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Casualties of Their Own Success: The 2011 Urination Incident in Afghanistan

Paolo G. Tripodi and David M. Todd¹

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ABSTRACT: This article explores the individual, situational, and system roles influencing the 2011 incident in which a small unit of US Marine scout snipers urinated on three Taliban corpses. Without absolving individual responsibility, the authors emphasize a strong command climate is the most important influence behind ethical and professional behavior.

In the waning days of 2011, the leaders of 3d Battalion, 2d Marine Regiment, could justifiably reflect with pride on the unit's accomplishments during the past year. Tasked with a key role in the largest, most austere area of operations in northern Helmand province, the commanding officer instituted a comprehensive ethical warrior program into every aspect of operations and through each phase of training, combat operations, and post-deployment recovery.

During the seven-month deployment, 3/2 garnered high praise for its innovative tactics and for the exploits of its successful scout sniper platoon. The Commandant and the Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps subsequently hosted a congratulatory breakfast for the scout sniper platoon. The battalion even garnered national attention and praise when actress Mila Kunis attended its post-deployment Marine Corps Birthday Ball in November 2011.

With the loss of six marines and one US Navy corpsman, the deployment had been challenging and difficult. But, the battalion had returned triumphantly with its honor clean. Little did it suspect, twelve days into the new year, a 39-second video clip posted on YouTube would forever transform the legacy of that deployment. The video showed four marines from the unit urinating on the bodies of a few Taliban fighters.

This article explores the professional and ethical dimensions of the four marines' actions and focuses on why the event happened. The main objective is to understand whether this unit of marines fully grasped the ethical implications of its behavior.

We analyze the urination incident by adopting the ethical decision-making typology of outcomes developed by Ann Tenbrunsel and Kristin Smith-Crowe. Their typology "distinguishing between the process that produced the decision (moral or amoral decision-making) and the decision that resulted (ethical or unethical), produces four different outcomes—intended ethicality, unintended ethicality,

¹ The authors would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers and Colonel Timothy S. Mundy for their insightful comments on an earlier version of this article.

intended unethically, and unintended unethically.”² Tenbrunsel and Smith-Crowe explained “the moral decision-making that follows from moral awareness can result in unethical decisions as well as ethical ones; likewise, the amoral decision-making that follows from moral unawareness can lead to ethical decisions as well as unethical ones.”³ Thus, the incident potentially falls into the categories of intended unethically, and more likely, unintended unethically.

Our research indicates the marines associated with the incident accepted the behavior as normal: urinating on dead enemies was not a desecration, or a war crime, but a strong victory statement made against an extremely cruel enemy. In the moment, it is questionable whether the marines clearly perceived the unethical dimension of what they were doing. To the extent their behavior had become normal—a victory statement—such behavior also became unintentional. Thus, it is very likely the action occurred in a condition of ethical blindness. At least one marine came to regret his action, which is consistent with a temporary inability to see the ethical dimension of such behavior. Several marines, however, showed no regrets for their roles, which leads to the belief that they intentionally engaged in unethical behavior. It can be argued their perceptions of the conditions in which they operated, no longer filtered by a healthy command climate, removed ethical thinking from their decision-making. Thus, their conduct would be consistent with unintended unethically.

To understand what led these experienced and high-performing marines to engage in such unethical and unprofessional actions, we explore three main elements significant to explaining human behavior. First, we focus on the individual to understand whether these marines exhibited or had different characteristics from other marines and, therefore, might have been more inclined to engage in unethical behavior. Second, on the situation to evaluate whether these marines operated in an exceptional environment, which contributed to their unethical behavior. Third, on the system, the organization they belonged to, to evaluate whether it failed to promote ethical behavior and actually might have encouraged unethical behavior. We posit the consequential element of this system to be the command climate.

Unethical behavior is the result of several elements failing. Indeed, a functioning and resilient system should be able to prevent unethical behavior. Yet the following analysis provides strong evidence that the command climate in which these marines operated over a number of months had degraded to a dangerous level. This finding does not excuse the behavior of the individual marines nor absolve them of responsibility for their actions.

Our objective is to provide an opportunity to reflect on the role of the command climate, or the system, to determine the behavior of unit members and to ensure it is prepared for difficult challenges, particularly in highly stressful situations such as combat. More important, this article emphasizes the pivotal role commanders play in shaping command

2 Ann E. Tenbrunsel and Kristin Smith-Crowe, “Ethical Decision Making: Where We’ve Been and Where We’re Going,” *Academy of Management Annals* 2, no. 1 (2008): 553, doi:10.1080/19416520802211677.

