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# STUDENT ESSAY

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## ETHICS AND THE ARMY OFFICER: AN ASSESSMENT AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

BY

LIEUTENANT COLONEL RICHARD N. MURRAY  
ADA

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US ARMY WAR COLLEGE, CARLISLE BARRACKS, PENNSYLVANIA

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USAWC MILITARY STUDIES PROGRAM

ETHICS AND THE ARMY OFFICER: AN ASSESSMENT  
AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

INDIVIDUAL ESSAY

by

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US Army War College  
Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania 17013  
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**ABSTRACT**

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→ For the last fifteen years the Army's officer corps has been criticized extensively for deficiencies in its ethical conduct and conscience. The indictment charges that the corps has progressively degenerated in its ethical deportment to the point where national security is being jeopardized, and critics are calling for a total catharsis. This article examines these charges and proposes several recommendations for improvement. Data used in the preparation of this essay were gathered from relevant literature, personal interviews, and the author's experiences and observations. After a brief introduction showing the role of Army officers in national and world affairs, this presentation supports the need for Army officers' maintaining high ethical deportment. The essay also concludes that aspersions against Army officers for their lack of ethics are inflated and are magnified by the media and other critics. Nor does the Army's ethical conduct jeopardize readiness. The article then concludes by recommending that education, communications, and other institutional utensils be employed to improve and sustain high ethical conduct on the part of the Army's officers. ↘

## INTRODUCTION

For at least the last century the United States has held a special place in world history. Two world wars, unprecedented advances in technology, and enormous economic transformation have propelled the United States to a position of preeminence within the family of nations. With this advancement has come an awesome responsibility to serve as the champion of the free world and its associated causes. Inherent in this responsibility is the maintenance of world order and stability, including security for its people and their enterprises. To meet these challenges the United States has amassed military forces and associated weaponry and equipment that are qualitatively superior to anything the world has ever known. To harness this massive destructive capability and ensure its proper focus, the nation has relied on the officer corps of its respective services to discharge its responsibilities with intellect, dedication, and high standards of ethics.

For these reasons this article will examine several of the ethical dimensions associated with officership in the United States Army. The intent is relatively modest: to inform the reader as to why the conduct of United States Army officers must be ethical; to show in general terms the current ethical posture of the officer corps; to identify areas requiring ethical improvement; and, finally, to provide substantive recommendations for improving ethical sensitivities and conduct within the corps.



## THE NEED FOR ETHICS

Historically, the Army officers corps has prided itself in being both a beacon and a bastion for high ethical conduct and standards. Corps members have felt that this virtue has made them elite in a society whose ethical underpinning includes the philosophy of looking out for number one. Thus, the officer corps has embraced the West Point motto of "Duty, Honor, Country" as its own informal code of ethics.

Still, many questions remain as to the utility of being ethical. Why must an Army officer be ethical when his nation's greatest adversary openly demonstrates little regard for ethical conduct in the affairs of state and mankind? When the society he defends is motivated by individual concerns rather than the collective good? When many of his civilian leaders appear to be motivated by political and economic gain? When history indicates that numerous unscrupulous individuals have risen to high prominence? And when the very nature of the profession of arms focuses on the management of violence and death?

One answer to these questions is that the Army must inculcate ethics among its leaders if it is to perform its assigned missions effectively. A commander in the field, as well as a director of a staff section, must know he is receiving information that is accurate. Life-dependent decisions in combat demand reliable data; the same can be said for resource allocations in peacetime. Leaders must know without equivocation that the information they have received is valid in order to make correct decisions. The toughest job for any leader is to make the right call based on half truths. To minimize the chances of this situation occurring, the corporate ethical characteristics of the

institution--in this case the Army officers corps--must manifest the highest form of integrity and trustworthiness.

Secondly, the Army must maintain credibility within the society it serves. Failure in this area would reduce the officer corps' esteem as a profession and would cause the officer accession process to become restrictive and the pool from which it draws to become narrowed. Once this occurred, the Army's leadership ranks would swell with people of mediocre quality, while the more able and conscientious would disdain the Army and remain unsympathetic toward its needs. Accordingly, the ethical fiber of the Army's officer corps must remain resilient to preserve its credibility.

