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THE ARMY'S ETHIC SUFFERS UNDER ITS RETIRED GENERALS

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The recent *New York Times* article on how Barry McCaffrey handled his conflicting loyalties as retired Army general, defense industry rain-maker, West Point professor, and respected public voice of CNN and NBC, highlights once again an unsolved and haunting problem for the current strategic leaders of the Army Profession.¹

The problem is how to assist retired general officers in fulfilling their role of moral exemplars of the Profession just as they did when they were promoted to that high rank while on active duty. While retirement from active duty does make each one a newly nonpracticing professional, in the world of public perceptions they still act and speak, and are seen and heard, as an esteemed member of the military profession. In the public's eye and ear, and rightly so: "Once a general, always a general."

And in that unique world, just the appearance of impropriety is as devastating to their inherent role as moral exemplars of the Army's ethic as is the fact of it.²

But it is not just the American people that the leaders of military professions serve. Under the long-standing norms of our civil-military relations, they also serve the civilian leaders elected or appointed over them, and they serve those officers and soldiers below them within the ranks. In particular, it is the younger professionals who watch so carefully and take their cues from their respected senior leaders, even after their retirement.

Thus, there are three critical sets of trust relationships to be maintained by the current leaders of the Army if it is to be, and to be perceived as being, a real profession as opposed to just another governmental bureaucracy. And by their actions as moral exemplars, retired Army generals have a tremendous impact on these perceptions and critical trust relationships—the very life blood of the Profession. In doing so, they make the job of the current leaders of the Army either easier or harder.

This is the second time this vexing problem has arisen recently, the other being known in 2006 as "the revolt of the generals" when a group of more junior retired generals, several Army, went public with their criticisms of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld.³ While not effective in their attempt to bring down the Secretary of Defense,

their actions—largely outside long-standing Army norms—did result in much angst, anger, and mistrust from the junior professionals they had formerly led in combat.

But in the very public persona of General McCaffrey, the issue is now more clearly focused and localized to its essence of conflicting loyalties. Can any retired three- or four-star general be a West Point professor upholding the standards of academic integrity; a corporate advocate advancing through personal contacts the fortunes of defense contractors; an independent observer and objective reporter of current events for major news corporations; and, simultaneously, a moral exemplar for the Army Profession?

The answer is a qualified yes; i.e., only if there is no possible perception of conflicts of interest. And therein lies at least one solution to the problem presented to the current Chief of Staff of the Army, the most senior steward of the Profession.⁴

Since he is responsible to maintain the Profession's effectiveness through its ethic, he should quickly establish under the auspices of the Profession an electronic registry of retired three- and four-star generals that details the affiliations of each officer, both with for-profit and not-for-profit entities. To rightly restore the moral obligations over the legal, the registry would be voluntary. Each retired officer would voluntarily enter their own affiliations and keep them current.

Most importantly, the registry would be open to the public so that any interested person could see at any time, under the auspices of the Profession, the ties each individual retired general has and has voluntarily offered to the public. Perceptions of conflicts of interest can best be avoided if all affiliations are well-known in advance of commitments and contracts.

But would the retired general officers voluntarily cooperate with the Chief of Staff to create and to maintain the registry; would they continue to support in this new manner the Profession for which they and their families have sacrificed so much for so long? Frankly, that depends on how much they cherish their public role as moral exemplars and therefore seek to avoid the deathly appearance of conflicts of interest.

My belief is that the vast majority, if not every single one, would do so quite willingly. Their individual reputations and the vital trust relationships of the Profession are simply too valuable to them to consider doing otherwise. For the one who might not, it would be apparent to all who inquire that he or she is simply operating outside the auspices of the Army Profession. Let the buyer beware.

This salience of this issue has increased markedly during the past 7 years of war with the increased demand for the services of retired generals. And it is not *sui generis* to McCaffrey and the Army; many retired generals from all three warfighting professions are now situated in similar manner. As demonstrated, the issue will simply not go away if again ignored. But there is no reason the Professions' ethics need be further diminished. The public, the civilian leaders over our military, and junior military professionals of all services will all be more trusting of their Professions if the commitments and loyalties of retired generals are open to all to see. The Service Chiefs should act, now.

ENDNOTES

1. For the strategic leader of a profession vice of a governmental bureaucracy, see Leonard Wong and Don M. Snider, "Strategic Leadership of the Army Profession," chapter 28 in Don M. Snider and Lloyd J. Matthews, eds., *The Future of the Army Profession*, 2d Ed., McGraw-Hill, 2005, pp. 601-623.

2. For a new framework of the legal and moral components of the Army's professional military ethic, see Don M. Snider, Paul Oh, and Kevin Toner, *The Army's Professional Military Ethic in an Era of Persistent Conflict*, Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, forthcoming, January 2009.

3. See Don M. Snider, "Dissent and Strategic Leadership of the Military Professions," *Orbis*, Spring 2008, pp. 256-277.

4. For views on this subject by the professional head of the British Army, Sir Richard Dannatt, Chief of the General Staff, see his article "Character and Leadership in the Age of Image," accessed at The Trinity Forum, December 10, 2008, www.ttf.org/index/journal/detail/where-no-one-sees/.

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