



JUDGE ADVOCATES ASSOCIATION/JUDGE ADVOCATES FOUNDATION
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Special Guest Remarks

by

General Joseph L. Votel, U.S. Army (Retired)

Former Commander, U.S. Central Command

INTRODUCTION — AS DELIVERED BY MAJGEN JOHN EWERS, JAA PRESIDENT

General Joseph L. Votel, a 1980 West Point graduate, is a retired U.S. Army General and the former Commander of the U.S. Central Command – responsible for U.S. and coalition military operations in the Middle East, Levant and Central and South Asia. During his 39 years in the military, General Votel commanded special operations and conventional military forces at every level. His career included combat in Panama, Afghanistan and Iraq. Notably, he led a 79-member coalition that successfully liberated Iraq and Syria from the Islamic State Caliphate. His assignment at CENTCOM was preceded by service as the Commander of U.S. Special Operations Command and the Joint Special Operations Command.

General Votel currently serves on a collection of fiduciary and advisory boards, is involved with the Middle East Institute, and the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, and he serves on the Executive Board of the Center for Ethics and Rule of Law at the University of Pennsylvania. He and his wife Michele live in Lake Elmo, Minnesota. Having led, served alongside, and been advised by scores if not hundreds of judge advocates, General Votel graciously agreed to make remarks at the 2026 JAA dinner. We are enormously grateful.

REMARKS AS DELIVERED

I have two objectives this evening:

- Acknowledge the critical role played by Staff Judge Advocates in our formations.
- Do that in a manner that ensures I maintain my security clearance.

My experience placed me in consecutive positions of leadership where I had the opportunity to lead our very finest organizations in the most politically sensitive and strategically critical situations that our Nation was confronting at the time — Rangers, the 82d Airborne Division, JSOC, SOCOM and CENTCOM. That experience spanned:

- COIN operations;

- Targeted operations against terrorists in declared areas of active combat;
- High value target strikes against terrorist leaders and networks outside the declared areas of active combat;
- Detention and interrogation operations;
- Advising and assisting partner forces in the conduct of CT operations;
- Supporting Federal Law Enforcement partners in bringing terrorists to justice; and
- Investigating and remediating the collateral effects of our operations on civilians.

What all these experiences have in common is that they were politically sensitive, strategically significant and often times – legally fraught.

Of course, no commander — even me — does it by themselves. I came to be reliant on key members of my staff to help me navigate the difficult waters that we encountered. No member of my staff was more critical to me than my Staff Judge Advocate.

Let me start by offering a simple proposition for your consideration: competent, independent legal advice and disciplined adherence to the LOAC are not constraints on effective combat operations. They are, in fact, critical ingredients to success on the battlefield and the military's contribution to preserving our national interests. They are not a convenience – they are an imperative.

Having made that proposition, let me also acknowledge something that is at the forefront of all our minds this evening. Recent public commentary by our senior civilian leadership has called this proposition into question, sparking discussion and indeed concern about how our military will conduct themselves in time of conflict, and suggesting that legal considerations have limited our warriors and made our military operations less effective in accomplishing our national security objectives. This of course has been underscored by the removal of senior judge advocates across the services with the implication that they were somehow responsible for failures in our national security policy objectives.

It is not my purpose this evening to weigh in on personalities, specific policy debates or personal decisions. I will let the words of our civilian leaders speak for themselves. Respectfully, and based on my personal experience, I have a different viewpoint.

Let me offer four points that underscore my position and proposition:

1. **Legal advice enables operations.** Competent, independent legal advice is not a constraint on military action but an integral part of combat effectiveness. In high-tempo operational settings, commanders need clear and timely guidance on what is lawful, what is prohibited, and where legal risk is being assumed so that they can act decisively.
2. **Independence gives legal advice value.** The value of legal advice depends on its credibility, and credibility depends on independence. Commanders need legal advisors who will candidly state when a legal or ethical line is being approached or crossed, even when operational and political pressure is most intense.

