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ETHICAL ISSUES OF MILITARY LEADERSHIP

by

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Earlier this year, I awoke at 0500 hours thinking about an ethics talk I was scheduled to give at the US Army War College Memorial Chapel. As I allowed my mind to wander in free association, I got more than I bargained for. I started out with a flashback of Vice-President Nixon's visit to the heavy mortar company I commanded on Okinawa in 1954.

It was pleasant to recall that my company had been selected for the Vice-President's visit because we consistently had the best mess on the island. However, this triggered a thought about my mess sergeant. For some unknown reason, he could come up with juicy steaks whenever they were needed, whether they were on the menu or not. I recalled that he had some contacts with the Air Force and apparently was involved in trading, but I never bothered to look into it.

My next thought was that trading in steaks really wasn't much different from trading in bullet-proof vests. This brought to mind the supply sergeant of another company I

commanded during the Korean War. He had no administrative ability whatever, but he always had a good supply of bullet-proof vests. The only thing that helped me out of Korea without supply shortages were those bullet-proof vests—valuable trading materials.

These uncomfortable thoughts, dredged from the semi-subconscious at five in the morning, formed the starting point for my thinking about the ethics of military leadership. But still another question forced itself upon me: "Is this the sort of thing which forms the substance of Watergate and mini-Watergates?"

With this as background, I can't pose as a flaming prophet or crusader in the ethical area. Maybe this is just as well. Perhaps in order to have an ethical consciousness we should be aware of our personal fallibility. In recent reading, I've noticed this awareness in Abraham Lincoln's life. He was constantly at odds with puritanical moralists and idealists whom he could never please. Yet Lincoln knew very intimately what we are like as human beings. It came out in a comment he made about our judicial system as he quoted Thomas Jefferson, with approval: "Our judges are as honest as other men, and not more so. They have, with others, the same passions for party, for power, and the privilege of their corps."¹

At the outset, I must admit that I am probably as silent, as tactful, as self-protective, and as non-risk taking and gutless as anyone else. Yes, I have been forced to take some clear-cut goal line stands—those Martin Luther deals where you say, "Here I stand. I can do no other," whether it's to the detriment of efficiency report, career, or whatever. However, this is exceptional.

On a day to day basis, the tightrope is a better metaphor. I believe that we walk a tightrope, constantly oscillating between the

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extremes of crusader and chameleon; both roles are difficult and we burn up a lot of energy attempting to walk the tightrope between these two positions. The crusader, to use a phrase of J. D. Salinger, seems to “give off the stink of piousness”² or self-righteousness. On the other hand, the chameleon is so non-principled that if you told him “A” was right one week and then that “non-A” was right the next week, he’d dutifully and loyally click his heels together and say, “Yes, sir.”

My own self-understanding, then, in discussing this matter of ethics is that of a tight-rope walker caught alternately between the positions of crusader and chameleon—in one instance donning the uniform of a pure knight in shining armor and, at the other times, crawling into my chameleon skin of comfort and compromise. To the extent that others have felt this ethical tension, I hope this article will encourage fellow crusader-chameleons to surface those ethical issues with which we all struggle from day to day.

In the December 1973 issue of “Worldview,” Josiah Bunting, a former Army officer and a crusader type who wrote *The Lionheads*, refers to “the tyranny of the dull mind,” which, he says, “one so often encounters in the military.” But he’s objective enough to speak also of “the tyranny of the gifted mind” and he says these types are more dangerous because they withhold their true judgments lest they jeopardize the hopes for success which their ambitions have carved out for them.

He quotes B. H. Liddell Hart, discussing British officers, at this point:

A different habit, with worse effect, was the way that ambitious officers, when they came in sight of promotion to the general’s list, would decide that they would bottle up their thoughts and ideas, as a safety precaution, until they reached the top and could put these ideas into practice. Unfortunately, the usual result, after years of such self-repression for the sake of their ambition, was that when the bottle was eventually uncorked the contents had evaporated.³

What Hart is saying should not be limited to promotion to general. The process starts much earlier. I would have to agree that if we don’t *now* expose the relevant ethical issues that affect our daily lives, when we become Chief of Staff or Chief of Chaplains and open up the bottle, we’re going to find that there isn’t any carbonation left, no zip. It will be gone. It simply can’t be saved that long.

I would like to emphasize four pressing ethical issues for leaders in the military establishment to consider. The first is the danger posed by the acceptance of various forms of *ethical relativism*, or the blurring of right from wrong. It appears obvious that the erosion of a sense of right and wrong in favor of a “no-fault” society poses a threat to sound ethical judgments.

