

Ethics Education of Military Leaders

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To educate a man in mind and not in morals is to educate a menace to society.

—Theodore Roosevelt

EXPANDING THE ETHICS EDUCATION of senior military leaders is critical to meeting the demands of current hostilities and the challenge of preserving the trust of the public and allies.¹ To maintain this elusive trust, leaders must keenly understand the tension inherent in completing martial missions both adroitly and ethically. Understanding of the subtlety of these issues reminds us of the pervasive relevance of ethics education. Neither the officer corps nor the public will tolerate a military that does not successfully resolve this tension, and neither will accept a lower standard of conduct. This article explores why the senior service colleges (SSCs), the command and staff colleges, and associated military colleges of the United States must provide ethics education to senior leaders so they may lead effectively at the strategic level. Planning expansion of their ethics curricula must be a priority as the Department of Defense is poised to refine common course content.

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Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, speaks to military students and interagency partners at the U.S. Army War College, 21 September 2012. (DOD, Air Force Master Sgt. Chuck Marsh)

If any curriculum should include ethics, it is that of the senior U.S. and partner-nation military leaders at the SSCs for reasons of the foundational importance of ethics itself, as well as the following specific grounds:

- First, the current environment of persistent conflict of ever-increasing lethality and the security forces deployed to defend against it.
- Second, the unique reach of SSC programs to senior military leaders of the United States and its international partners, the ability of those leaders to communicate with the policy makers of their home countries, and their ability to build trust through mutual understanding of ethical conduct.²

Foundational Arguments

Tension exists between the efficient accomplishment of missions and conformity with fundamental social values, and between personal morality and that of the military profession. What is the “right” thing to do? Ethics mediates this constant tension; choices often must be made between imperfect solutions when there is no time for the luxury of reflection. Ethics education edifies soldiers (*soldier*, in this discussion, refers to all military personnel) who are not ethics specialists, inducing them to develop professionalism, self-control, and “moral intuition.”³

Individual leaders exercise discretionary judgment many times a day, making decisions requiring high moral distinction. Overcoming the fear to act, making ethical decisions, and having the internal fortitude to take action decisively count when the everyday activity of the military profession wields the power of life and death. It follows that the moral character of individual students requires advancement during their professional development at the SSCs so they develop the capability to act ethically when events demand.⁴ Moving moral sensitivity to the point where the individual leader possesses the courage to act upon it is preemptory.⁵ This calls for the enhancement of the leader’s “self-sustaining capacity to be a moral actor [even] in the absence of social sanctions or reinforcements.”⁶ The objective of the SSCs is to influence students to internalize ethics so they wield their ordained power in a legal and ethical manner.

British statesman and writer John Morley said, “No man can climb out beyond the limitations of

his own character.”⁷ The demand therefore follows for forearming students with a predisposition for ethical decision making by enhancing their ability to recognize and process ethical dilemmas and execute prudent behavior in response to them.⁸ The development of ethical habits of mind is essential to equip the individual leader to react professionally to rapidly changing technology and tactics and to foster trust within military organizations and alliances with partner forces.⁹ Ethics is a cornerstone of honorable service and esprit de corps, and a defense against brutalization.¹⁰

Ethics Educates the “Why”

Ethics provides the essential “why,” the sense, to our rules. Understanding why provides the motivation to adopt rules, including those that guide ethical direction. Ethics education introduces students to potential issues, alerts them to issues they may not have considered, and provides direction as to how issues should be confronted. While it cannot present all possibilities, ethics education offers a methodology for dealing with ethical challenges when encountered. The more leaders understand, the more they integrate teachings into their own self-guidance system and avoid the mistakes of others. An ethical foundation supports risk management, so critical to both the exercise of foreign policy and effective prosecution of missions.

