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Ethical Dilemmas and Senior Army Leaders

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The history of both the military tradition and the United States Army is replete with examples of general officers and other senior leaders who, when faced with adversity, stood up for what they believed to be right, did what they thought was best for their Soldiers or branch of service, and risked ending their career. By using historical examples and contrasting them with current leaders and their actions we will examine three crucial areas: 1) the responsibilities of general officers and Army leaders, 2) the impact that these leaders have on the Army and our operations in Iraq, and 3) how leadership failures impact tomorrow's Army. In short, the inability of senior leaders to make ethically tough decisions is the most serious problem in the Army today.

First, the general officers of our Army have several responsibilities, but foremost among them are two crucial items: the responsibility to advise our civilian leadership on the ability of our armed forces to conduct operations, and once embroiled in a conflict the responsibility to accurately convey the Army's progress and capacity to sustain the fight. I would submit that our senior leaders have failed the Army on both counts. Do not interpret this as any one individual's failure but rather an institutional failure. The U.S. Army has bred out risk takers in its senior ranks and replaced them with managers concerned with their careers and retirement.

It has become painfully obvious in our conduct of the war in Iraq that the Army was, at all levels above the tactical, ill prepared and inadequately led, and yet the only general officer to say anything was GEN Eric Shinseki. He testified, before Congress and with the Secretary of Defense sitting next to him, that the plan to invade and stabilize Iraq was unrealistic; he acknowledged that it did not include either enough "boots" on the ground or sufficient time to meet the stated objectives. For his candor, he was effectively sidelined for the remainder of his tenure as the Army Chief of Staff. Obviously, he was not the only leader that could make this

observation. Surely, there were other officers and NCO's with experience in Vietnam, Haiti or the Balkans who understood stability operations and reconstruction. So where were they? Why do so many leaders only feel the need to do the ethically right thing after retirement? LTG Ricardo Sanchez, a former corps commander and the commander of MNC-I for 18 months, recently stated that "After more than four years of fighting, America continues its desperate struggle in Iraq without any concerted effort to devise a strategy that will achieve victory in that war-torn country or in the greater conflict against extremism" (Cloud 2007), General Sanchez, when asked why he waited for more than a year after his retirement to criticize United States policy, stated that "it was not the place of active-duty officers to challenge lawful orders from the civilian authorities" (Cloud 2007). But, it was his responsibility to challenge those orders (not necessarily in a public forum) and to provide a course of action that accomplished the mission and looked out for the welfare of his Soldiers. What kind of ethical decision is it that allows thousands of Americans to die under your watch because you don't believe it is your place to criticize? How does this compare to MG William Mitchell who was such a strong advocate of air power that he was convicted by a courts martial for refusing to compromise his beliefs; he would later be completely exonerated and is now considered the father of the U.S. Air Force. Or how about LTC Creighton Abrams (who would later become the Chief of Staff of the Army) who when faced by no less of an imposing personality as GEN Patton had the moral courage to challenge him on both the military necessity and manpower requirements for Task Force Baum (a operation undertaken to liberate a prisoner of war camp). Yet GEN Patton would later call Abrams "the best tank commander of the war" Does LTG Sanchez or any of the myriad of retired generals who have now criticized our civilian leadership deserve the same respect as they do?

If LTG Sanchez knew things were that wrong, why during his tenure as the MNC-I commander, did he not adjust the strategic aims in order to ensure success? GEN Douglas MacArthur insisted on conducting the landing at Inchon, Korea, despite the chorus of civilians above him that swore it would never work and would endanger the American effort on the peninsula; yet that operation is now widely regarded as one the most successful military landings of all time. Sir T.E.

Lawrence faced with the daunting task of conducting military operations on the Arabian Peninsula, and with specific guidance from his headquarters, decided to go his own way “with or without orders” and has become one of the most celebrated insurgent and unconventional warriors of all time. His campaigns and thoughts are referenced and quoted in numerous publications to include our own counter-insurgency manual.

