers on the railroads and virtual slave labor in the coal mines? Does it include the belief that this country was founded on the proposition that property owners had more rights than others, and slaves were only worth three-fifths of a human being? Or does in include the story of those who, despite such treatment, worked, slaved, and dreamed to make our country great? Does it include someone like Martin Luther King, Jr., fighting for the rights of blacks? Or is America's story one where Martin Luther King, Jr. fought for a better America and fought to make us all better people?

Corporations today, and the military as well, use expressions like vision statement and mission statement. I think we need to ask ourselves, "What is our vision statement or mission statement as a nation?" In many ways, the Constitution is our mission statement: the plan about how we were to build a government, defining the way we want the relationship to be between the government and the people. But the Declaration of Independence is our vision statement, and I define vision statement as the vision we achieve if we are successful at our mission. This vision statement lays out the core values for us as a nation: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and we need to do more to understand what those core values mean.

Life in America is precious, but not ultimate. Every life counts. We would never use an expression for life like "cannon fodder," such as other countries have used. But life is not ultimate, because we believe that some things are worth dying for.

Liberty is inalienable according to the Declaration. It is not just a gift or a social contract. It is somehow inherent in our rights as human beings. And yet it is not free. Rights come with responsibility. When we take the oath in the military, we do not give up our rights, but we tilt more toward responsibility.

The pursuit of happiness is the belief that things can get better. In a world where many people think the clock is winding down and things are getting worse, or that things will never change—an expression that sends shivers up my spine because our vision is based on the dream that things can get better—for the next generation and generations to come. This is the value that helps us understand that we are not perfect, even as a nation, but we can, and must, build a "more perfect union." This is the value we sing about in the hymn "America" when we sing, "God mend thine every flaw." This is the value that gives foundation to our vision Martin Luther King, Jr., addressed when he said, "I have a dream."

Today, we seem to argue more in our country about differences than about the values and vision we share. We argue about religious differences. Thankfully, we argue, rather than battle, like in so many other countries in the world. But we still need to expand our vision in terms of the religious foundation of our country. Is the story of America the story of a "Christian nation," formed by Christian patriots and forefathers? Or is it a story of people who may or may not have had that Christian belief but went to great effort to make sure that neither the word "God" nor the word "Jesus" was included in the Constitution, and the word "creator," a word that embraced a more all-encompassing belief that left room for the future, was included in the Declaration of Independence?

THE VISION OF OUR MILITARY

In our military, our diversity gives us strength. We invite people to join the military, and they come in thinking they will be shoulder to shoulder with all others. But the question is whether we take them in that way, or do we treat them as second-class citizens?

One of my goals, which I started when I was working with the Air Force staff, is to get us away from the word "tolerance." Many of us grew up thinking that tolerance was a goal, and in some programs in the Air Force we still use the word. But in 1790, George Washington wrote, "[i]t is now no more that toleration should be spoken of as if it were the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights." People don't have rights because those in power and the majority tolerate them and give them rights. We have rights because they are inalienable.

When I taught at the Naval War College, there were many officers from foreign countries who were part of the aristocracy or royal families of their countries. I was reminded how different we are that any man or woman in America who is willing to take the military oath and serve in uniform has the right to rise to whatever level he or she might be able to.

Many of you know I was in Beirut—not just the day of the suicide truck bomb explosion, but many other days, as well. I remember being in a foxhole as mortars came in. I looked around at the people in that foxhole with me—mostly Marines, but also some Airmen, Sailors, and Soldiers, as well—and I made a simple comment. "Here in Beirut," I said, "I bet we Americans have the only interfaith foxholes in all of the Middle East." There were Muslim foxholes, there were Christian Phalangist foxholes and, in Israel, there were Jewish foxholes. I said, "If the world had more interfaith foxholes, maybe we wouldn't need so many foxholes."

That is the image we need to have in our military: an interfaith foxhole, an interfaith cockpit, an interfaith silo, an interfaith conference, and an interfaith military. We need to understand that our choice is to take pride in diversity. The more people who can serve with us the better—people of different faiths serving alongside those who claim no religious faith—because the choice is to serve together in that interfaith foxhole or to be like many other parts of the world, where each group pitted against others, foxhole against foxhole.

THE VISION OF OURSELVES

What is the vision we have as leaders? We need a vision; not just laws, but a vision based on core values that we share. Should we just tell people to do "the right thing," and trust that individuals will know what to do? I have heard leaders say that, and I think they are wrong. I think it is dangerous. First, very few people purposely do what they consider to be the wrong thing. I have counseled many people in my career as a chaplain, and the few that start by saying, "I know I did something wrong," always add, "but." That "but" is an explanation of why it was not wrong. We can never rely on the fact that it is easy to know what the "right" thing to do is—especially in the complicated and dangerous world of the military. We must work hard to establish a shared vision—a value-based vision—of what is right for those of us in the military.

Let me tell you about one of the greatest failures of my life. When I went from college to the rivers of Vietnam, I served on a ship with ten officers and about 90 sailors. This was a different world. My commanding officer was drunk all the time, and on a Navy ship you were not allowed to have alcohol. He got us into danger. Once we became beached in enemy territory, and thank God the morning tide freed us, but we never reported it. Once the commander brought a prostitute on board

and shot the guns to show off. I remember being scared, I remember being young, and I remember crying myself to sleep, although I did not admit that for many years.