3. **Legal rigor protects legitimacy.** The law of armed conflict and related legal frameworks are central to maintaining legitimacy with allies, partners, civilian leaders, the American public, and those people most directly affected by our military operations. Applying the LOAC principles of distinction, proportionality, and precautions in attack help preserve public and international support, strengthen the U.S. strategic narrative, and deny adversaries propaganda opportunities.
4. **Integration of legal advice throughout the military planning process ensures effective outcomes.** The most effective legal advisors are fully integrated into operational planning and execution, including targeting, rules of engagement, and maritime decision-making. A technically correct legal answer that arrives too late is not enough; commanders need operationally fluent legal guidance delivered at the speed of operations.

I was fortunate to be well-supported by extraordinary judge advocates throughout my uniformed military career. They provided me legal advice grounded in professional independence. They exhibited operational fluency and a deep understanding of what we were trying to accomplish. They provided clarity in translating complex legal frameworks. And, in difficult situations, they demonstrated moral courage to say what needed to be said and ensure that the emotions of the moment did not eclipse best military judgement in fast moving situations.

When those qualities are present, legal advisors help ensure that combat power is applied in ways that are consistent with national values, legal obligations, and our long-term strategic interests.

I have heard some describe the relationship between a commander and his/her SJA as a partnership. This may not be a word I would use, but I understand the sentiment it implies — dependence, collaboration and shared responsibility for achieving outcomes. But to be perfectly clear — commanders are in charge. I wasn't looking for a thumbs-up from my JAG; I was looking for expert and considered advice that informed my orders and the subsequent actions that would be taken by the organizations I led. In the end, the decisions were mine. I held the risk. I was the accountable officer for everything my unit did or failed to do.

I am afraid that this point may sometimes be lost in the contemporary discussions that are taking place on the role of judge advocates in our military. Commanders are responsible. Not judge advocates. As a junior officer, I may have had a different perspective when confronted with expert legal advice. But accumulated experience, and the wisdom and judgement that come with it, are critical to appreciate the role that independent legal advice plays in helping to inform our operational decisions.

I know that much concern remains about independent legal advice and adherence to the LOAC. It is, in fact, a topic we should always be concerned about and always discussing. My view is that within the operating force — the role of legal advisors remains strong, as do the imperatives of the LOAC.

I offer a contemporary example:

The April 20th announcement that we were imposing a blockade at the entrance to the Strait of Hormuz was accompanied by some very strong and aggressive language from our Commander in Chief. And while I think most everyone can agree that the President has a unique way of communicating to the public – I think we can also appreciate the concern that these and other comments may pose for how our force may subsequently operate. It is the role of senior military leadership to interpret political guidance and intent and turn it into meaningful and lawful military tasks and operations. In this instance – I think the force did well.

On April 21st – just a day or two after imposing the blockade – many of us were able to hear through the media the bridge communications from the USS Spruance to the Iranian cargo ship Tauska before it was disabled and boarded. It was clear professional military communication followed by careful application of disabling firepower. Certainly, this is a result of good training. But it is also a strong indication that the force is well informed on their legal obligations and conduct. In this – we can take some comfort. And the military legal community can take some pride that the training you provided to our sailors, and indeed all our service members, resonates deep in the force.

It is a decisive advantage for the nation when military operations are conducted in a way that demonstrates an appreciation for legal obligations, sustains legitimacy, manages escalation and preserves integrity. We cannot afford to lose this – and legal advisors are essential to this end.

As we continue to confront an increasingly complex world in the Middle East, in Europe, in the Southern Hemisphere and in the Indo-Pacific, I am hopeful that we will have more opportunities to discuss the proposition that I offered at the start of my remarks: competent, independent legal advice and disciplined adherence to the law of armed conflict are not constraints on effective combat operations, but critical ingredients of military success. They are not a convenience – they are an imperative to national security.

I think it is essential, and I encourage you to stay engaged in the public discourse. I am fortunate that I have an opportunity to do this through my role as a member of the executive board at the Center for Ethics and the Rule of Law (CERL) at the University of Pennsylvania. I am one of the very, very few non-lawyers on their board. I believe in the mission of this organization, and they are committed to a persistent, professional, unemotional and non-partisan articulation of why adherence to ethical standards and the rule of law are foundational to effective national security. I hope you will continue to do the same.

Thank you again for the opportunity to join you this evening.