3 Ibid., 554.

climate. Particular attention is given to the problematic phenomenon that well-meaning leaders might unintentionally create conditions leading to unethical behavior.

Outstanding Platoon

The marines of the sniper platoon were extremely experienced; several of them were tactically savvy and adaptable thinkers. Many had seen combat in its ugliest face. For those who had separated, their sense of brotherhood and service caused them to return to the Marine Corps and to volunteer for deployment. Marines have unique and special motivations and bonding that are often even stronger for a tight-knit unit such as the scout snipers.

The scout sniper platoon of 3/2 was shaped mostly by its platoon leader, Staff Sergeant Joseph W. Chamblin. Chamblin joined the platoon in late summer 2010 believing he would be the platoon sergeant. He had been a marine for 15 years, 10 of which as a sniper. He had deployed on missions abroad several times and already had seen combat in both Afghanistan and Iraq.⁴ As a result of the battalion struggling to fill all of the officer billets while preparing for the deployment to Afghanistan, and likely because the commanding officer wanted an experienced sniper in charge of the platoon rather than a young junior officer, Chamblin was selected to take command of the platoon.

The immediate challenge was to prepare the platoon for the deployment to Afghanistan. Chamblin remembered: “Unfortunately, the starting point wasn’t good. The Platoon’s reputation wasn’t stellar in the Battalion or the sniper community. When I arrived, the platoon had fourteen men and only one school trained scout/sniper or HOG [Hunter of Gunmen].”⁵

A few years earlier, while a scout sniper instructor in Quantico, Virginia, Chamblin had plenty of opportunities to meet, train, and develop many experienced, outstanding, and committed marines. In his new role as platoon commander, Chamblin asked some of them to join the platoon. Sergeant Robert W. Richards—a marine since 2007 who had completed a tour of duty in Garmsir, Afghanistan, with 1/6—accepted. Other marines respected Richards, and he understood the most effective way to employ snipers. During the battle of Marjah (Operation Moshtarak) in February 2010, Richards was seriously wounded by an improvised explosive device (IED).⁶ His psychological wounds matched his physical wounds; he qualified for 100 percent disability. Yet Richards recovered from the physical wounds and coped with the psychological ones. Once removed from limited duty status, he returned to the Marines. Initially Richards was supposed to mentor the less experienced snipers. Yet, the more time he spent with the scout sniper platoon, the clearer it became in his mind that he needed, but also wanted, to deploy with them. He became the leader of Team 4.

4 Joe Chamblin, *Into Infamy: A Marine Sniper's War*, with Milo Afong (Middletown, DE: CreateSpace Publishing, 2015), 109.

5 *Ibid.*, 113.

6 Hope Hodge Seck, “Marine Sniper Rob Richards Died from Drug Toxicity: Autopsy,” *Marine Corps Times*, November 30, 2014.

By the fall of 2010, the platoon had gone through intensive training. Out of the 39 marines and 2 sailors, “twenty-three of the Marines were school trained HOGs, and the others were hand selected, exceptional infantrymen.”⁷ In addition to completing tactical training, all 3/2 units were directed to incorporate ethics instruction in every aspect of training, and to conduct two hours of focused ethical instruction every week. Battalion Commander Lieutenant Colonel Christopher G. Dixon, a veteran of deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, understood the demanding uncertainties of a dispersed, counterinsurgency environment. In his view, the mission required the marines of 3/2 to be ethical warriors, “to show restraint in the use of force and sometimes accept tactical risk, in order to protect the people and to support our strategic goals.”⁸

The battalion’s ethical warrior program sought “to develop high-performing individuals and small units who are morally, psychologically, and emotionally resilient in order to operate, live and thrive on an austere battlefield defined by fog, friction and severe stress.”⁹ Small unit discussions and ethical decision games were conducted. An ethical warrior reading list was posted to the battalion’s shared drive. The program continued during combat operations in Afghanistan. Significantly, prior to and following each mission, small-team leaders were to address and debrief potential or encountered ethical dilemmas, making the “harder-right” a matter of “muscle-memory.”¹⁰ Finally, the program helped post-deployment marines develop resilience and minimize post-traumatic stress. The marines of 3/2 probably completed more ethics training than other units who had deployed to either Afghanistan or Iraq. Moreover, the ethics training concept, which focused on small group discussions led by leaders in the platoon and in smaller units, was sound.