Every one of the other nine officers came up to me and told me the code was to "protect the old man." He had been in Vietnam for ten months, and they said he had two months to go, so we needed to protect him. When I look back, I am ashamed, because I did not have the wisdom and the courage to understand that we were not protecting him or, ultimately, ourselves. It was just by the grace of God that we survived. The officers had a code, but it was the wrong code. It was the wrong code for a military that deals with life and death decisions.

We must look at values and ask what values make sense for us—values linked to the military oath we take, our responsibilities, and the trust and power that have been invested in us. I am impressed at how the JAG Corps is looking at its own values: wisdom, valor, and justice. But everyone in the military must think about these issues, not just the JAG Corps. The military as a whole must clarify and educate about bedrock military values that are often misunderstood.

Take, for instance, the value of loyalty. How many people think loyalty is keeping their mouth shut? We must remember that loyalty is a fluid, complex concept. I should be loyal to my shipmate or my friend until it becomes disloyalty to my unit. I need to be loyal to my unit until it becomes disloyalty to my service. We must understand and change the vision of what loyalty is. Loyalty is not keeping your mouth shut, it is "friends don't let friends drive drunk." Loyalty is understanding that you take away the keys if you are really loyal. You tell someone, "Either you turn yourself in, or I will have to say something."

What is our vision of diversity? It is a vision that understands our human instinct is to want those around us, and those with whom we serve, to be "like us." But we do not value diversity until our teammate comes up with an innovative idea and we say, "Thank goodness, my teammates are not all like me."

What about our vision of honor? We use the word, but for many people, it is the same thing as honesty. But that is wrong. Honor is a special word for the military. You can be honest and not care whether others know you are honest, so long as you know yourself. But those of us in the military must realize that honor is understanding that the way people think about me affects the way they think of you, the way they think of others, and the way they think of us all.

When I was stationed in Pensacola, I stopped at a gas station in Mobile, Alabama. I was in uniform, and a car had broken down. I could see steam coming out of it, and the car's owner came up to me and said, "I hate to bother you, but my wife and daughter need to go to the airport. My daughter is flying away to college. I would never ask a stranger, but you're in uniform. Could you take my wife and daughter to the airport?" I thought to myself, "My grandfather and my father escaped from countries in eastern Europe where someone in uniform would have been the last person on earth others would have respected and trusted. They would have feared that uniform."

I will end with one final story from Vietnam. When my drunk commanding officer was relieved, I learned what one leader can do to change the atmosphere on a whole ship or in a whole unit. The next commander was ethical in a way that I will never forget.

We were part of Operation GAME WARDEN, keeping the Viet Cong out of the rivers. We were in danger, but the people who really were in danger were those in the small boats that would go out in the river. These small boats were ambushed, and they would engage in fire fights. The wounded were evacuated, and we never knew if they lived or died. Once, as a boat was coming back, we saw something in the water behind the boat. As the boat approached, we saw it was pulling a corpse of a Viet Cong who was killed. There was a rope tied around the neck of the corpse, and the other end was tied to the back of the boat. As the boat got closer to our ship, it sounded its siren and did what seemed like a war dance, as if the body were a war trophy. I remember asking myself whether this was an atrocity or not.

We waited to see what our commander would say. He grabbed the men off the boat, stood them on the ship next to the wall, and said, "I want you to listen carefully. Every time we put on a uniform, every time we are involved in a war, we face two enemies, not one." He said, "There is always the external enemy, and here it is the Viet Cong. We are going to fight them hard, fight them strong, and fight them smart. But there is an internal enemy, as well—the animal within you that likes what it's doing, that wants to kill more, and that wants to take control." He said, "As long as you work for me, you are going to fight both enemies, because if you don't, then you will remember how to fight, but you will forget what it was that we ever thought was worth fighting for. You are going to fight both enemies, or we are going to get to the point where you can't tell the players without a scorecard."

Sometimes we make rules and decisions not for the sake of the enemy, but for our sake. My commanding officer in Vietnam had a vision of our nation and its military, and he also had a vision of leadership and humanity. He was a leader who touched, and in some ways, changed, my life.

You are the leaders who will have the opportunity to touch and change the lives of others with your words, your deeds, and perhaps most importantly, your vision. I thank you, I salute you, and I wish you luck.

The previous remarks, which have been edited for this publication, were made by Rabbi Arnold E. Resnicoff at the Keystone Leadership Summit on 4 November 2008.

Rabbi Arnold E. Resnicoff *is a consultant on interfaith values and interreligious affairs, and he has a long and distinguished career that includes extensive military service. He is a retired Navy chaplain who earned the Defense Superior Service Medal for his work with military and civilian leaders throughout Europe, Africa, and the Middle East while serving as Command Chaplain for the U.S. European Command. His military career began as a line officer in the rivers of the Mekong Delta before he left active duty to attend Rabbinical School. He was one of a key group of Vietnam Veterans who fought to establish the U.S. Vietnam Veterans Memorial, and he delivered the closing prayer at its November 1982 dedication. Rabbi Resnicoff was also present in Beirut, Lebanon during the 1983 truck-bomb attack that claimed the lives of 241 U.S. Marines. From June 2005 to June 2006, he served as Special Assistant for Values and Vision to the Secretary and Chief of Staff of the Air Force. In June 2006, the Secretary of the Air Force presented him with the U.S. Air Force Decoration for Exceptional Civilian Service—the highest award the Air Force can present to a civilian.*