Moreover, the Army's underlying purpose is to serve the needs of the nation. This, by its very nature, mandates strong ethical requirements. In line with Constitutional law, the Army is responsible to the President and the Congress as well as the American people. The Army must therefore subordinate its self-interests to the greater good. Reckless expenditures of taxpayers' monies, manipulative tactics in acquiring authorizations or appropriations from Congressional committees, or a lack of candor with the Commander-in-Chief and Congress would dilute the officer corps' credibility and would subvert the unified efforts of the people it is sworn to serve. Constant adherence to the principle of serving something larger than self must permeate the officer corps if our nation, its leaders, and our way of life are to survive and flourish.

The Army officer is by very definition a leader. This entails certain responsibilities including that of fulfilling the expectations of subordinates. If the leader is untrustworthy or is perceived to be so by the soldiers under his direction, then the effectiveness of his

organization, the morale of his subordinates, and the positive impact he will have on sustaining high standards will all be undermined. The most crippling and lasting effect of unethical conduct by an officer is the impact it has on his immediate organization and subordinates. From a personal, as well as a professional practical point of view, it is in the officer's best interest to ensure that his unit and people operate at optimum efficiency; anything that impedes, this effort should be eliminated.

Another important reason for impeccable ethical practices and total candor within the officer corps is to enable effective change to occur. Without the ability to generate self-criticism or to do honest soul-searching, leaders would be unable to correct the internal shortfalls that might jeopardize national security. Candid and continuous self-analysis is essential among those charged to head the forces protecting our nation. Failure to acknowledge problems will ultimately reduce readiness and in turn will compromise our security.

Another utilitarian reason for maintaining a high ethical standard within the officer corps is the impact this will have upon the enemy in combat. The United States Army would be ill served to face an adversary that was willing to fight to the death for fear of what could occur to him if captured by American forces. Moreover, it is equally important that United States soldiers know that their leaders have not provoked the enemy into retaliatory actions because of immoral, illegal, or unethical treatment imposed upon captured soldiers. These facts, coupled with reprisals for violations of international law mandate that the highest order of ethical conscience and conduct exist within our officer corps.<sup>1</sup>

In essence the need for officers to be ethical is based on personal, practical, and professional reasons. The legitimacy of the Army itself is based on the premise of service to a cause higher than itself.<sup>2</sup> Without a high standard of ethical conduct within its officer corps, the Army would ultimately rot, thus endangering our national security and gravely affecting the American way of life for succeeding generations. Although history may show unscrupulous men succeeding, or cunning politicians advancing their own interests, or even declining ethical deportment in society as a whole, these are inadequate reasons for Army officers to lower their standards. The Army's prime purpose for existence is to support the nation and its ideals, and this requires high ethical consciousness and conduct throughout all levels of the officer corps.

#### TRACING THE HISTORY

During the last fifteen years there has been a rising volume of comment relative to professionalism and ethical conduct within the United States Army officer corps. Most of these writings--by individuals both within and outside the military--suggest that Army officers are falling far short of the Army's earlier standards for integrity, self abnegation, morality, and genuine concern for others. These critics range from hypocritical "do-gooders" whose sanctimonious aspersions and solutions serve as a facade for "grinding an axe" to earnest, honest men attempting to influence a beloved institution slightly off course. These writings, however, suggest that the ethical climate within the Army is not ideal, and that action should be taken to revitalize the ethical consciousness of Army officers. To make their point, many of the critics have highlighted such Army indiscretions as the My Lai

incident, body-count reporting procedures in Vietnam, cheating at West Point and improprieties in recruiting. This serves as evidence for the declining ethical conduct within the officer corps.

