




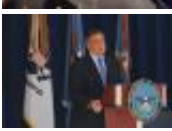


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Ethics Can Be Taught

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By A. Edward Major, Colonel Lee DeRemer, U.S. Air Force (Retired), and Lieutenant Colonel David G. Bolgiano, U.S. Air Force (Retired)

Strategic leaders are made, not born—and a good place to train solid moral and ethical officers is the Senior Service College system.

In a May 2011 article in *Army Times*, Sergeant Ashley Moye, a 13-year Army veteran, wrote, “We have tenets of leadership, leading by example, knowing your soldiers, knowing your jobs, doing the right things and setting the example for your soldiers. Today, those things are not done. Everybody gets the impression that leadership is a trait we all possess. But it’s taught, and we’re not being taught properly.”

Moye is not the only soldier to recognize that servant leaders are much better than self-serving leaders. General Martin E. Dempsey, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has also emphasized the need for developing senior leaders with a strong ethical compass to better help them navigate the murky waters of strategic leadership.

The challenges ahead of us in the 21st-century security environment mandate that we reinvigorate our commitment to the development of strategic leaders. We owe it to the nation to “build a bench” of leaders for tomorrow who can operate at the highest levels of our government.

We need to be ready to add to the knowledge, skills, and attributes of our brilliant tactical leaders and prepare them to operate at the strategic level. Possessed of a strong personal and professional ethic, strategic leaders must be able to navigate successfully in ethical “gray zones,” where absolutes may be elusive. ¹

General Dempsey connects the gray zones of personal ethics to professional competence in his call to action. But how are ethics taught for such an amorphous subject? Some contend that this topic is a personal matter and that, in teaching

it, we are intruding on soldiers' privacy and right to self-determination. Ironically, some of these people are ethics professors. We disagree and believe it is possible to meet the general's challenge—at any level of professional education. An ethics education is well worth the time and money, for the reasons we offer here.

A Higher Standard

Putting these concerns in simple terms, the honor code at the U.S. Military Academy states, "A cadet will not lie, cheat, steal, or tolerate those who do." This may be enough for an officer to successfully navigate at command levels all the way to brigade command, but more study and reflection are needed at the succeeding levels of one's career.

Major General Gregg F. Martin, president of National Defense University and former commandant of the U.S. Army War College, seconds Dempsey's admonition. In his opening note to the informational booklet "U.S. Army War College: Developing, Inspiring, Serving Strategic Leaders," he states that "refining ethical decision-making" is essential to the holistic development of senior military officers that is the objective of the Army War College. The strategic leader cultivates "values-based, ethical climates" to be "ready to make decisions in a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous, environment."²

Some may argue that if, after 20 years of service, an officer does not have his basic moral compass in order, then no amount of education or training can correct it. Even if true, this assertion misses the point. First, the services should identify and remove people who have made it through two decades with a flawed understanding of the role of ethics in the life of a professional. The failure of a few should not prevent good leaders from being educated with the expectation that they can become even better. We advocate for continued and expanded ethics education by encouraging and equipping senior officers to better reflect on what virtuous and effective leadership looks like at the strategic level.

Instilling Virtues

Leadership instruction necessarily involves the teaching of virtues. Alexandre Havard, in his book, *Virtuous Leadership—An Agenda for Personal Excellence*, argues that virtues "are part and parcel of [professional competence] and substantially so." Professional competence implies the application of technical knowledge to some "fruitful purpose."³ The officer-students in the Senior Service College (SSC) system have already proved their technical competence. They attend SSCs specifically to study strategy and leadership to raise their competence to new levels.

The United States requires virtuous senior officers whose decisions reflect well on their profession and inspire trust and confidence in their countrymen. Preparation and background for the challenges of general officership entails education. As Havard writes, "Virtues are qualities of the mind . . . that are acquired through repetition. Leaders either strive to grow in virtue . . . or they are not leaders."⁴ Because SSC students are transitioning from tactical to operational and strategic leadership and staff positions, the SSCs are the most obvious and propitious avenues for such education.

