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SPECIAL COMMENTARY

Renewing the Motivational Power of the Army's Professional Ethic

Don M. Snider

ABSTRACT: The US Army currently faces challenges not unlike those of the post-Vietnam era and the post-Cold War period. Subsumed within these challenges is a more critical overarching one; simply stated, will the Army that emerges from this transition period in 2025 be an effective and ethical military profession, or just another large government bureaucracy? The former can defend the Republic and its interests abroad, the latter cannot. How to understand and think about this challenge is the topic of this commentary.

The new understanding of modern, competitive professions holds that, contrary to what we might have learned from Huntington's *Soldier and State*, the idea that "once a profession, always a profession" is not true. In fact, modern, competitive professions "die" in the sense they might still exist as organizations, but their culture and behavior, and that of their individual members, becomes other than that of a profession.

Applying this fact to the US Army as a military profession, we must recall it is by design an institution of dual character – a bureaucracy and a profession – with constant and intense tensions between them. The Army has only been a military profession for roughly half of its two hundred and forty-year existence. For example, in the early 1970s, after Vietnam, the Army was not a profession mainly because it had expended its corps of non-commissioned officers who were later so instrumental in professionalizing the junior ranks of the new all-volunteer force. A decade later, however, the Army of Desert Shield/Desert Storm was the world's model of military professionalism.

So, in the case of the Army Profession, to "die" means the institution would duplicate the behavior of a large, government bureaucracy, treating its soldiers and civilians more as bureaucrats than as professionals. As a result, soldiers would be unmotivated by a personal calling to "honorable service," being instead micro-managed within a centralized, highly-structured organizational culture. Sadly, were this to occur it would be the antithesis of the Army's current doctrine of mission command within a professional culture.

The current potential for the Army to lose this internal struggle for cultural dominance, and for the profession to die as such, is heightened by ongoing defense reductions. All defense reductions are pernicious toward the military's professional character. They will, as they have in the past, strongly reinforce the unremitting de-motivations of the Army's bureaucratic character and undermine the essential professional character, e.g., with highly centralized, impersonal micromanagement for force and personnel cuts, and fiscal resources allocated to "do more with less."

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Further, beyond current defense reductions, if other recent events are accurate indicators—the too frequent moral failures of senior leaders, the institution’s as yet unsuccessful campaign to expunge sexual harassment/assault from its ranks, the necessity for Secretary of Defense to appoint a new flag officer as his Special Assistant for Military Professionalism, attempts within the Congress to reduce commanders’ legal authorities, etc.—the Army Profession is already struggling to maintain its professional character, at least from the perspective of the American people and their elected representatives.

Given this confluence of events, the best chance for Army 2025 to come through this post-war transition as a military profession lies in the renewal of the motivational power of its ethic. Only professions can use a normative, principled ethic, which is far more than compliance-oriented rules and regulations, as the means of social control for the performance of both the institution and its individual members. Thus, the power of the ethic, its internalized attitudinal and behavioral expectations shared Army-wide, is critical to effective and ethical practice at both the individual and institutional levels. And, the stewards of the Army Profession must now reassert it.

Why the Ethic?

My argument rests on a particular understanding of the nature of the military professional’s daily practice. The Army has recently created, for the first time in its history, official doctrine on what it means for the institution to be a profession and for its soldiers and civilians to be professionals (Army Doctrinal Reference Publication 1—*The Army Profession*, 2013). In this new doctrine, the practice of Army professionals is noted as “the repetitive exercise of discretionary judgments,” implemented and followed with review for effectiveness. For professions, the nature of their trust relationship with their client is such that the client cannot flourish, or indeed survive, absent the profession’s effectiveness; thus, efficiency is a secondary consideration.

Further, all such discretionary judgments by Army professionals are highly moral in nature, each one influencing the well-being of many human beings. This is true whether the individual is a junior professional leading tactical operations in the Middle East or a senior Army leader allocating fiscal and personnel shortages from within the Pentagon. In both cases, the decisions will directly and significantly impact the welfare of many Army professionals, their families, non-combatants on the battlefield, wounded veterans receiving care in the United States, and so on.

We can all agree such discretionary judgments are better made by individuals who are themselves of high moral character. As General Sir John Hackett observed decades ago, “The one thing a bad man cannot be is a good soldier or sailor...” And, for the most part, that has been the case within the US Army. Historically, such discretionary judgments have been made by individuals whose professional development has led to deeper moral character as they advance in rank and responsibility; (given their far greater developmental experiences and responsibilities, general officers are expected to be of significantly deeper moral character than 2d lieutenants who are just entering the profession, even though

they both follow the same ethic). In other words, moral development has long been an inherent part of the progression of leader development within the Army. But that is not to say it is sufficiently effective today.

Achieving a profession of moral character takes careful selection during accessions, followed by life-long development in an environment that fosters, supports, and sustains exemplary behavior, what the Army now calls “honorable service” in its new doctrine. In other words, professionals are only developed, particularly in their early years, within a uniquely professional culture. Bureaucracies do not produce individual professionals (though many professionals, once developed, do serve well in large bureaucracies). So, if Army 2025 is to have individual professionals who are called to “honorable service,” the Army must be maintained as a military profession with a powerfully motivating ethic.