A brilliant young major, now out of the Army, once told me that we can never say anything is right or wrong. He said very blatantly, “Everything is relative. There is no right or wrong.” I then asked him if the killing of six million Jews in World War II was wrong and whether the actions of an Adolph Eichmann were wrong. He said, “Well, it depends on what was going on in Eichmann’s mind.” What basis does this man have for making ethical judgments with his belief that all is relative?

Less blatant but equally devastating to ethical judgments is a subtle and disguised form of ethical relativism practiced frequently in the military setting. It comes out of the tendency to have a functional or pragmatic attitude. I’ve heard Army officers say impatiently, “Hell, don’t give me all that theory. I just want to know what works.”⁴ This, of course, *is* a theory—“what works is right.” Such a hazardous ethical position is made worse by emphasis on getting the job

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done, no matter what. Performance of the mission is everything; therefore, the question of what is right often gets lost in the shuffle of practicality and necessity, if indeed ethical questions are even raised.

A second ethical issue every military leader should face is what I call the *loyalty syndrome*. This is the practice wherein questions of right or wrong are subordinated to the overriding value of loyalty to the boss. Loyalty, an admirable and necessary quality within limits, can become all-consuming. It also becomes dangerous when a genuine, wholesome loyalty to the boss degenerates into covering up for him, hiding things from him, or not differing with him when he is wrong.

General Shoup, former Marine Corps Commandant, once said something like this: "I don't want a 'yes' man on my staff, because all he can give back to me is what I believe already." Now for a leader to honestly say this and to attempt to carry it out, I would think he would have to be very secure. To turn it around, the less secure a leader is, the greater his need for pseudo-loyalty, that is, for fewer ideas that threaten his position. The simplest and quickest way he can get this type of loyalty is through fear. There is little doubt in my mind that fear is often a motivational factor in Army leadership, and also a major trouble spot in terms of ethical practice. This is confirmed in a study entitled *The United States Army's Philosophy of Management*, done by eight officers in the Army Comptrollership Program at Syracuse University. With reference to a survey of officers and civilians on managerial practices in the Army, the report said:

From the statements concerning fear, one can conclude that the use of fear is perceived by a majority of respondents, especially the lower ranking respondents, to deeply pervade the Army's organization structure. Lower ranking respondents generally believe that managers are unwilling to admit errors and are encouraged to stretch the truth because of how fear operates within the system. They believe that fear itself and

the life and death power of efficiency reports are the primary means used by their superiors to motivate subordinates' performance. When lower ranking officers are afraid to tell superiors about errors, embarrassing situations for the individual, the manager, and the organization can arise when the errors are finally disclosed. The persistence of fear as a stimulator of performance can have repercussions.⁵

This report says that "when lower ranking officers are afraid to tell superiors about errors" it is an "embarrassing situation." More than this, the use of fear to guarantee a sterile form of loyalty contributes to an environment where suppression of truth is guaranteed.

Concern about what might turn out to be an "embarrassing situation" leads into a third ethical trap on which we've been particularly hung-up for years in the Army, namely, the anxious worry over *image*. We frequently run scared; instead of acting upon what is right, we often hear: "You know, if we do this, it'll be embarrassing to the Army's image."

Whereas with the loyalty syndrome people are reluctant to tell the truth, with the image syndrome they aren't even interested in it. What becomes important is how things are perceived, rather than how things really are. Thus, a dream world of image is created which is often different from the world of reality.

Let's look at some quick examples:

- the former recruiting poster: not "Join the U.S. Army" but "The Army wants to join you." How true is it?
- A general at his new duty station who tells his information officer: "You're going to make me my next star."
- A unit commander who says: "This is the best unit in the U.S. Army," and yet refuses to seriously consider negative input.
- And what about our craze for "innovation?" How much of it is based on a desire for good publicity or catching our rater's eye with "dash and flash," and how much of it is based on the desire for quality and solid achievement in the unglamorous "bread and butter" items of our daily job?

As you read this, add examples from your own experience and you will probably arrive fairly close to my conclusion: at times, the obsession with image in the U.S. Army borders on institutional paranoia.

A fourth ethical trouble spot in our military experience involves *the drive for success*. This is the masochistic whip by which, sometimes, we punish ourselves and by which we sometimes are beaten sadistically by others.

In Vietnam, I escorted a speaker who was sponsored by the Department of Defense. I took him to see some of the best and the brightest of our leadership. On one occasion, I heard a high-ranking officer tell our visitor about a field grade officer who objected to the body count and to the wisdom of some current operations. The General to whom we were talking repeated gruffly what he told this field grade officer's superior: "Give 'em some candy and send 'em back up." In other words, you can buy off his ethical sensitivity—give him some medals and ribbons and send him back to his unit.