In addition, several studies--under military auspices--tend to support the thesis that Army effectiveness is most threatened by self-ish, promotion-oriented leaders who set poor standards of ethical/professional conduct.<sup>3</sup> The two studies most often cited include an Army War College paper done in 1970 and a follow-on study from the same institution in 1977. Both studies argue that the Army officer corps is remiss in meeting its professional and ethical responsibilities. A subtler point, somewhat overlooked, within these studies is that the vast majority of the officer corps are sincerely concerned with the perception that things are awry in the ethical arena.

In addition to these studies, several notable books dealing with morality and ethics have recently appeared. At the forefront are Richard Gabriel's 1982 book, To Serve With Honor, and Doctor Sam Sarkesian's 1981 work, Beyond the Battlefield. Colonel Malham Wakin has also played a leading role over the last fifteen years through his numerous writings that suggest techniques for improving the ethical climate. Probably the most sobering empirical testament yet, however, may have come from Lieutenant General Julius Becton, Commander of the United States VII Corps in Germany, who, when addressing the Joint Services Conference on Professional Ethics in January 1982, acknowledged that there were 212 reported criminal offenses by officers in his corps in 1980.<sup>4</sup> My experiences within an infantry division between June 1981 and June 1983 and from subsequent discussions at the Army War College indicate that General Becton's report is not an aberration, nor is the

problem of any less proportion today. The environment within which we operate is certainly less than perfect, and the key question is how pervasive the problem really is.

To make an assessment of the current ethical condition within the Army officer corps, many things need to be considered. The first is an allowance for change. Conditions today differ from those of forty years ago. Political dynamics, economic gains, and technological advances have thrust the Army into a world far more complex than that of previous generations. The ethical dimensions in the lives of today's soldiers are far more demanding than those of the past. Secondly, we tend to fabricate notions of the idealized past--a time when things were as they should be now. We need to remember that ideals become such because people don't live up to them, and this is true of any era.<sup>5</sup> American history records that many of the ethical deficiencies with which we wrestle today were also problems for some of our country's most revered military and civilian leaders. Finally, because today's media are more efficient at disseminating information--particularly the unsavory news--contemporary ethical transgressions are inflated significantly when compared to similar events of earlier eras. With this added media hype working on a society desirous of precluding future Watergates, ABSCAMs, and My Lais, there has come to be a growing ethical circumspection within our military forces over the last fifteen years.

The modern world has also generated new parameters with which the Army must deal. The budget crunch, Soviet expansionism, and the sensationalist media have produced adversaries on a grand scale against the Army. This, coupled with the normal plight of a peacetime Army, has caused the officer corps to appear manipulative and deceiving, when in fact their motives accorded with the spirit of protecting the nation's

security interests when a foe was not offering an immediate challenge of arms. The vulnerabilities of a peacetime Army to critics in a competitive arena for resources is well known. Army leaders must expect to be tarred with the brush of narrow, self-serving interests.

For all its alleged and perceived ethical ills, the Army is not ignoring the situation and denying that problems exist. The Army's Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), together with the Army War College, has developed a broad-based program for providing ethical education to officers from precommissioning through the senior service college.<sup>6</sup> In addition, the Combined Arms Center at Ft. Leavenworth, along with many of the service schools, is continuously publishing relevant articles on the ethical dimensions of officership. All of this, coupled with recent activity by the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel (DCSPERs), in this arena, indicates things are moving in the right direction.

In summary, the ethics of today's Army officer corps are at little variance from those of the idealized past. Problems currently exist, as they most certainly did in times past, but change is occurring and recent actions of force modernization, restructuring, and doctrinal modification indicate that the Army is doing some critical soul-searching. Moreover, the ethical level of the Army's officer corps has not been perceived by any adversary as being so low as to make the Army vulnerable to attack. Also, the fact--so ironically highlighted by the Army's critics--that the great preponderance of the officer corps are concerned about their ethical posture speaks well for their corporate morality.

## CHANGES NEEDED

The total catharsis called for by many of the Army's critics rings hollow under careful examination. Advances in the Army's education system, the pace at which change is taking place, the fact that most of its officers are concerned about ethics, and the ability of the profession to discuss its problems with candor in journalistic writings and symposia show that a solid foundation already exists. Still, it requires no prescience to realize that the future will bring new ethical problems to an ever more complex world. To help resolve the current dilemmas, and those that haven't even surfaced yet, the Army should consider several modest changes to the way in which it promotes ethical conduct and conscience among its officers.