Recently some authors have criticized the structure and even the necessity of the military's SSC system. They charge that the SSC curriculum is neither academically rigorous nor effective in teaching students how to think versus what to think. Air War College professor Daniel J. Hughes writes:

By and large, there are no real academic standards, a fact to which new professors quietly object but which they, like the older hands, eventually accept with resignation tempered with dark humor. To use an old cliché, students and colonels have a tendency to stress what they need to know in an immediately practical sense, while the professors are more interested in how to think about issues of policy, strategy and so forth.⁵

Professor Richard H. Kohn of the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, is similarly direct:

Related to these strategic and political failures are possible moral deficiencies among the officer corps, which have arisen in the last few years. At its heart is a growing careerism that has led to micromanagement from above and a sense that any defect will derail a career, which in turn leads to risk aversion and sometimes to cover-ups, avoidance of responsibility, and other behaviors that harm the ability of the armed forces to succeed in battle.⁶

Kohn, however, ranks moral deficiencies third behind a lack of intellectual rigor and political savvy. While his arguments are sound, the lack of moral structure and virtuous leadership may be the preeminent factor driving the other two problems. Moreover, the recent ethical scandals at the senior-most levels of military leadership belie Kohn's ranking of these issues.

Strengthen the Curriculum

While some critiques of the SSC curricula often reflect a misunderstanding of the diverse schools' roles and missions (as well as of military culture), they nevertheless deserve our attention. We suggest a reconsideration of two items: ethical reasoning and critical thinking. The U.S. Army War College's core curriculum contains only six hours dedicated to teaching ethical reasoning and philosophy. Additional time in the curriculum is allotted to applying these foundational lessons in the context of senior leader responsibilities, but this is not sufficient.

One shortcoming in leadership development is in the field of ethics, a deficiency often caused by the convenient substitution of legal briefings by Judge Advocate General (JAG) officers both at the installation and staff levels. The law is never a substitute for ethics, and we do a great disservice when our education methodology implies or demonstrates that we fail to understand this nuance. Moreover, an act is not ethical just because it's legal. As Plato stated in *The Republic* when he described the ideal leader or philosopher-king:

I need no longer hesitate to say that we must make our guardians philosophers. The necessary combination of qualities is extremely rare. Our test must be thorough, for the soul must be trained up by the pursuit of all kinds of knowledge to the capacity for the pursuit of the highest— *higher than justice and wisdom* —the idea of the good. (Emphasis added.)

The legal system is often a regressive review of events that have already occurred. It is meant to demarcate unacceptable behavior and punish those who do not conform to its standards. The law is rarely an inspiration or command philosophy, such as SSCs aspire to offer in training our country's future general officers. Sadly, too many senior leaders now boast that they never make a decision without first consulting their judge advocate. The purpose of the SSC education is to look forward and prepare for future challenges and conflict resolution. Therefore, the teaching of ethics must be seen as a means to reinforce our nation and our profession through reflection, application, and case studies of values that we treasure as Americans.

In their article, "The Army's Professional Military Ethic in an Era of Persistent Conflict," Don M. Snider, Paul Oh, and Kevin Toner argue that there are two types of moral foundations in the Army ethic: institutional and individual. ²They contend that moral teaching is a vital part of establishing an ethic for soldiers and the moral/individual foundation is essential to the effectiveness of the Army (and broadly for the military) as directed under Army Field Manual 1. These foundations are requisite, but individual moral training is essential for those in strategic decision-making roles.

Some claim that the SSCs may teach institutional ethical values, but not individual ethics, which would represent a constitutional invasion of privacy and a personal intrusion. Neither the law nor common sense supports such an argument. Taken to its logical end, this argument would have to deny the instruction of both individual and institutional ethical values, since the institutions that frame our conduct through culture, climate, and policy necessarily will have an intrusive effect on individuals. Teaching anything else becomes moral relativism. Better to call nonsense what it is and move forward responsibly.

SSCs can cultivate intuition and understanding through ethical education, which the best way to teach a moral set of values. It might fall out of vogue, but it never loses relevance. Using the Army as an example, "its evolving expert knowledge in the moral-ethical domain is what allows the profession to develop individual professionals—soldiers and their leaders—to fight battles and campaigns 'effectively and rightly,' as expected by the client the profession serves."

Navigating the Gray Areas

The challenges of our times also suggest the need for ethical education. Persistent, low-level conflicts that often more resemble police actions than combat, such as our current engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan, place tremendous demands on individual soldiers and their understanding of ethics.