To provide ethics education is to appreciate that the behavior of soldiers begins with the environment created by their leaders. There is no better way to inculcate ethics in organizations than through the education of their leaders. Even their minor decisions are closely observed and treated as precedent, reverberating down the chain of command. In military organizations in particular, the more senior the commander, the wider the influence exerted and its resulting perversion, should the influence be flawed. Military authority exerts tremendous power on an individual’s ethical perception, which often propagates the lure of being close to power. There is the tendency to get into lock-step with what the inner circle, the focus of power, is doing, for the psychological need to become part of the in-group and also for career advancement.¹¹ This is not just the action of a young officer scrambling for recognition, but also senior military officers who seek the recognition of national politicians or simply

become overly impressed with the power that they wield. This very human condition must be addressed at the SSCs to alert students to these lures and how they may skew their judgment.

While the best combat planning in ideal circumstances is susceptible to miscalculation, escalation, mission creep, and unintended consequences, the irregular warfare typical of the current fight compounds the amorphous challenges for leaders, challenges which cannot be fully foreseen.¹² Compounding the challenge to the military is the demand to do more with less due to shrinking budgets—that is, to be more efficient while remaining effective. How does the leader cope with these increasing complexities while maintaining the trust of both soldiers and the public? Such challenges call for a strong moral compass, understood by leaders in cooperation with allies to help maintain the balance between completing missions efficiently and ethically.¹³

There is good reason for leaders to impose an ethical working environment on their commands.

Several recent surveys reveal that a vast majority of business employees preferred working for companies with ethical business practices and were even prepared to accept less compensation. Further, it was decisively found that the most effective workers are those who feel they are not just doing a job but are performing something that reflects who they are. They work harder and stay longer in their positions.¹⁴ It is the objective of leaders to attract and retain this kind of motivated and dedicated soldier to their command. An effective ethical platform for a leader's command will attract those that identify with it.

The speed of Internet news capabilities also creates its challenges. Decisions must be made with new immediacy. Moreover, much so-called news is not filtered through responsible editorial authority but is immediately broadcast over the Internet, not fact-checked, possibly misleading, or even staged. An effective ethical environment discourages soldiers from paying attention to such sources.



The National Defense University 2011-2012 academic year kicked off with a convocation ceremony for students and faculty. The ceremony took place on the front steps of Roosevelt Hall, home of the National War College. (DOD, Katie Lewis, James Lewis, and Mark Meleski)

Professional Education Sought by Students

Conversely, from the students' perspective, serving in the profession of arms connotes commitment to the ethical standards of their profession and a striving for their mastery.¹⁵ Professions, by definition, license and continually train their members, especially their senior officers and members, and sanction behavior determined unprofessional or illegal. By this method, professions enable and motivate their members to serve appropriately in the discharge of their duty. In the leaders' perceiving themselves responsible to the larger community and duly conforming their actions to this responsibility, they retain societal trust.

The military is a profession that trains, educates, and licenses its members. Officers have much required pre- and post-commissioning training and education, interim training and studies, and professional military education throughout their careers. Promotions, awards, oaths, assignments, and periodic evaluations also award soldiers and certify them as qualified within their profession. The educational piece includes the SSCs, charged with senior leader education and is necessary to maintain expertise of the military profession. The SSCs influence policy and education at institutions well beyond their walls.

DOD Direction

The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, recently stated at The National Defense University, "For the first time, our competence and character are being evaluated by experts and pundits while we fight . . . There will be an ever-increasing expectation of servicewomen and men to achieve that intricate balance of high character and high competence."¹⁶ His words were more than aspirational: Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel had previously directed Gen. Dempsey to review ethics education to better inculcate "a culture of value-based decision making and stewardship of general and flag officers and their staffs."¹⁷ Recently, the Joint Chiefs duly reviewed some of the ethical violations of senior leaders. They are drafting recommendations to avoid lapses in critical judgment.¹⁸ Their preliminary findings included that "we need to . . . reinforce that [ethics] training more frequently in an officer's career." The chairman was charged with a long-term effort to make and implement recommendations in consultation with the secretary of defense.¹⁹ These efforts remain ongoing.

