

Running Head: Personnel decisions and ethics

## Administrative Boards and Ethics

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At some point in their military careers, most officers and senior noncommissioned officers (NCOs) are tasked to evaluate a Soldier's military performance record and make critical recommendations or decisions that will advance, impair or possibly end the military career of a Soldier that they may have never even had the opportunity to meet. Generally, after these senior leaders are provided minimum guidance, left with wide parameters in which to work or none at all and limited administrative documents to review, they are expected to render their opinions and/or judgments that are long reaching and permanent. In many cases, these are divided decisions, far from unanimous and the results regularly considered questionable. Each individual board member who may or may not be familiar with other members of the board comes into the proceedings with their own personal military and life experiences. Their individual experiences have led each to the formation of their own individual value systems that they will inevitably be applying to the Soldiers they are evaluating. The introduction of multiple value systems, more often than not, will result in multiple standards for evaluating and grading the performance and careers of Soldiers. Each board member usually arrives with the understanding that their standards, while in compliance with Army regulation, may be different from other members. Naturally, they will be convinced that their standards are what are best for the board, the Soldiers they are evaluating and the Army. It is highly probable that they will attempt to impose their view or will on the other board members. This can and does sometimes create an ethical dilemma for each member. They all may have an internal debate within themselves questioning whether they should follow their understanding of the minimum standard or apply their own personal standard, which in essence is creating their own agenda. The dilemma grows even larger when there are multiple records to consider. On boards involving multiple records, some board members may be willing to yield their initial and genuine opinions on one record in

exchange for the same consideration on another record. Some Soldiers undoubtedly benefit from a system like this one. This system will seem unjust to many other Soldiers. They will feel cheated. This entire process has resulted in what many consider questionable, broken and unfair system. I myself have experience as a board member with two systems that fall into this category. They are the Army promotion boards (centralized and decentralized) and administrative separation boards. I have personally witnessed the disparity and inconsistency among these boards.

Based on guidance from the Department of the Army, military personnel officials strive to meet the goal of selecting the most qualified and competent senior leaders to make decisions concerning the future and careers of its most valuable resource, its Soldiers. Participation on any official board should require that an individual fully understand and exercise each of the Army values in their entirety. Before every Department of the Army level board convenes, its members are required to take an oath to perform all their duties without prejudice or partiality. Each board member swears to maintain the highest integrity throughout the proceedings. The most senior Army leadership impresses upon Department of the Army centralized board members that a violation of this oath is a violation of Army values and a violation of any one of the Army values is a violation of all Army values.

More than any other Army board that affects Soldiers careers, the decentralize promotion boards held monthly at the battalion level Army wide vary greatly based on location and circumstances. Some Soldiers will undoubtedly benefit from a system like this. This type of system will fail others. The decentralized promotion board, like all others, is merit based system and is designed to select the most qualified and deserving Soldiers for promotion to the ranks of Sergeant and Staff Sergeant. The premise is all Soldiers will compete within and meet the same

standard. The reality is the standards are not the same for all Soldiers competing for the same promotion. In fact, the standards will vary greatly depending on the Soldier's locations, assigned duties and the leadership style of those in charge at the time. For example, a Soldier assigned to the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division stationed at Fort Hood, Texas may be required to appear before a promotion board in his class A uniform to successfully answer a minimum of three questions in three different categories presented from each member of the promotion board. On the very same day, at the same time, on the same Army installation, a Soldier assigned to the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division, Fort Hood, Texas may be required to report to a promotion board in his Army Combat Uniform, which is considerably more comfortable than the class A uniform and take less time to prepare. The 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division Soldier may be required to answer only one question from each member of his promotion board. I would argue that the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Soldier would have to invest more time in his preparation to meet the same standard. Many on the opposite end of this view will contend that the flexibility and convenience of this system is a necessity for larger units. I would then question if we should trade standards and fairness for convenience. Would the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division Soldier consider this to be a fair system? In addition to disparity in boards, there is also inconsistency among board members, which further complicates and maybe compromises the process. Some Sergeants Major who serve as President and sometimes-voting members of battalion-level promotion boards provide strong guidance and attempt to standardize the proceedings. Other Sergeants Majors allow board members the freedom to conduct themselves and the promotion boards, as they believe it should be.

Department of the Army centralized promotion boards for senior Noncommissioned Officers are so shrouded in secrecy few Soldiers have confidence or trust in the system. Senior leaders selected to sit on these boards are unable to tell anyone where they are going or what they

will be doing. They mysteriously disappear from their units for thirty days. They cannot take notes or talk about the board when they return. Only those senior leaders who have been sitting members on these promotion boards seem to truly understand how they work, but often have problems explaining it to their peers and subordinates Soldiers. To a man, every Sergeants Major who has been a board member will tell you that it is a very fair system. However, not even these board members can explain the numerous inconsistencies. In addition, the current subordinates of those senior leaders who sit on these promotion boards traditionally have a significantly higher selection rate, resulting in even more suspicion. This mysterious process has lead too many Soldiers to believing that promotions at the most senior noncommissioned officer levels is based more on who you know rather than what you have achieved or have the potential or capacity to accomplish in the future.

Administrative separation boards make recommendations to a court martial convening authority whether or not a Soldier's performance or lack of performance warrants separation from the Army. If the board determines that separation is in the best interest of the Army and/or the Soldier it will also recommend the characterization of the Soldier's service. These boards consist of two commissioned officers and one senior enlisted NCO. I have twice served on an administrative separation board and each time I was surprised and disappointed to find that the process was not immune to manipulation. In the most egregious case, I discovered preparers intentionally left information out of a Soldier's records making it impossible to fairly evaluate the Soldier's performance or characterize the service of his entire career.

Even more than promotion boards, administrative separation boards have a lasting effect on the lives of Soldiers. Army leadership should ensure that there are checks and safeguards integrated into these processes to validate that they are completely without bias and are not

subject to any individual's personal beliefs. Failure to do so leaves the entire process an incomprehensible enigma for too many Soldiers. There are no valid reasons why it should be this way. The Army leadership should fix this for all Soldiers now.