Early in 2011, the battalion relieved 1/8, in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, a widely-recognized Taliban stronghold. Historically, bloody fighting between the International Security Assistance Force troops and the Taliban occurred in Helmand. Despite the great commitment of resources and lives, the province remained very unstable and volatile. The Musa Qala and Now Zad districts, where the battalion was deployed, were particularly dangerous, hotly contested areas. Chamblin deployed one sniper team to Now Zad, nicknamed Apocalypse Now Zad, and the rest of the platoon to Musa Qala.¹¹

The marine snipers proved to be extremely effective from the start, killing a significant number of Taliban. The enemy called them “ghosts” as they were able to hit hard and remain unseen.¹² The most innovative tactic adopted by the snipers put them in a leading role with the support of a tank unit. In a few months the snipers’ accomplishments were known and acknowledged beyond the battalion. Three months into the

7 Chamblin, 116.

8 E. G. Clayton, Letter of Instruction, “3d Battalion, 2d Marines Ethical Warrior Program,” October 1, 2010, Camp Lejeune, NC.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Dan Lamothe, “3/2 Marines Replace 1/8 in Musa Qala, Now Zad,” *BattleRattle* (blog), *Marine Corps Times*, March 30, 2011, <http://battlerattle.marinecorpstimes.com/2011/03/30/32-marines-replace-18-in-musa-qala-now-zad/>.

12 Chamblin, 130.

deployment, the platoon had more than 70 confirmed kills.¹³ Chamblin wrote, “the command couldn’t have been more pleased with our work and results.”¹⁴

Major General John A. Toolan, the commanding officer of II Marine Expeditionary Force and the commander of Regional Command Southwest in Afghanistan, did not miss the excellent performance of the tanks and snipers that resulted in 50 kills in 10 days, noting the likelihood of individuals with “upwards of 100 kills.”¹⁵ Toolan even visited with the platoon to congratulate them on their successes.

Towards the end of the deployment, while the marines of the scout sniper platoon were waiting to return to the United States, then-Commandant of the Marine Corps General James F. Amos—who was on a visit to Afghanistan with Sergeant Major Micheal P. Barrett, the sergeant major of the Marine Corps—decided to have breakfast with the platoon. The platoon’s achievement had been acknowledged by many at different levels, but to have the Commandant do so in person was extremely flattering. The snipers received challenge coins from the Commandant and words of praise. Chamblin wrote, the Commandant and the Sergeant Major “specifically requested to sit down with my platoon. . . . walked around, talked to [platoon members], congratulated them. . . . shook everyone’s hand, gave them a coin and told them they had done a great job. It meant a lot.”¹⁶

“Piss on these assholes.”

The urination incident took place less than five months after the scout sniper platoon had deployed to Afghanistan. They had become extremely experienced in the region and had acquired a solid understanding of the enemy and its activities. Over several weeks of monitoring an area near the small village of Sandalah, where the Taliban presence was heavy and their activity particularly intense, the platoon identified several valuable targets; they focused on a Taliban command cell.

Seventeen marines, mainly from Team 4, left Patrol Base (PB) 7171 in the early hours of July 27, 2011, to take position close to the village. Pushing into a territory the battalion rarely had ventured in before, the patrol covered a few miles while avoiding IEDs and several Taliban observation points. They arrived in place at five o’clock in the morning. A little after seven, the scout snipers engaged the enemy, killing twelve and suffering no casualties.¹⁷ Then they received the order from their command to retrieve a few of the closest Taliban bodies. Chamblin strongly opposed the request, which he considered to be “completely unfitting for a sniper mission.”¹⁸ Yet as the fight subsided, the snipers

13 Ibid., 143.

14 Ibid.

15 Dan Lamothe, “General: More Than 100 Kills for Some Marine Snipers”, *BattleRattle* (blog), *Marine Corps Times*, September 1, 2011.

16 Gina Harkins, “Exclusive: Controversial Marine Sniper Fires Back at Critics”, *Military Times*, October 31, 2013.

17 Chamblin, 182–84; and Marine Corps Combat Development Command (MCCDC), *Command Investigation into the Alleged Desecration of Corpses by U.S. Marines in Afghanistan* (Quantico, VA: MCCDC, 2012), 26–28.

18 Chamblin, 188.

sent two Afghans with a wheelbarrow to transport the bodies to a temporary compound.