First, the moral and ethical consciousness of each officer needs to be honed. Officers must not only know right from wrong, but why. Additionally, they must be able to determine the correct solution when faced with an ambiguous ethical dilemma. To this end, the Army's leaders must understand that ethical sensitivity needs to be cultivated throughout one's career just as much as technical competency. The purpose of such training is to inculcate ethics into an officer's being so that it becomes a natural part of every decision process.

The officer corps also needs some institutional changes to rid itself of excessive careerism, or at least the perception of a disproportionate amount of self-orientation. The indictment relative to careerism within the Army receives much play by both the disgruntled as well as the idealistic officer. Appropriate organs at the Army staff level, together with senior field commanders, must take the lead in eradicating this condition.



Third, Army leaders must remain vigilant in their efforts to improve the Army's image and reputation. The most critical aspect in this regard is communications. Army leaders at all levels must convey, through action as well as word, that the Army puts the nation's interests foremost at all times.

Fourth, the Army needs to develop a true cohesiveness, and not just at the experimental or unit levels. Otherwise, time-tested loyalties and bonds of trustworthiness will never become a reality because of disruption. Unless individual turbulence is removed, the officer will face competing loyalties and shortfalls in competency, both of which promote dishonest, unethical behavior.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, the Army must promote a climate in which its officers can grow and mature. Obviously personalities, missions, location, and resources will all modify the atmosphere within which we work, but the command climate should vary minimally. Constant pressure, leadership by intimidation, and improper focus on the unit's purpose will produce a fearful and disquieted organization. Such qualities lead to coverups if things go wrong or to efforts on the part of subordinates to avoid doing anything that might precipitate reprisals. Both actions are reprehensible and subvert readiness. Equally important, the ethical implications of this situation undermine the very nature of what the Army is trying to develop: competent, confident, courageous leaders for combat.

The keys to the Army's continued success at improving its moral and ethical leadership are twofold: Sustain what has been previously advanced, and supplement what is already in existence with tempered change.

### SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

Inasmuch as Army officers need to possess a moral/ethical reasoning capacity commensurate with the responsibilities of their grade and position, the Army needs to provide appropriate instruction through its military schooling system and through the field commander.

There is good evidence that TRADOC is focusing in the right direction. The ethics and leadership task forces at Fort Benjamin Harrison and at the Combined Arms Center at Fort Leavenworth, coupled with the efforts of the faculty at the Army War College, have made great inroads at integrating ethics into the curricula of the service schools. This has also produced a network of operators--at all instructional levels--seeking to inculcate ethics and its associated virtues into the officer corps.

The real problems, however, are those relevant to the inconsistencies in the what, how, and length of time devoted to the teaching of ethics. This program needs to be standardized, linked to higher and lower programs, and properly focused. Its genesis must begin with courses in ethical philosophy in precommissioning schooling. Cadets must also receive complementary instruction from their officer cadre underscoring and accentuating the profession's commitment to high ethical conduct. At the onset of his career each officer should receive his own copy of The Armed Forces Officer as a primer on ethics at the initial entry school, which should include a minimum of one week's schooling on this subject. At the advanced course and the Command and General Staff College level, case studies of relevant military ethical issues should be pursued. Here the thrust of development should be on why things are right and wrong, as well as on broadening the officer's

perspective on the ethical dimensions of the profession. The capstone course should be at the senior service college level. Prior to attendance, each officer should write a 2,500-word paper on his ethical responsibility, including that for developing his subordinates. This could serve as a point of departure for the school year and for extensive discussions on this issue. In addition to a short core three-day course on ethics, all issues discussed during the course of the year should be analyzed as to their ethical implications. By taking this cumulative, everbroadening approach throughout the schooling system, the Army will have come far in developing a strong ethical sensitivity within its officer corps.

