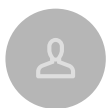




U.S. Air Force photo/Tech. Sgt. Angelita Lawrence

The SHALL To Power: Creeds, Communication, and Culture Through a Linguistic Lens



K.S. Anthony | [Follow](#)

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During a discussion about what separates military culture from corporate culture, [Brady Moore](#) and I stumbled onto the topic of creeds and how there really isn't a civilian counterpart (aside from, perhaps, [The Nicene Creed](#)).

In the interest of disclosure, I'll point out now that I am not a military veteran. Brady, however, is, hence our ongoing dialogue about these topics.

Businesses may have mission statements or lists of company values, but for most people, a job is something that you're *compelled* to go to. As such, those carefully-constructed statements come off more like insipid platitudes, regardless of the original intent or sincerity. Moreover, because businesses tend to become overwhelmed with inefficient processes and bureaucratic nonsense – and that's not to say the military

different in that it's 1) voluntary and 2) it possesses a period of cultural indoctrination – which includes rote memorization – that comparatively lengthy to even the most tedious corporate on-boarding process. Creeds, in short, serve to articulate a core set of collective cultural – and even tribal – values.

My interest in creeds has less to do with their inherent utility than with their uses of language, particularly when it comes to word choice. The words we choose to express something say a lot about what we value and how we think: case in point, the words “will” and “shall” as used in [The Ranger Creed](#), written in 1974 by Command Sergeant Major Neal R. Gentry.