Standing there in a brief silence, knowing the men laying dead [at] our feet were responsible for inflicting pain and misery on our fellow Marines, I felt a surge of anger deep in my bones. They had taken the life of a man whom I considered a brother. They'd also gathered his mutilated body parts and hung them in a tree for us to find. I stood burning inside. Someone jokingly said, "Piss on these assholes!" The joke died almost instantly, and we couldn't help ourselves. Hell, urinating on them still showed more respect for their dead than they showed of ours.¹⁹

Intention of the Individual

When watching the infamous short video of the incident, the marines appear as if they did what they intended to do. Whether they truly understood the nature of their actions, however, is unclear. Considering their experience and training, they should have known their behavior was unethical and unprofessional. Their conduct, therefore, might be considered intended unethicality. Yet, analysis reveals the possibility that, when they decided to urinate on the dead enemies, the marines' ability to see the ethical dimension of the action was significantly compromised or, more likely, completely absent. They were ethically blind.

During his court martial, Staff Sergeant Edward W. Deptola, the platoon sergeant, expressed regret for not stopping the other marines from urinating on the enemy bodies. Deptola said, "I was in a position to stop it and I did not. . . . I should have spoken up on the spot."²⁰ When Lieutenant Colonel Nicole Hudspeth, the judge advocate, questioned Deptola's motive, he said: "I have no excuse, no reason, ma'am . . . it was not the correct way to handle a human casualty."²¹ It is unclear whether Deptola regretted not intervening during the incident or condoning the marines' behavior. Yet, Chamblin wrote, "Later, when asked why we did it, Dep [Deptola] said it best. 'Killing these assholes was not enough.'"²²

Neither Chamblin nor Richards showed remorse for the incident. But, what they said helps us understand their behavior. In their minds, urinating on dead enemies did not constitute desecration, or a war crime, rather it was a strong victory statement. They had vanquished a brutal enemy. Chamblin explained,

I didn't see anything wrong with it. I would do it again. It wasn't like we had some random Afghans laying there. They were insurgents, they had weapons and they were trying to kill us. The same guys were making IEDs and trying to kill Marines. If they could get over here, they would cut off the heads of everybody in this room right now. That's how they are. And you know what? I won that day. They didn't.²³

At least two factors that influenced the behavior of this small team are revealed by the events surrounding the incident. For the first time into the deployment, they had been asked to bring corpses to the battalion command post. Such a task is unusual for a sniper unit; indeed,

19 Chamblin, 191.

20 "US Marine Pleads Guilty to Urinating on Corpse of Taliban Fighter in Afghanistan," *Guardian*, January 16, 2013.

21 *Ibid.*

22 Chamblin, 191.

23 Harkins, "Exclusive."

Chamblin unsuccessfully pushed back on his chain of command. Yet, the command's request put them in close contact with the enemy bodies.

After the incident and before leaving the area, the unit had two locals load the dead enemies on top of a tank. Despite the fact that body bags, required by regulations, should have been available, they were not used. According to Chamblin, once all the equipment was loaded and the dead bodies were placed on the tank, they decided to ride back to the base on the tank. It became a victory parade that Chamblin remembered proudly.

Displaying the dead insurgents atop the tanks sent a strong message to the enemy and the locals. We were the lions, the victors. Riding on top of the tanks, despite the stench of stinking bodies, felt great, how the Mongols must have felt riding their horses after a hard fought battle. . . . We were welcomed back to the Battalion Command post like conquering heroes.²⁴

A growing body of research into ethical behavior and decision-making, clearly indicates that individuals confronted with ethical choices have a tendency to behave in a significantly less rational way than expected, or not rationally at all.²⁵ Often their decisions are in direct conflict with their values and their training.²⁶ Looking at decisions and behaviors from outside a situation, others easily and clearly see the ethical dimension and implications; yet such clarity for those immersed in the situation might be compromised.

Guido Palazzo noted "(un)ethical decision making is less rational and deliberate but more intuitive and automatic. As a consequence, the ethical dimension of a decision is not necessarily visible to the decision maker. People may behave unethically without being aware of it—they may even be convinced that they are doing the right thing."²⁷ Thus, when an individual becomes unable to see the ethical dimension of the decision-making process, a state of ethical blindness develops.

Shaped by combat, servicemembers might tend to act upon unit-defined, socially-approved behaviors.²⁸ Taking place over several months, a process of ethical fading likely was encouraged, unintentionally although irresponsibly, by the more senior leaders of the organization, who were distracted by the excellent outcomes of the scout sniper platoon. In the deployment workups, battalion leaders already noted an independent spirit as the sniper platoon failed to observe the standards of the other marines. A few months into the deployment, battalion leaders could see the snipers' behavior was departing from the Marine Corps's sound ethical and professional standards. Captain Rudyard S. Olmstead, Kilo Company's commander, noted the scout sniper platoon displayed a poor level of discipline in the way they wore the uniform, and when superiors addressed the issue, the scout snipers simply disregarded it. Olmstead

24 Chamblin, 192–93.

25 Dan Ariely, *Predictably Irrational: The Hidden Forces That Shape Our Decisions* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008).