Compare this with a comment by one of the respondents in the section on "Integrity" from the *Study on Military Professionalism* done by the US Army War College in 1970: "One of the most violent reactions we got was from the body count, particularly from the young combat arms officers recently back from Vietnam... basically being given quotas, or if not given quotas, being told that their count wasn't adequate—go back and do it again."⁶ "Give 'em some candy and send 'em back up." But at what price success or even survival?

The internally-generated drive for success which we all possess is compounded by the externally-demanded results which signal success. In one word this adds up to *pressure*. We have this in common with other professions. While reading a study of 1,700 executive readers entitled "How Ethical Are Businessmen?", conducted by Harvard Business Review, I found the following comments under the title "Pressure:"

A controller resents "repeatedly having to act contrary to my sense of justice in

order to 'please.' In upper middle management, apparently, one's own ethical will must be subordinated to that of interests 'at the top'—not only to advance, but even to be retained."

The sales manager of a very large corporation phrases his views most bluntly: "The constant everyday pressure from top management to obtain profitable business; unwritten, but well understood, is the phrase, 'at any cost.' To do this requires every conceivable dirty trick."

A young engineer testifies that he was "asked to present 'edited' results of a reliability study; I refused, and nearly got fired. I refused to defraud the customer, so they had others do it."⁷

It may be small comfort to realize that business leaders also experience pressures to buy off ethical sensitivity, through jeopardy of career advancement or retention. Yet one would hope for better standards in the military services where profit motive demands are absent, and where its members are dedicated to a lifetime of service to their country.

Interestingly enough, the Harvard Business Review study also indicated that there were pressures from bosses which helped employees to act ethically. The study concluded: *if you want to act ethically, find an ethical boss.*⁸

Fortunately, there are a great many leaders in the Army who, by personal example, offer this ethical encouragement to others. However, while the Army neither compels its personnel to compromise their ethical principles nor condones unethical behavior, the importance of an institutional drive to push ethical leaders to the fore becomes significant since individuals cannot always choose their commanders. It also means building into the institutional structure and leadership training process such emphasis on ethics that leaders who use unethical methods will be exposed.

The task of building an ethical environment

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where leaders and all personnel are instructed, encouraged, and rewarded for ethical behavior is a matter of first importance. All decisions, practices, goals, and values of the entire institutional structure which make ethical behavior difficult should be examined, beginning with the following:

First, blatant or subtle forms of ethical relativism which blur the issue of what is right or wrong, or which bury it as a subject of little or no importance.

Second, the exaggerated loyalty syndrome, where people are afraid to tell the truth and are discouraged from it.

Third, the obsession with image, where people are not even interested in the truth.

And last, the drive for success, in which ethical sensitivity is bought off or sold because of the personal need to achieve.

Before being sentenced for his Watergate role, Jeb Stuart Magruder testified: "Somewhere between my ambition and my

ideals I lost my ethical compass. I found myself on a path that had not been intended for me by my parents or my principles or by my own ethical instincts."⁹ In the Army, we must insure that the ambition of the professional soldier can move him along the path of career advancement only as he makes frequent azimuth checks with his ethical compass.

NOTES

1. Elton Trueblood, *Abraham Lincoln, Theologian of American Anguish* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), p. 123.

2. J. D. Salinger, *Franny and Zooey* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1955), p. 158.

3. Josiah Bunting, "The Conscience of a Soldier," *Worldview* (December 1973), p. 7.

4. Scientific research by James W. Tyler in *A Study of The Personal Value Systems of U.S. Army Officers and a Comparison with American Managers*, an unpublished University of Minnesota thesis in August 1969, has shown "first-order" values to be pragmatic ones such as high productivity, organizational efficiency, my boss and achievement. "Second-order" values are ethical and moral values such as trust, honor, dignity, equality, etc. See US Army War College, *Study on Military Professionalism*, Carlisle Barracks, Pa., 30 June 1970, pp. B-6 and B-7.

5. Management Research Center Report, *The United States Army's Philosophy of Management*, Syracuse University, August 1972, p. 77.

6. US Army War College, *Study on Military Professionalism*, Carlisle Barracks, Pa., 30 June 1970, p. B-1-10.

7. George A. Smith, Jr., *Business, Society, and the Individual* (Richard D. Irwin, Homewood, Ill., 1962), pp. 59-60.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

9. *New York Times*, May 22, 1974, p. 37.

