

KEITH ALEXANDER: “WE MUST WIN, THERE IS NO SUBSTITUTE FOR VICTORY”

I frankly have no problem with Keith Alexander giving the employees of the National Security Agency a pep talk as the truth of what they're doing to us becomes public. They are not, after all, responsible for the serial disinformation Alexander and James Clapper have spread about their work. And the overwhelming majority of them are just trying to support the country.

I don't find this part of Alexander's speech even remotely accurate, mind you, but I've gotten used to dissembling from Alexander.

The issue is one that is partly fueled by the sensational nature of the leaks and the way their timing has been carefully orchestrated to inflame and embarrass. The challenge of these leaks is exacerbated by a lack of public understanding of the safeguards in place and little awareness of the outcomes that our authorities yield. Leadership, from the President and others in the Executive Branch to the Congress, is now engaged in a public dialogue to make sure the American public gets the rest of the story while not disclosing details that would further endanger our national security.

It's hard to understand how leaks can be inflammatory and embarrassing but all the claims about safeguards and dialogue to also be true.

But it's this passage I'm far more struck by:

Let me say again how proud I am to lead this exceptional workforce, uniformed and civilian, civil service and contract

personnel. Your dedication is unsurpassed, your patriotism unquestioned, and your skills are the envy of the world. Together with your colleagues in US Cyber Command, you embody the true meaning of noble intent through your national service. In a 1962 speech to the Corps of Cadets on “duty, honor and country,” one of this nation’s military heroes, General Douglas MacArthur, said these words teach us “not to substitute words for action; 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.” You have done all that and more. “Duty, Honor, Country” could easily be your motto, for you live these words every day. [my emphasis]

It’s not just that he calls out Cyber Command in the midst of a scandal that’s not supposed to be (but really is) about offensive war.

It’s not just that he chooses to cite one of the most powerful Generals ever, one who defied civilian command to try to extend a war that – it turns out – wasn’t existential.

But it’s also that he chose to cite a speech that invokes that moment of insubordination, a speech that encourages political inaction among the troops, a speech whose audience MacArthur defined as singularly military.

And through all this welter of change and development your mission remains fixed, determined, inviolable. It is to win our wars. Everything else in your professional career is but corollary to this vital dedication. All other public purpose, all other public projects, all other public needs, great or small, will find others for their accomplishments; but you are the ones who are trained to fight.

Yours is the profession of arms, the will to win, the sure knowledge that in war there is no substitute for victory, that if you lose, the Nation will be destroyed, that the very obsession of your public service must be Duty, Honor, Country.

Others will debate the controversial issues, national and international, which divide men's minds. But serene, calm, aloof, you stand as the Nation's war guardians, as its lifeguards from the raging tides of international conflict, as its gladiators in the arena of battle. For a century and a half you have defended, guarded and protected its hallowed traditions of liberty and freedom, of right and justice.

Let civilian voices argue the merits or demerits of our processes of government. Whether our strength is being sapped by deficit financing indulged in too long, by federal paternalism grown too mighty, by power groups grown too arrogant, by politics grown too corrupt, by crime grown too rampant, by morals grown too low, by taxes grown too high, by extremists grown too violent; whether our personal liberties are as firm and complete as they should be.

These great national problems are not for your professional participation or military solution. Your guidepost stands out like a tenfold beacon in the night: Duty, Honor, Country.

At a moment of crisis, at a moment when his own credibility is under strain, Keith Alexander has chosen to address the military, civilian, and contractor employees of the NSA as unthinking warriors, isolated from the critical issues swirling around them at the moment. He has chosen to frame NSA as a war machine, not as a defense machine.

The employees of NSA's first duty is to the Constitution, not the secret battles Alexander wants to escalate and win at all costs. I do hope they don't despair of that duty.