26 David DeSteno and Piercarlo Valdesolo, *Out of Character: The Surprising Truths about the Liar, Cheat, Sinner (and Saint) Lurking in All of Us* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2011); and Max H. Bazerman and Ann E. Tenbrunsel, *Blind Spots: Why We Fail To Do What's Right and What To Do about It* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

27 Guido Palazzo, Franciska Krings, and Ulrich Hoffrage, "Ethical Blindness," *Journal of Business Ethics* 109, no. 3 (September 2012): 324, doi:10.1007/s10551-011-1130-4.

28 Ann E. Tenbrunsel and David M. Messick, "Ethical Fading: The Role of Self-Deception in Unethical Behavior," *Social Justice Research* 17, no. 2 (June 2004): 226, doi:10.1023/B:SORE.0000027411.35832.53.

explained, “we ultimately kind of gave up and said, ‘Well, they’re doing great stuff outside the wire.’”²⁹

Impact of the Situation

To understand an individual’s unethical behavior, it is important to explore where the behavior took place, the situation in which the conduct occurred, and how the individual perceived and constructed the situation as an individual and within a group. The situation can be very powerful and have great influence on individual behavior. Palazzo explained “some situations are so powerful that they elicit a specific behavior in many people, independently of intentions, level of moral developments, values or reasoning.”³⁰ Indeed, leaders should always consider how the environment in which they operate could trigger unethical behavior without their intention.³¹

Philip Zimbardo, a social psychologist who has undertaken ground-breaking studies on the impact the situation has on individuals, stressed the key to understanding unethical behavior is not to consider immediately the individuals responsible as bad apples, which is a clearly biased approach. Often they might well be “good apples” operating in a powerful, very dangerous, highly stressful, “bad barrel.”³² In a situation permeated by strong, powerful forces, it is possible for individuals to lose their ability to see the difference between right and wrong and the application of such judgments.

The scout sniper platoon deployed and operated in a situation of great physical and psychological stress. The loss of several marines who were part of, or close to someone within, the very tight-knit sniper organization made an already demanding situation significantly worse. On June 3, Sergeant Mark Bradley, the assistant team leader for Team 2, was fatally injured by an IED. Corporal Steven Bradley, a sniper with Team 4, escorted his brother to Bethesda, where Mark died on June 16. On June 11, Lance Corporal Aaron Hill, a sniper with Team 3, accompanied the body of his brother—Lance Corporal Jason Hill, 3/4, who was killed by small arms fire just a few miles from where the scout sniper platoon was operating—back to the United States.

Role of Command Climate

The behavior of the marines on July 27 can only partially be explained as dispositional, situational, or a combination of both. The individual marines responsible for urinating on the dead enemies were distinguished servicemembers who had performed extremely well in previous deployments and had demonstrated their proficiency. Several US Marine units had deployed in similar or even worse environments, suffered a higher number of casualties and inflicted major blows on the Taliban over a number of years. Yet, marines in these situations did not engage in unethical or unprofessional behavior. Therefore, to understand

29 “Marine 4-Star General Offers Powerful Testimony in Defense of Accused Officer,” *Military Times*, October 17, 2013.

30 Palazzo, 329.

31 Bazerman and Tenbrunsel, 20.

32 Philip Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil* (New York: Random House, 2008); and Tenbrunsel, 20.

why this small unit behaved in such an unethical and unprofessional manner, the role of the system—the command climate—in failing to discourage the behavior must be considered.³³

According to Zimbardo, “systems matter the most” because they “provide the institutional support, authority, and resources that allow situations to operate as they do.”³⁴ Zimbardo emphasized the negative side of systems, yet when inspired and regulated by ethical and professionally sound principles, systems play an important role in preventing members of an organization operating in a stressful powerful situation to engage in unethical behavior. Moreover, leaders—whose responsibility, and commitment, is to make sure that systems are inspired by “norms, morals, and ethics”—might unintentionally become victims of a powerful situation. As a result they might compromise their ability to “regulate/control and shape” the system to be as effective as possible at interacting with the situation while providing strong motivations and clear guidance for individuals to behave ethically and professionally.