Classroom study alone, however, will not promote ethical conduct. Nor does the schooling process allow sufficient time to address all dimensions of ethical issues. For these reasons, the Combined Arms Center, together with the branch service schools, should develop a training packet on ethics for field units to apply in their officer professionalism programs. Commanders should use these materials at least monthly when conducting training on ethics. In addition to attending classes and discussion periods on this subject, all company-grade officers except commanders should have mandatory semi-annual reading and writing requirements on ethics. Books such as Once an Eagle, Crisis in Command, and The Lionheads should be read, discussed, and written about in the context of their relevancy to ethics and to the officer's current assignment. By these means, younger officers would enhance their understanding of ethics, while their commander, who should review their writings and participate in their discussions, would gain a better appreciation of his subordinates and the ethical climate within

his unit. Such a program would produce a greater awareness of ethics throughout the Army and would generate a more honest, open environment, thereby promoting higher combat readiness.

Education, however, is not a panacea for promoting ethical conduct among officers. The commander and the atmosphere he produces strongly influences the ethical conduct of his subordinates, providing models and patterns that can persist throughout their careers. But the commander cannot establish a healthy ethical climate within his unit by himself. He needs official as well as informal feedback as to its effectiveness. The value of honest feedback in developing and nurturing the correct climate cannot be overstated.

The field commander can profit from five feedback mechanisms in assessing and improving command climate. First, the supporting Organizational Effectiveness (OE) staff officer can advise the commander as to the impact of ethical behavior programs within the unit. A yearly assessment of the ethics program by the OE officer would pay handsome dividends to the commander. Two other informal techniques for obtaining feedback include after-action reviews (two-way discussional critiques) conducted after each training session, and monthly discussions with subordinate officers on ethical/moral issues of concern to the command. These mechanisms would ensure that dialogue for honesty would become commonplace, and subordinates would sense sincerity and lose their fear of reprisals.

Official feedback should come from two sources--from the Inspector General (IG) during annual general inspections, and from superiors and subordinates during official counselling sessions. Feedback from the Inspector General could come in a form similar to that provided by the Organizational Effectiveness officer. The IG's focus during the annual

inspection, however, would be an assessment of the commander's programs to enhance the unit's performance and behavior. The results of this evaluation should be discussed with the commander alone by the team chief during his personal exit critique. These findings and results, however, must be reported up the chain of command, whereas the OE officer's findings and recommendations would remain confidential between the commander and himself.

Counselling represents another means for establishing effective two-way communication and feedback between leader and subordinate. In this regard the onus must fall on the subordinates' shoulders. To promote this, the Army has developed the officer efficiency report support form, which permits the subordinate to produce a document upon which he and his boss can sustain useful communications.

Cumulatively, the Army's emphasis on openness and honest feedback will generate confidence and promote competence. More importantly, it will produce a climate wherein imperfections can be corrected without fear and intimidation. All of this helps strengthen unit bonds resulting in higher combat readiness.

In the past, the Army's officer efficiency report has contributed to careerism and to a breakdown in honest reporting. This management tool has almost universally been abused through inflated numerical and narrative ratings. Efforts to restore integrity to the system--such as General Abrams' "pull up your socks" message in 1973--have failed. Because no one wants to jeopardize their subordinates' future by giving noninflated ratings, misuse of the report form has caused the officer corps to overstate the truth, has promoted tendencies of self infatuation, and has inhibited moral courage. All this undermines strong ethical character.

What is needed is an efficiency report system that requires raters to "tell it like it is." A study commission should work out the details, but the officer efficiency report support form should be preserved, while the rater's narrative portion should be drastically curtailed. Also a rater's profile should be incorporated into the system as is done with the current form and the senior raters. Among other options, the Army might even consider adopting a bare-bones rating system consisting only of a job description and a box rating for job performance and promotion potential. With such an abbreviated rating system, the Army would need a complementary program such as a closed-form letter from the rater to assist career management branches in making future assignments. Regardless of what direction the Army takes in resolving this matter, it is imperative that decisive action be taken lest the total effort to promote strong ethical conduct be undermined.