Providing ethics education is to accept the burden imposed by Gen. Dempsey and echoed by the directives of the Strategic Landpower Task Force, to develop ethical senior leaders who "exercise moral nerve and restraint" and to "develop mutual trust and understanding." The responsibility of providing ethics education falls on the SSCs because they possess the expertise. Ethics education is a thoroughfare for SSCs to influence leaders' character around the globe with reverberating effect.

In stewardship, the SSCs can either prepare their own curriculum now or await the imposition of a system designed elsewhere.²⁰ It is best to be ahead of the curve by anticipating change, actively influencing the debate, and guiding policy development and implementation.

Ever-Increasing Lethality Alters the Ethical Equation

The ever-increasing lethality of terrorism and the force deployed to combat it commands our urgent attention. These permutations drive modifications to U.S. and international security policies and changes to ethical analysis. Ethical violations mean that people die, and the resulting effects of bad press, including lawfare (referring to using international law and litigation to achieve a military advantage), entail long-term consequences.²¹ Even after the U.S. Army condemned its soldiers' actions at Abu Ghraib prison, there was no way to prevent the public shame. It became an instant public spectacle, sullying the efforts of the U.S. and allied governments throughout much of the Near East. The sudden loss of the trust, so diligently constructed, was regained only at great expense and after much time. The very integrity and independence of the profession of arms was shaken.

Such incidents point out why ethics should be proactively taught. The offending officers and soldiers were all considered thoroughly trained and knew better, yet their training was insufficient. Some deeper thinking can prevent such violations in the future and, together with broader training, the SSCs may devise better educational systems for doing so. Post-disaster efforts are reactive and ineffective, even after the expenditure of vast amounts of money, changes of procedure, and the healing passage of time, yet further attention to ethics may subvert these problems before they occur.

Professional Ethics

Effective professions police and hold their members accountable, and there is good reason for doing so. When a profession hangs its own violators from the yardarm, the punishment is almost always regarded as just propitiation. It serves as sufficient retribution and satisfies public demands for corrective measures. Further, if a profession effectively polices itself, it controls much of the criteria by which its members are judged and punished. As long as this authority is not abused, the profession is trusted to self-regulate. Professions must labor to maintain this trust, as it is earned every day, and even 99% on that test is a failure! The misconduct of a few paints the entire profession. A public press and jury cannot be expected to fully understand context, nor will it take the time to discover the facts before pointing an accusing finger.

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The United States does not espouse any particular religion, but powerfully manifests an ethical ethos to be a merciful peacemaker through its military action.²² We seek peace through positive action and reconciliation for the oppressed. It is our national ethical premise to have abandoned the effort to meet our needs through the destruction of our enemies; this promise imparts great ethical power to our actions.

Reach of SSC Programs to Senior Leaders

The second basis for teaching ethics at the SSCs highlights their unique reach to U.S. and international partner senior military leaders and SSC students' access to the senior policy makers of their countries. This represents a powerful influence through

the modeling of their ethical leadership. If ethics programs are effective, the SSCs can build trust through mutual understanding of ethical conduct within the United States and between the United States and its partners throughout the world. To be effective, government and military relations require a high level of trust. The call to shared ethical standards seeks effective understanding and trust in our own civil-military relations as well as those of the partner nations' military and security forces with which we serve. A common understanding will assist in overcoming disparate and often contradictory moral structures and laws. While it is absurd to believe worldwide agreement may be constructed during our lifetimes, the SSCs, more than any other institution, may exert a powerful influence. SSC students possess the ability to think independently and the authority to influence policy and change behavior, with influence over large geographic areas. Their professional identity, enhanced through ethics instruction, has wide-reaching utility. SSCs present the opportunity to engender a common vocabulary and trust among partners that is so essential to building effective alliances.

If the SSCs do their jobs well, their graduates will effect change within their nations and assist in the building of reliable alliances among nations. Their international students will go forth as models of behavior, with trust in America's commitment to ethical action. Recent conflicts have required broad alliances to effectively counter security threats. With the diminishing defense budgets of most nations around the world, alliances have more than ever become necessities, fiscal as well as political.