While conducting the Stanford Prison Experiment, Zimbardo even fell victim to this dangerous dynamic. The fictitious prison system he devised included his leadership role as the warden; however, the organization degraded from the first night shift. Hazing, initiated by a group of student-guards on a group of student-inmates, escalated in a matter of days.

Zimbardo acknowledged the student-inmates were quickly subjected to forms of punishment that made them suffer, which was unacceptable and unethical for a scientific experiment. Yet, he failed to see how quickly the ethical dimension of the experiment was degrading. Zimbardo was so absorbed by the experiment and the progression of behavior that he lost the ability to recognize the unethical and unprofessional conditions for both the student-guards and student-inmates. His ability to provide the system with positive inputs was compromised as he became distracted by the “encouraging” results of the experiment.

If Zimbardo and his team continued to focus on the amazing and unexpected evolution of human behavior, it is very unlikely that they would have stopped the experiment. Even when prison inmate 8612 had a nervous breakdown, when “things begin to turn sexual” during the fourth day, and when a student-inmate broke down every night thereafter, Zimbardo failed to comprehend the experiment was out of control.³⁵ Dr. Craig W. Haney, a researcher who participated in the experiment, remembers the break downs “were scary to see, were upsetting to us, they were unexpected, they were very clearly the real thing . . . we had not built in time to step back and to look at what was happening. . . . We were caught up in the events that were taking place.”³⁶

Despite indications that the experiment was corrupted by major unethical behavior that impacted the student-inmates, and despite

33 On page 234 of “Ethical Fading,” Tenbrunsel and Messick stress “one set of variables that leads to unethical behavior are the environmental or contextual cues that exist in an organization. Organizations should thus identify the structural, institutional, and systematic factors that promote unethical behavior.”

34 Zimbardo, 226.

35 “The Stanford Prison Experiment,” *Heroic Imagination*, August 20, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sZwfNs1pqG0>.

36 *Ibid.*

the fact that Zimbardo and his team should have known that such behavior was unacceptable for a scientific experiment, they carried on. Arguably this was a case of unintended unethicality. The experiment likely would have continued for the planned two-week period, possibly with terrible, yet unintended consequences if Christina Maslach, an assistant professor of psychology at University of California Berkeley and romantic acquaintance of Zimbardo, had not visited the “Stanford Prison” five days into the study.³⁷ She was shocked by the “madhouse,” but even more surprised that “Phil seemed to be so different from the man [she] thought [she] knew, someone who loves students and cares for them in ways that were already legendary at the university. He was not the same man that [she] had come to love.”³⁸

Zimbardo the experimenter successfully created a situation in which role-playing students behaved in ways that stimulated his scientific interest and validated several of his assumptions. Zimbardo the warden failed to regulate the system to prevent degradation. His main focus was on the experiment—his mission—which distracted him from his responsibility to protect the mental and physical wellbeing of the students. Zimbardo had fallen into the leader’s trap, and Maslach came to his rescue. After a tense argument, Zimbardo—alerted to the fact that he had become a victim of his own experiment—decided to call it off.

Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Doty and Major Joe Gelineau stressed the role played by command climate in preventing or encouraging unethical behavior: “Historically, there are examples of questionable command climates resulting in behaviors that are not in tune with our professional military ethic or a result of character-based leadership.”³⁹

According to a previous field manual, *Army Leadership*, “an organization’s climate is the way its members feel about their organization. Climate comes from people’s shared perceptions and attitudes, what they believe about the day-to-day functioning of their outfit. These things have a great impact on their motivation and the trust they feel for their team and their leaders.”⁴⁰ The role leaders play in shaping and maintaining a healthy command climate is pivotal: “The members’ collective sense of the organization—its organizational climate—is directly attributable to the leader’s values, skills, and actions. As an Army leader, you establish the climate of your organization, no matter how small it is or how large.”⁴¹ Doty and Gelineau rightly noted

Command climate is set at the battalion level. Although brigade-and-above commanders will establish a command climate, it is at the battalion level where the most profound and effective influence occurs. Battalion-level commanders . . . most closely “touch” and influence soldiers’ attitudes and behaviors. Counterinsurgency operations, which are often decentralized at company- and platoon-level operations, highlight the importance of battalion commanders establishing and enforcing—by their presence (“leadership by walking around”)—a moral/ethical command climate.

37 Philip G. Zimbardo, Christina Maslach, and Craig Haney, “Reflections on the Stanford Prison Experiment: Genesis, Transformations, Consequences,” in *Obedience to Authority: Current Perspectives on the Milgram Paradigm*, ed. Thomas Blass (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000), 215.