Secondly, the ethical decision making process of leaders has a profound impact on day to day operations in Iraq and the Army as a whole. The first ethical dilemma we encountered concerns the capabilities of the Iraqi army. Units throughout Iraq conduct operations and allow the credit to go to the Iraqi army. Soldiers are told at the outset of these operations not to say anything negative about Iraqi soldiers or units to the press, as well as to highlight any accomplishment or success story of the Iraqi army in order to make them appear victorious. When senior non-commissioned officers or company grade officers challenge this opinion or attempt to bring another view to the attention of any visitor they are immediately challenged or contradicted by more senior officers in the chain of command. Admittedly, no one wants to fail, however you cannot change or grow as an individual or an organization without acknowledging shortcomings. How many times has the public been told that the Iraqi army was trained and ready to assume responsibility for an Iraqi province or town only to see that town in the news weeks later as the focus of a major operation in order to destroy insurgent forces? Numerous generals have

appeared on the television to highlight the latest victory and to declare the insurgency broken only to announce a change of strategy a short time later.

No one has done more harm to the credibility of the U.S. Army and shown a greater disregard for ethical decision making than COL Michael Steele. Steele, the former commander of the 3rd Brigade of the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) led an operation that ultimately resulted in the unwarranted death of Iraqi civilians. COL Steele received an official letter of reprimand based on his miscommunication of the current Rules of Engagement (ROE) to his Soldiers; but, the Army has subsequently indicted four of those Soldiers on murder charges. When approached as part of the Army's investigation, COL Steele has pleaded the Fifth Amendment; retained a lawyer whom he chooses to speak through, and has actively sought immunity from prosecution. Meanwhile his Soldiers face prosecution for acting on orders that he has already been found culpable for. How does this compare to the actions of Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest (a known slave trader who learned the art of war in the brutal western theater) who at the conclusion of the American Civil War was tried by a war crimes commission headed by GEN William T. Sherman. He not only admitted, but firmly stated, that his Soldiers acted under his orders and his orders alone in the massacre of black Union Soldiers at the Battle of Fort Pillow (Forrest who would have hanged if he had been convicted was later exonerated of all charges). The actions of COL Steele and his failure to do the ethically right thing not only discredit him but tarnish the reputation of a fine unit and the Army as a whole.

Lastly, ethical decisions affect the future of our Army. GEN Shinseki had the foresight to call on the Army to become lighter and more deployable. He had one of the most turbulent terms as the Army Chief of Staff in recent history and yet when he could have let ideas go and thought of his own career he made the ethically right choices. His ability to foresee that the Army would

become involved in more light intensity and counter-insurgent conflicts and then the moral courage to stand by his convictions in the controversial creation of the Stryker Combat Team did more for our current operations in Iraq than any current operational commander. Additionally, GEN Shinseki also stood his ground on the size of the Army, when it was proposed that, due to increased technology, the Army could function just as effectively with only eight divisions his comment “Beware the 12 division strategy for the 10 division Army” set the tone for the debates that would follow. These decisions at the risk of his reputation have had a lasting impact. How does this reflect on the leaders who now won’t discuss the true capabilities of the Iraq Security Forces or allow their Soldiers to repeatedly risk their lives conducting operations in areas that the Iraq’s were supposedly able to secure?

In this age of mass media ethical decisions are on the front page of newspapers and in America’s living rooms every day. The conduct of officers and non-commissioned officers in Iraq and Afghanistan not only reflect upon the United States Army, but literally impact the day to day operations conducted there. Disingenuous statements made by any leader severely hamper the long term progress of our Army in Iraq as well as our ability to train and deploy our Soldiers. Soldiers are extremely astute, and have a right to know the truth. Statements made to the media that contradict what they are told or what they see on the ground only serves to disillusion them. Soldiers will perform any mission and accomplish any task; however they will also tell people exactly what they think, if leaders aren’t honest with them they will let someone know. Since Soldiers are obviously the greatest asset of the Army and it is a clear duty of leaders to provide them with the best leadership possible, honesty with those Soldiers must be the first requirement of leadership.

References

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