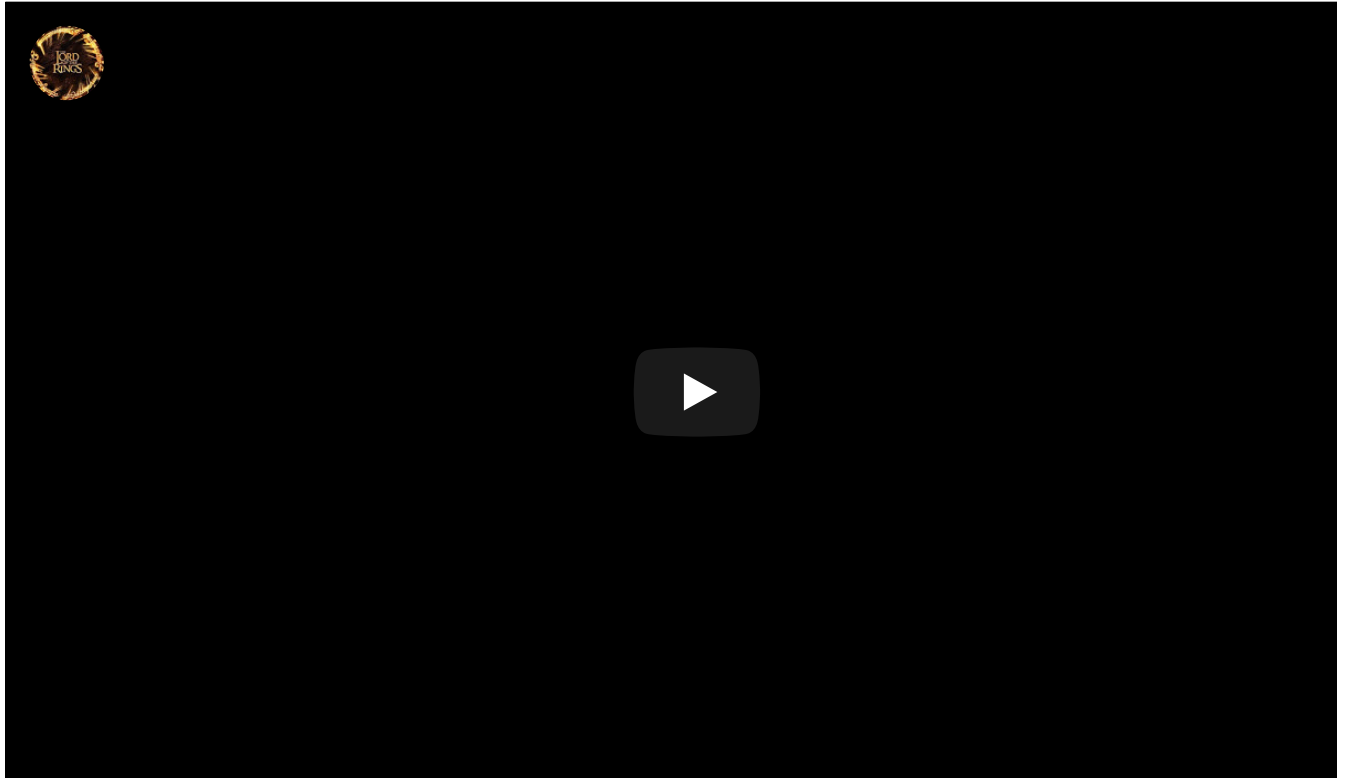


According to the [Oxford Dictionaries](#), the decision to use “will” or “shall” to express the future tense hinges on the pronoun form. “The traditional rule,” the lords of language tell us, “is that shall is used with first person pronouns (i.e. I and we) to form the future tense, while will is used with second and third person forms (i.e. you, he, she, it, they).”

This isn't entirely the case in *The Ranger Creed*. The word “will” is used nine times with the first person pronoun “I.” The word “shall” is used three times: twice with “I” and once in reference to what amounts to “it” (“My courtesy to superior officers...” in the 4th stanza). None of these uses, however, are incorrect. Oxford adds that “when it comes to expressing a strong determination to do something, the roles are reversed: will is used with the first person, and shall with the second and third.” More importantly, however, the words stem from etymological roots that express exceptionally different ideas, both of which provide a depth of meaning to the creed that isn't especially transparent at first, though I think most people intuit it.

“**Will**” evolved, both as a noun and verb, from the Old English word *willan* or *wyllan*, which means “to wish, desire; be willing; be used to; be about to.” It suggests a

"Shall" comes from a very different place. Beyond being a future tense verb, "shall," like "will," is also an imperative, but a more potent and obvious one. Far more powerful than "you will" is "you shall." If you've seen the Peter Jackson version of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, you'll note that Gandalf's imperatives as he meets the Balrog in combat are "go back to the shadows...you shall not pass!"



"**Shall**" is derived from the Old English *sceaþ*, which means "I owe/he owes, will have to, ought to, must," suggesting a debt or obligation: a sealed and binding promise that transcends "I will," because it demands more. In the Ranger Creed, those three "shalls" are demands and responsibilities – imperatives – created by vows sworn and owed, by sheer dint of belonging to the Ranger tribe within the Army's larger culture, to:

Their fellow soldiers: "**Never shall I fail my comrades.**"

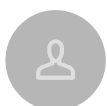
The Army/Regiment, including one's superiors and peers: "**My courtesy to superior officers, neatness of dress, and care of equipment shall set the example for others to follow.**"

Victory: "Energetically will I meet the enemies of my country. **I shall defeat them on the field of battle...**"

Those things *must* be done: they're oaths. They remove the element of choice. You already *chose* to volunteer: here are the incumbent responsibilities. Oaths aren't about options: they're about being bound by the power of openly spoken words.

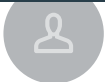
In a world where words no longer seem to matter, it's reassuring to know that those tasked with defending the country still find words that do. That's because they *make* them mean something.

An earlier version of this article appeared in [The Quartermaster Newsletter](#).



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Our Mission: Through the goodwill of others, we create the pathway to a better future for all by helping those who desire self-sufficiency. Good article.

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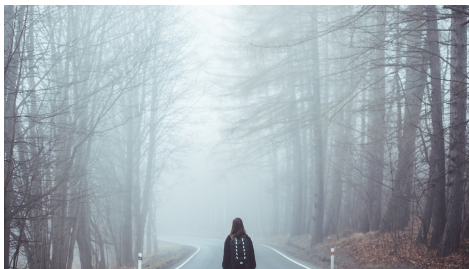


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