38 *Ibid.*, 216–17.

39 LTC Joseph Doty and MAJ Joe Gelineau, “Command Climate,” *Army* 58, no. 7 (July 2008): 22.

40 Headquarters, US Department of the Army, *Army Leadership*, Field Manual 22-100 (Washington, DC: HQDA, 1999), 3-12.

41 *Ibid.*

Company commanders and platoon leaders are at the execution level of the battalion commander's command climate. . . . Most importantly, if a battalion level commander does *not* set and enforce a command climate, subclimates *will* be established by leaders in the unit [emphasis by the author]. Subordinate leaders within the unit with referent and expert power (charisma) will establish subcultures that may or may not be what the unit commander desires. Setting a moral/ethical command climate must be an intentional process by commanders and is a requirement to maintain the moral high ground in this era of persistent conflict.⁴²

The initiatives taken by 3/2's commanding officer before the deployment, and in particular the design and implementation of the ethics training program focused on the professional and moral actions of small unit leaders, indicated a strong commitment to a healthy command climate. Yet after the battalion deployed to Afghanistan, the overall strength of the command climate eroded, probably unintentionally and over a number of months. The *Command Investigation into the Alleged Desecration of Corpses by U.S. Marines in Afghanistan* noted a "high turnover rate in the chain of command. Turnover of key leadership billets within Kilo Company, immediately before and during deployment in Afghanistan, contributed to an environment where necessary discipline standards were lacking. Team 4, Scout Sniper Platoon 3/2 operated from PB 7171, considered to be the base with the worst discipline standard in [Regimental Combat Team]-8's area of operations."⁴³ The investigation also noted

Kilo Company discipline issues ranged from the state of police to accountability. Specifically, PB 7171 was found to have: (1) marines not wearing [personal protective equipment], in dirty uniforms, without haircuts, and not shaving; (2) unsanitary conditions and ammunition on the deck; (3) insufficient patrol orders being issued, fighting positions without range cards or identified primary directions of fire, and marines not conducting appropriate drills and inspections.⁴⁴

These concerns were brought to the attention of the 3/2 leadership while division and marine expeditionary force leaders praised body counts, open roads, and increased market activity to validate the success of the surge. The tactical success gave the command a sense that everything was under control. Yet, General John F. Kelly stressed that 3/2 was "loose in the way it did business" and "a lot of people doing great things but general confusion in how people were organized for combat."⁴⁵

Consequences of a Slippery Slope

Often, ethical and professional blunders such as the urination incident are viewed and treated as isolated events. Indeed, at this time there is no known evidence of similar behavior from other Marine units who deployed in Afghanistan. All of those units fought a tough enemy while displaying honorable behavior. Yet, the urination incident, although specific to the unit, is not isolated: it belongs to a broader context.

42 Ibid., 24.

43 MCCDC, *Command Investigation*, 53–54.

44 Ibid., 24

45 "Marine 4-Star."

For the scout sniper platoon, it is quite clear that many indicators of a healthy system—the unit culture, discipline, obedience, and cohesion of the command climate—were compromised. It also appears that the frame—the filter through which the scout snipers perceived their situation—had become particularly rigid. They had moved into an “us-them” frame, in which “us” were only the members of the platoon and “them” were not only the enemy but also fellow marines who did not approve of the snipers’ conduct. In his book, Chamblin often was less than pleased, and at times very frustrated, with anyone who tried to address the scout sniper discipline issues and who disapproved of their behavior.⁴⁶

Thus, under a rigid frame and a deteriorated unit subclimate, urinating on the dead enemy bodies likely revealed more about the overall state of the platoon rather than a momentary lapse of judgment (for which many of the involved marines have yet to show any sign of remorse). The incident indicated the unit’s command climate had reached a dangerous level and worse behavior might have been very likely. The unit’s constant transgressions and breach in discipline were not properly addressed and were ultimately tolerated by the chain of command. Though likely unintentional, this dynamic created a dangerous slippery slope.

For a number of reasons, leaders might not enforce a unit’s standards. Leaders might want to give their subordinates a break, they might not want to be perceived as too tough, and perhaps, they might even sympathize with perceptions of micromanagement. Such approaches hide dangerous dynamics and make it difficult to see more serious unit infractions.

