

Running head: Values and Ethics in the United States Military

Values and Ethics in the United States Military

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to express my personal thoughts on the ethics of the military and how they affect Soldiers and civilians today. I will address the broad scope of past history and present events regarding the ethics and standards of the military. Events in history have shaped the military and society, yet acceptable standards of behavior continue to evolve and affect us. The changes in acceptable standards of conduct both on and off duty, the effect of the media's influence on personal and very public social decision making, and the Army's endorsement of programs like "Turn-it-In.com" all merit reflection. The ethical dilemma that faces today's military is not a new one, rather it is one that reflects the discrepancies found between the standards of our armed forces and the changes occurring in civilian society.

Introduction

The ethics of today's military have been shaped by the actions of the past and the social beliefs and values of today's society. These base values have remained constant throughout time, though the social acceptance (or tolerance) of them has changed to reflect society through each period of US history. A lot of the "ethical dilemmas" faced today are the same ones human beings have wrestled with as definitions of "right" and "wrong" shaped America's shared expectations and rules.

Ethics of the Army When I Was a Private

The Non Commissioned Officer of today has the same ethical dilemma of the NCO of twenty years ago. When I was a private in the 984th MP Company at Fort Carson, Colorado, the 1SG set and enforced the standards of the unit. He was also the final solution to the ethical dilemmas that would crop up within the unit. When new Soldiers arrived, the 1SG would conduct an interview with them and either assign them rooms in the barracks or go with them and inspect their quarters. The Soldiers in the barracks would go to the supply room and the supply sergeant would have a set list of the items that they would receive for their room. Four rolls of toilet paper, a scrub brush, pine oil, Comet and other cleaning supplies were given, which cost the unit about twenty dollars. The 1SG would take a married Soldier down to the supply room and issue him/her the same supplies but also add a broom, mop with a bucket and additional items, making sure to give enough to help the Soldier's family get a good start on their new household. This totaled well over a hundred dollars, compared to the single Soldier's twenty. Was this right and fair? Was the 1SG being a good steward of the taxpayers' dollars? Some would argue for the married Soldier's additional need, while others would resent what they

felt were unnecessary gifts or bonus to Soldiers with families. Some would say it was a theft of government property and report them, though no one did.

I remember firsthand being on motor pool guard with another Soldier and having the Platoon Sergeant hand me a box of tools telling me “that jeep over there has a new motor in it. It belongs to the infantry unit down the road. The LT’s jeep has a bad motor, fix it.” I was a private and trained to follow the orders of my NCOs and officers appointed over me, but still felt that tug of moral and ethical judgment. What was I to do? I asked my Squad Leader who told me to use my head and fix the LT’s jeep. Was this right and fair, or was it “controlled cannibalization” as it is called today? I swapped out the motors. As another example, I can remember situations in which one person in the barracks would get cable television and everyone else would wire in with him/her and have free cable access. All of the NCOs and Officers knew about it, and some of them would even help troubleshoot if the rewiring wasn’t working. These examples illustrate how units and NCOs did business. The ethical decision making process was still well established, but the rules were a little different. Was it wrong? According to some, yes. Does it still happen today? Yes it does, though it’s referred to as “taking care of Soldiers and their families” or “making the mission happen.” Like yesterday, people today turn a blind eye to these things, and being “creative” and an “innovative problem solver” are traits rewarded just as they were twenty years ago.

Ethics and the UCMJ, a Conflict With Civilian Ethics and Values

The Uniformed Code of Military Justice is the basis for our standards and discipline within the armed forces. How we enforce these articles is an ethical issue that we face daily. We can look at events or incidents that regularly occur in the news all around the country and find