Conclusion

Ethics is not mere abstraction, but rather an integral component of a leader's character. Leaders do not serve either their profession or country without ethics as their guiding light.

To equip an expanded ethics program at the SSCs will require careful planning to avoid offering a course that distracts from other more didactic courses (as did my ethics course in law school). To be effective, it must walk the line between philosophy and anecdotes and avoid the perils of irrelevance. It must develop critical thinking. It is not enough just to teach principles and rules; ethics education must delve into soldiers' service careers to find the challenges

they face. Students, for example, may personalize their teaching to place it into a context where they see issues as they relate to themselves. They may be encouraged to discuss or write about ethical violations they have witnessed and describe how they may have been better handled.

Teaching must stress the importance of context and circumstances. To illustrate the complexity of decisions, the SSCs should look to the challenges actually confronted by soldiers and security personnel. Such study would avoid the dreamy philosophizing inimical to many students. Challenges provided must be realistic and have applicability to the students' experiences so that the lessons may be internalized.²³ The professors must guard against treatment of their examples as anecdotal personal stories and thus inapplicable. My own reaction to most law school ethics course examples was, "Oh, I would never do that," or "How could he do that?" Only convincing, real-world experience brought appreciation that the examples really can and do happen!

An ethical character requires nurture and incubation. A story attributed to President James A. Garfield, when

he was a university president, is illustrative: A young entering student reviews the curriculum and decides that he wishes to get through in less than the prescribed four-year program and requests the abbreviated program. President Garfield replies, "You may take the short course; it all depends on what you wish to make of yourself. When God makes an oak, it takes 100 years, but He only takes two months to make a squash."

The point in teaching senior leaders is to inform them of issues and build ethical instincts that serve in the many amorphous situations they may encounter. The desired end state of teaching at the SSCs is to develop capacity in its students to apply their ethics education in an operational environment. Ethical actions build self-confidence in leaders, and their self-confidence helps generate trust in both their soldiers and the partners that work with them. The appreciation of ethical action is an inspiration for the building of trust because *actions speak louder than words*. There is already a richness of ethical issues to correct and, as Theodore Roosevelt warned, we must avoid educating social menaces, especially in the military profession. **MR**

NOTES

1. Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 1, *The Army*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office [GPO], 17 September 2012), chapter 2. <http://armypubs.army.mil/doctrine/DR_pubs/dr_a/pdf/adp1.pdf>; Raymond T. Odierno, "38th Chief of Staff of the Army Marching Orders: America's Force of Decisive Action," January 2012, <<http://usarmy.vo.llnwd.net/e2/c/downloads/232478.pdf>>; and draft Army white paper "The Profession of Arms, 8 December 2010, <<http://www.benning.army.mil/armor/content/PDF/Profession%20of%20Arms%20White%20Paper%208%20Dec%2010.pdf>>. The terms "moral" and "ethical" are used interchangeably herein. The term "military leader" is used to include civilian military and other civilian students of the SSCs.

2. Although we cannot hope to form a universal code of ethical conduct, even if one were desirable, much may be gained through a closer understanding among partners.

3. Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 1, *The Army Profession* (Washington, DC.: GPO, 14 June 2013), para. 1-3 et seq. <http://armypubs.army.mil/doctrine/DR_pubs/dr_a/pdf/adrp1.pdf>. The phrase "moral intuition" is from *An Army White Paper: The Profession of Arms*, 14.

4. Don M. Snider, communication with the author, 1 August 2013.

5. Sean T. Hannah and Patrick J. Sweeney, "Frameworks of Moral Development and the West Point Experience: Building Leaders of Character for the Army and the Nation," from *Forging the Warrior's Character: Moral Precepts from the Cadet Prayer*, Don M. Snider and Lloyd J. Matthews, eds. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2007), 127, citing USMA Circular 1-101, *Cadet Leader Development System*, 2002.

6. *Ibid.*, 158.

7. Viscount John Morley, who attributed the quote to Robespierre. See also John Locke, "No man's knowledge here can go beyond his experience."