Lieutenant General William R. Peers, the senior Army officer who investigated the My Lai incident, provided much wisdom and enlightening reflections on the role leaders play in preventing war crimes, which retain great validity today. Some of Peer’s leadership requirements for a counterinsurgency environment, include:

A commander must be constantly alert to changes in the attitude and temperament of his men and the units to which they belong. Ground combat in a counterinsurgency environment may develop frustration and bitterness which manifest themselves in acts quite apart from that which would normally be expected. Accordingly, commanders must be quick to spot such changes and to take appropriate corrective action.⁴⁷

Bazerman and Tenbrunsel emphasized “if we find minor infractions acceptable, research suggests, we are likely to accept increasingly major infractions as long as each violation is only incrementally more serious than the preceding one.”⁴⁸ Kelly clearly identified such an issue: “It’s a slippery slope to urinating on corpses, to raping women, to murdering kids.”⁴⁹ This analysis is a strong professional reminder of how dangerous

⁴⁶ In the final pages of his book, Chamblin wrote that after the incident had been revealed “the only group of people that stood by my men and me, was our fellow scout/snipers, a Brotherhood of shared pain. These men went out of their way to help and defend us, with one exception, Sergeant Major Michael [sic] Barrett, then Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps. Sergeant Major Barrett was a former Scout/ Sniper Instructor and as it turns out, Uncle Tom extraordinaire! What a piece of shit” (212).

⁴⁷ William R. Peers, *The My Lai Inquiry* (New York: Norton, 1979), 248.

⁴⁸ Bazerman and Tenbrunsel, “Ethical Breakdowns,” 63.

⁴⁹ “Marine 4-Star.”

and costly tolerating behavior that gradually departs from accepted standards can be. If the unit deployment had been longer than seven months, it is possible the marines would not have engaged in the type of war crimes Kelly mentioned. Yet it is also true that the unit would have been more inclined to engage in such behaviors than other units with a strong command climate.

Conclusions

The urination incident is an extremely insightful case that provides valuable understanding on why members of an organization might engage in unethical and unprofessional behavior and the pivotal role that the command climate plays in determining such a behavior.

Before the deployment to Afghanistan, the marines of the 3/2 scout sniper platoon certainly would have been considered above average, but more likely outstanding. They had the experience, the time-in-service, the commitment, and the desire to serve that are typical of solid marines. The situation into which the unit deployed was extremely powerful, yet it was no different from the situation in which thousands of other marines operated ethically and professionally.

Notably, the battalion commander was genuinely committed to preparing his marines for the difficult ethical challenges of a counterinsurgency environment. He wanted his marines to be able to make sound ethical choices while operating among civilians. In many respects, Dixon was an innovative thinker who invested a significant amount of time in ethics instruction when other commanders would have valued other areas of tactical training.

Yet, despite the best of intentions, 3/2's leaders became distracted by the achievements of the scout sniper platoon as they became associated with the overall success of the battalion. This mindset probably detracted from the necessity of enforcing and maintaining sound marine standards with the scout sniper platoon.

Commanders might find reprimanding a supporting unit or organization uncomfortable, and to a certain extent challenging, especially when such a unit is instrumental to the success of the larger organization. Leaders might become inclined to condone and accept minor infractions of the standard, which are mistakenly perceived as harmless, for fear of compromising the enthusiasm of a successful unit. The danger is for leaders to compliment immediate, visible, positive results that enable the success of the entire organization while underestimating the long-term, latent, negative consequences of unethical and unprofessional behavior within supporting units. Allowing the command climate to depart gradually from institutional standards can incite a dangerous process whose outcome is the slippery slope. As then-Commandant of the Marine Corps General James F. Amos wrote: "There is a disturbingly frequent correlation between Marines who act poorly and units with poor climate."⁵⁰

Our analysis of the 3/2 scout sniper platoon indicates the command climate plays an important, if not the most important, role in preventing unethical and unprofessional behavior. The command climate is like

50 General James Amos, white letter, "Command Climate," May 9, 2013, Washington, DC.

a double-edged sword: it has the potential to discourage and prevent unethical and unprofessional behavior, or indeed, it might encourage unethical and unprofessional behavior. Clearly, there might be cases in which units with a strong command climate might experience members engaging in unethical and unprofessional behavior; conversely, units with a weak or degraded command climate might experience a difficult deployment without instances of inappropriate behavior.

What should be acknowledged, however, is that units with a resilient command climate will be better prepared to deal with stressful deployments and situations while also being significantly less likely to have members of the organization engaging in unethical behavior. The command climate serves as a filter between the situation and the individual and is regulated by organizational leaders; the more effective the filter is, the better the behavior of the individuals.

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