ethical dilemmas or violations of the UCMJ. Despite Soldiers' complete immersion into the military lifestyle upon completion of basic training, their prior civilian standards and practices usually end up integrating with their military training, creating the total Soldier. When I was a recruiter I would often say "We are a direct reflection of today's society." This saying holds true even today. The operational tempo of the armed force is at its highest ever and we're seeing more and more ethical issues arise. Why? Some of these are a direct result of the ethics that Soldiers bring with them into the military. While adultery is considered unacceptable in the military, (Soldiers and senior leaders are give UCMJ punishment and/or forced to step down or retire), in the civilian world it is of little importance and has little impact on a person's ability to accomplish his or her job. The media circus created over President Clinton and his acts of adultery with Monica Lewinski received worldwide attention and led to his impeachment. Ms. Lewinsky received a few more than fifteen minutes of fame thanks to numerous television appearances, a book deal, and her own handbag line sold by major retailers. Did President Clinton really lose his ability to lead our nation? No, but with his impeachment and no action being taken to enforce punishment against him, the act of adultery (and being caught at it) became more acceptable to people. Celebrities, high profile sports stars and shows documenting rich living have captured the admiration and emulation of young people. Britney Spears, Paris Hilton, 50 Cent, Snoop Dog and the infamous Hugh Hefner all live the "party" or "gangster" lifestyle. Mick Jagger, Koby Bryant, and more recently, Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie, have had highly publicized affairs. OJ Simpson, Michael Vick, Lindsay Lohan, Nichole Richie and Mel Gibson have been arrested for DUI or felony charges that could (or have) put them in jail.

Even the lifestyle and activities of street gangs impact the military's ethics of today. Some Soldiers in our ranks are members of the Bloods, Crypts, Arian Nation, KKK, Latin Kings,

Los Zetos, Mara Salvatrucha, Nortenos, Skinheads, Louis Farrakhan's Nation of Islam and more. As such, these Soldiers have brought values and ethical decision making processes developed by other organizations into the military with them. These prior affiliations and exposures as civilians affect how they make decisions, and therefore impact us in the military.

Integrity and Religious Ethical Conflicts Within the Military

When examining Christianity's basic principles, values or ethics, the Ten Commandments can be recognized as the guide that many of us were taught to follow growing up. "You shall not kill" must be re-evaluated by most, if not all Soldiers because the bottom line of today's army is that we are a nation at war. This long-term battle and the accomplishment of our mission force many Soldiers into facing a dilemma: one shouldn't kill, but what is to be done when someone else is trying to kill you or the other Soldiers with whom you are on patrol? For some, adherence to the rules has to change when the situation changes. For others who strictly follow their previously established beliefs and practices, the change from civilian to Soldier continues when the Soldier feels the need to identify him or herself as a conscientious objector. Looking deeper into the Bible, readers find many men considered great military leaders who used force, killing to provide for or save their people. Joshua, Gideon, Abraham and Saul all used the sword to resolve issues. They were military leaders who took their men into battle and killed other human beings to achieve their goals.

Stealing or bearing false witness against one's neighbor both address personal integrity. Even at the pinnacle of Non Commissioned Officer Schooling instructors use a program called "Turn It In." Though it helps to protect author's original essays and assignments from plagiarists, in my opinion this program delivers two messages to students: 1) do your own work,

and 2) we do not trust you to do what is right. I anticipate that eventually the program will be full of military documents and many assignments will be returned to students because of the high suspicion of plagiarism that will be created by the redundant nature of the assignments given. What message will future students think they're being given, and will they understand where it is coming from?

Counterpoint

Values and ethics have been the guideposts (or behavioral leashes) for society, acting as the foundation for the establishment of laws designed for the good of the citizens of our country. What if there were no commonly agreed upon laws or ethics? Presumably there would be chaos, with the strongest and those most willing to do anything for power ruling over, enslaving or exterminating those less strong or less desirable. There are some people today who would find this an attractive arrangement. In our present day society, commonly agreed upon values and the adherence to following them (and making sure others do too) prevents us from destroying each other and our world. Interpreting those values and reconciling our actions and beliefs with doing what must be done are difficult yet necessary ethical tasks. The Soldier, Sailor, Airman and Marine must possess the ethical courage to do the hard right over the easy wrong

Conclusion

We as senior NCOs must maintain the moral high ground, serving as role models and mentoring and developing our young Soldiers. It is our responsibility to mentor them to ensure they know what the Army's values mean to our nation and its people, developing in them the skills needed to overcome the ethical dilemmas they will face when in combat or at home. We

must prepare them to be the leaders of tomorrow and know what is right and what right looks like, without double standards. If we fail the Army fails. If we succeed, then each member of the team succeeds ensuring the survival of our Army and our American way of life.