Another controversial issue in military circles today centers on the need for a written code of ethics for officers. Probably the foremost proponent for such a code is Richard Gabriel, who argues the case in his book, To Serve With Honor. Many who disagree contend that a written code is impractical because it could never be all-inclusive and would require continuous update. Perhaps the best solution to this controversy has been articulated by Chaplain Don Davidson, of the Army War College's Department of Corresponding Studies. He notes that written codes of ethics can take on two primary functions--judicial and educational. In his view, the officer corps would not be well served by a code of ethics that was enforced judicially; however, he does endorse a written code for its instructional value.<sup>8</sup> A written code of ethics,

moreover, could reinforce the educational initiatives already recommended. Without such underpinnings, the Army's ethical development initiatives will continue to be plagued with inconsistencies and voids.

The adoption of enlightened personnel policies also can make a significant contribution to stability within the Army officer corps and toward promoting high ethical conduct. Such policies might include ensuring greater time on station, continuation of quotas by specialty in the selection process, tougher accession policies, and assignment practices that elevate the general needs of the Army over those related to the specific development of additional specialties. This would require a firm hand at the policymaking helm. Unless the Army can stabilize its officers for longer periods of time, unless it attracts and develops the best individuals to lead its soldiers, and unless it promotes individuals with the right credentials to competently do the job, then the Army should not expect any improvement in the ethical conduct of its officers.

As for the charge--apparent and real--that careerism is pervasive throughout the US Army, just as it has persisted in many other democratic armies,<sup>9</sup> certain steps can be taken to reduce the grounds for criticism. The Army's Military Personnel Center (MILPERCEN) needs to improve its current image of being a collection of double-talking, wheeling-dealing career managers.

One of the best ways for MILPERCEN to develop the image of providing honest advisors and straight-talking career counselors would be to remove the existing officer selection boards from their colocation with MILPERCEN at the Hoffman II Building in Alexandria, Virginia. These boards have generated, in their numerous sessions, an almost hypnotic atmosphere wherein emphasis centers on considerations of individual

success and failure rather than on the primary purpose of providing support to the operating forces. With assignment officers and selection boards physically separated, career management decisions can be made on a more impartial, rational basis. MILPERCEN also needs to be structured and staffed in such a way as to enable it to provide personal interface with the field. Next, senior officers need to cease maligning MILPERCEN as a collection of devious career managers, for until they do, their subordinates will have little incentive in their dealings with MILPERCEN to pursue anything other than personal interests. Selection boards also must demonstrate that competent service, rather than self-centered interest, is rewarded. Finally, planners within the Army's Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel (DCSPER) should devise a system of peer ratings, which might serve as an aid in the assignment and selection processes.

Two other steps also need to be taken to reduce careerism within the Army. First, commanders need to ensure that the focus of the organization is on the right things. Statistical comparisons, for example, ought to be downplayed in the evaluation of an officer's performance and potential. Secondly, the commander must maintain an effective officer professionalism program and be active in counselling to develop subordinates properly. Without such actions, careerism will continue.

#### CONCLUSION

The very nature of the profession of arms requires high ethical conduct. Today's Army officer manifests a genuine concern for ethics, much as did preceding generations of Army leaders. The world, however, is imperfect, and the Army still has ethical shortcomings. To move closer to the idealized condition it seeks, the Army needs to implement



changes, which are principally educational and communicative in nature. The recommendations proposed in this article are not all inclusive, but, if adopted, they would bring the Army far closer to the ideal ends which the American people seek.

ENDNOTES

1. Personal Interview with Chaplain Donald Davidson, 24 February 1984.
2. Ibid.
3. Major Gordon Rodgers, "The Leader as a Teacher," Military Review, July 1983, p. 4.
4. Lieutenant General Julius W. Becton, "My Philosophy of Command," Proceedings of JSCOPE IV, (Ft. Benjamin Harrison, Indiana) January 1982, p. 31.
5. Davidson Interview, 24 February 1984.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Sam C. Sarkesian, Beyond the Battlefield, (New York: Pergamon Press, 1981), pp. 205-209.

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