Theories of moral development help explain how individuals process such conflicts and their capacities for doing so. Much of this analysis focuses on moral quandaries between personal values, such as “fight-or-flight” reactions that arise during stressful situations, which might include combat or high-stress command or staff billets. (It is not unheard-of, for example, for a senior leader to ignore an impossibly complex decision rather than grapple with it: consider the lack of Phase IV planning for the invasion of Iraq.)

A theme that arises in these studies is that the capacity to make ethical decisions requires moral courage and the efficacy to carry them out. Much of this is won by identifying with the institutional values of the armed services and the institutional reinforcement of these values by aligning its actions with its statements. But the teaching cannot end there. To act on these values, the individual must develop the sufficient will to convey that value into action.

Ethical education assists with the maturation and moral engagement of a senior officer’s understanding of dilemmas and complexity of understanding, which he and those under his charge will encounter when serving in the field.

The moral resolutions we wish to encourage are made only where the service members possess an innate sense of ethics. Ethical education at the SSCs can be designed to prepare senior officers to act in a manner consistent with our shared American values and the responsibilities of their office. Following Major General Martin’s precept that ethical education is essential for development of senior officers, the SSCs should seize the opportunity to improve the depth and breadth of the ethics education their students receive.

As leaders rise in responsibility, expand their scope of power, and engage a faster and increasingly complex world, the challenge gets harder. SSC curriculum can do a better job of preparing our officers for that world. Here are some options:

- Add more philosophy to the SSCs’ core curriculum. There is a reason Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, and others are the foundations of what we once called the classics of Western civilization: They have stood the test of time. They’re still relevant. Add to Western philosophy the works of Eastern and south Asian philosophers, and we can build a study of the history of ideas that can enrich American and international SSC students’ experience with a global and cross-cultural exploration of the enduring themes of civilization.
- Inventory our case studies to the core SSC curricula with the express purpose of exploring ethical dilemmas that senior military leaders faced. Develop case studies to facilitate seminar discussions on key topics for which our courses have gaps. History is replete with scenarios we can apply to any of the core course in any of the nations’ SSCs.
- Add an elective on philosophy. Most members of the military profession will be pleasantly surprised to see how much interest they now have in a course that so many disliked when they were a generation younger.
- Develop a Great Books curriculum alternative that provides select students the opportunity to revisit the literature that has informed and challenged leaders and thinkers for centuries. Offer it during a significant portion of the academic year with an exception from some of the otherwise required curriculum objectives.
- Offer a recurring series of brown-bag lunches to interested students and faculty with the purpose of building a foundation of the philosophy of ethics and building on that philosophy with a series of case studies for dialogue. This has already been especially effective in some SSCs.

Our nation invests heavily in its military leaders, often with admirable results. Having been trusted so deeply, we should constantly refine our curricula to prepare these senior leaders to the best of our ability. The opportunity of ten months in-resident education is the envy of every public and private organization. The challenge to the SSC officer will include, more than anything else, the ability to apply judgment and perspective to a wide array of national security tasks. Unfortunately, the SSCs are currently spending more time on learning the tasks and less time on developing judgment, perspective, and the ethical development of senior leaders.

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1. GEN Martin E. Dempsey, “Building Critical Thinkers,” *Armed Forces Journal* , February 2011.
 2. MG Gregg F. Martin, “U.S. Army War College: Developing, Inspiring, Serving Strategic Leaders,” 2011, U.S. Army War College publication, 2.
 3. Alexandre Havard, *Virtuous Leadership: An Agenda for Personal Excellence* , New York: Scepter Publishers, 2007, xvii.

4. Ibid., xvi, xiv.

5. Daniel J. Hughes, "Professors in the Colonels' World," *Military Culture and Education*, Chapter 10, Douglas Higbee, Editor (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing), 2010.

6. Richard H. Kohn, "Tarnished Brass: Is the U.S. Military Profession in Decline?" *Army History*, Winter 2011, 27.

7. Don M. Snider, Paul Oh, and Kevin Toner, "The Army's Professional Military Ethic in an Era of Persistent Conflict," Strategic Studies Institute, Professional Military Ethics Monograph Series, October 2009, 11.

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