8. Hannah and Sweeney, 145-46.

9. Aristotle, "The moral virtues, then, are produced in us neither by nature nor against nature. Nature, indeed, prepares in us the ground for their reception, but their complete formation is the product of habit," <<http://www.quotesandsayings.com/quotes/aristotle/>>; and Plato, *The Republic*, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Cairns Huntington (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), 620.

10. See A Edward Major, Lee DeRemer, and David Bolgiano, "Ethics Can Be Taught," *Proceedings Magazine*, December 2012.

11. C.S. Lewis, "The Inner Ring," Memorial Lecture at King's College, University of London, 1944; and Leonard Wong, conversation with the author, 7 August 2013.

12. A Edward Major, "Law and Ethics in Command Decision Making," *Military Review* (May-June 2012): 64-69.

13. Odierno draft white paper, "The Profession of Arms," 8-9. I use the term "efficiently" to mean: expertly, with minimum loss of life, timely, and least expensively.

14. C.B. Bhattacharya, Sankar Sen, and Daniel Korschun, *Leveraging Corporate Responsibility: The Stakeholder Approach to Maximizing Business and Social Value* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 15 September 2011).

15. Leonard Wong, and Don M. Snider, "Strategic Leadership of the Army Profession," in *The Future of the Army Profession* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005), 603; Martin L. Cook and Henrik Syse, "What Should We Mean by 'Military Ethics,'" *Journal of Military Ethics* (5 July 2010).

16. Amaani Lyle, "Chairman Champions Character in Graduation Address," 13 June 2013, American Forces Press Service, <<http://www.defense.gov/News/NewsArticle.aspx?ID=120281>>.

17. U.S. Department of Defense News Release No. 902-12, 15 November 2012, <<http://www.defense.gov/releases/release.aspx?releaseid=15684>>; see also ADP 6-0, *Mission Command* (Washington, D.C., GPO: 17 May 2012) <http://armypubs.army.mil/doctrine/DR_pubs/dr_a/pdf/adp6_0_new.pdf>; and joint white paper "Strategic Landpower: Winning the Clash of Wills," 14 May 2013, <<http://www.tradoc.army.mil/FrontPageContent/Docs/Strategic%20Landpower%20White%20Paper.pdf>>.

18. Investigations of the joint chiefs and other senior officials into the recent spate of ethical lapses of 3- and 4-star officers, December 2012 through date of writing.

19. Jim Garamone, "Panetta Briefs President on Dempsey Ethics Findings," 7 December 2012, American Forces Press Service news article, <<http://www.defense.gov/News/NewsArticle.aspx?ID=118741>>. Some SSC faculty members distinguish between training and education. Their point is that their charge is limited to education, that is, to areas outside those that should already be covered by the ethical training officers have received since their precommissioning days through senior levels. As important as the distinction is, I employ Gen. Dempsey's use of "training" as a type of education.

20. ADP 1, chap. 2, and Odierno draft white paper, "The Profession of Arms."

21. David Luban, "Lawfare and Legal Ethics in Guantanamo," *Stanford Law Review* (2008), 60 <<http://scholarship.law.georgetown.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1455&context=facpub>>; and <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lawfare>>.

22. First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution; *Matthew 5:6-9*, the fourth, fifth, and seventh Beatitudes; and *Zechariah 9:10*.

23. Biographies can be effective tools since they involve common situations of the need for immediate reaction and lack of time to ponder, the use of deadly force, command responsibilities, and ethical ambiguity. Yet, the decisions reached by one's hero may be another's villain and may not comport with another's ethics over different cultures and times. For example, the U.S. Civil War starkly depicts moral dilemmas. Robert E. Lee and Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson are widely regarded as military geniuses (and surprisingly, outspoken unionists, and opponents of war, yet later chose to fight by conscious conviction). While they remain glorified in certain corners, many vilify them, and history often convicts them for fighting for a morally indefensible cause. Choosing individual figures may distract students and color their view. Employment of biographies must therefore be used reservedly.