In summary, the practice of Army professionals is to make discretionary judgments routinely; those judgments are highly moral in nature; such decisions are better made by professionals of high moral character; and such high moral character is only developed and manifested within the “honorable service” of those serving daily in the professional culture and motivations of the Army’s ethic.

Current Efforts to Renew the Power of our Ethic

In the new doctrine, the Army’s ethic is defined as:

...the evolving set of laws, values, and beliefs, deeply embedded within the core of the Army’s culture and practiced by all members of the Army Profession to *motivate and guide* the appropriate conduct of individual members bound together in common moral purpose.

The best we could do in that doctrine was to frame the ethic into a two-by-two matrix arraying various sources of ethical principles by whether they are codified in law and whether they are more applicable at institutional or individual levels. Frankly, as that exercise demonstrated, the Army has too many statements of its ethic! What the Army lacks is consensus on a single understanding, concise and accessible to all.

The Army’s Center for the Profession and Ethic has been working during fiscal year 2014 on a single-page restatement of the Army Ethic, recently announced in a new white paper. On July 30-31 of this year, the Chief of Staff of the Army hosted the inaugural Army Profession Symposium at West Point to develop a shared vision, reinforce guidance, and generate dialogue on “Living the Army Ethic.” Over a hundred senior leaders and their sergeants major reviewed the white paper, explored future ethical challenges to the Army Profession, and discussed the Army’s concept and strategy for character development.

The intent of the Chief of Staff of the Army in establishing this symposium was to generate shared understanding of the central role of the Army ethic in explaining, inspiring, and motivating why and how we serve. However, better understanding of the ethic by itself will not address the challenge the Army now faces. The remainder of the challenge, as the Chief has often stated, is motivating leaders of all stripes, uniformed and civilian, to own it and live it in every decision and action they take daily.

As explained by the various schools of psychology, the crux of the issue is in the “moral motivations” stage of moral decision making when, having determined the “right” thing to do, the individual must manifest the moral courage (personal character) to do so, usually in an action weighted heavily with the institution’s and clients’ interests. Or, alternatively, Army professionals will manifest moral cowardice when acting on daily discretionary judgments, placing their own equities and needs above those of the profession and its client, the American people. Stated another way, they will manifest the behavior of a “careerist” rather than that of an “honorable servant.”

Simply stated, the Army’s challenge in character development comes down to moral courage versus moral cowardice. The crux of the current challenge is not a difficulty of Army professionals determining the right thing to do; rather it is institutionally and individually creating motivation for them to act with the moral courage (character) to do the right thing.

The Key to the Future of the Army Profession – Institutional Adaptation for Enhanced Character Development of our Professionals

So, the key to the future of the Army as a profession comes down to whether, in the midst of a bureaucratizing set of defense reductions, the stewards of the profession can adapt the Army’s major systems of human capital development (accession, utilization, certification, education, assessment and retention, and advancement) to create and maintain the necessary motivational culture wherein professionals will choose to act routinely as professionals—those who are motivated to follow the sacrifices and satisfactions of a calling versus merely having a government job and paycheck.

Sadly, the Army’s own research shows how far the Army has to go. The just released *2013 Center for Army Leadership Annual Survey of Army Leadership* (April 2014), concluded once again that among all of the core leadership competencies, “developing others” still rates the lowest. Within the active component in 2013, just over sixty percent of uniformed leaders were rated effective. That means Army leaders of all ranks are telling the stewards responsible for the Army’s professional culture/developmental systems that two-in-five of their immediate leaders are currently ineffective in developing those with whom they lead and serve! The *Center for Army Leadership Annual Survey of Army Leadership* continues:

There is other support for this finding. Twenty percent of leaders report that formal and informal performance counseling never or almost never occurs. When performance counseling is done, only 52% agree it was useful for setting goals. Up to 3 in 10 respondents indicate their immediate superior does not provide feedback on their work, talk with them about how to improve performance, or help prepare them for future assignments. Also 4 in 10 leaders say they do not currently have a mentor.

This is a stark report, indeed, since we know from Army history and all our own experiences that the moral purpose of the Army Profession, the identity of Army professionals, and the values/moral principles that control them (i.e., the Army ethic) are best passed on in such

irreplaceable, interpersonal experiences in which leaders serve as role-models, counselors, coaches, and mentors.

Conclusion

Defense reductions are, historically, dangerous times for the Army. Wisely, current stewards have made “Adaptive Army Leaders for a Complex World” and “Soldiers Committed to our Army Profession” their strategic priorities, among others for hardware, software, and force structure. However, stating a priority is not the same as implementing it. The Army’s systems that develop and manage precious human resources are from the industrial age; their negative influences on Army culture have been notoriously hard to change. Within this framework the right motivations can remain elusive within command climates. The ethic’s influence can be sidelined by Army bystanders not motivated to live it.

So if Army 2025 is to be a military profession, its stewards will have to make it so by ensuring the culture of a profession dominates during the defense reductions. Later, we will learn whether they were successful by observing where researchers always look to see if the Army is still a military profession – by how effectively and ethically its leaders apply new knowledge of sustained land-power in the “first battles of the next war,” earning and sustaining the trust of the American people.

