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Situational Ethics in the Army

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Abstract

In today's Army it is increasingly apparent that much of the American culture's ethical erosion is seeping into the ranks of Soldiers and thereby will have, and has had, a detrimental effect upon the Army as a whole. The narcissistic societal norms that are evolving are in direct contrast to the Army values leading some Soldiers and leaders to play lip service to such noble attributes as selfless service, honor, duty, and loyalty. As an institution that exhibits these stalwart ideas and concepts it is essential that we do not compromise the time honored standards that has distinguished the Army as the embodiment of the American character. Leaders at all levels, from the squad leader to the General officer should not only strongly emphasize the Army values as more than a generic concept but a lifestyle, but also strive to live them out in their daily lives as a great example for their Soldiers.

Situational Ethics in the Army

In today's Army it is increasingly important that Soldiers maintain high standards of ethical conduct. There are many reasons for high ethical standards in any Army at any time, whether in peacetime or at war. However, high ethical standards, especially for an Army entrenched in an extended global war on terror, are paramount to ensure Soldiers are equipped with the tools that they will surely need when faced with ethical decisions. A break down of ethical standards, which will inevitably be reflected in Soldier conduct, can and has undone the fantastically heroic deeds of thousands of Soldiers, at least in the eyes of the people whose hearts and minds we are attempting to win. Lapses in Soldier judgment and conduct, when dealing with enemy combatants specifically, are a direct result of unsatisfactory ethical decision making, a lack of training on ethics, and poor ethical examples by their leaders. Under different circumstances, Soldiers that have been found to have committed atrociously unethical offenses might well have behaved themselves in a highly ethical manner that would bring exemplary credit to our service. Yet, in certain situations, their true values and ethics took over as they allowed themselves to carry out embarrassing and unethical deeds amounting to crimes.

This apparent contradiction in the nature of the Soldier is a direct result of situational ethics. Situational ethics stems from moral relativism that has grown in influence as a world view, not only in America, but around the world. Moral relativism states that there is no absolute right and wrong. Right and wrong are determined by each individual and is subject to the situation that he or she finds him or herself in at the time. According to this value system, what is right for you may not be right for me and what is wrong for you may not be right for someone else. While this may certainly be applicable to , say, when one is picking out a car to buy, a college to attend, or where to have lunch, this view will inevitably bring trouble when dealing

with those that we have some modicum of power over such as subordinate Soldiers and captured enemy combatants. If leaders continue to practice situational ethics, in full view of their subordinates, they may well only expect the same from them. This can be very dangerous especially when one considers the level of experience, or lack of experience, that many young Soldiers possess. Putting a young Soldier into a situation where he or she must make an ethical decision without having first ensured a properly trained ethical foundation can have far reaching consequences.

One but has to examine the circumstance surrounding the former Soldier guards at the infamous Abu Ghairab enemy internment camp in Iraq and their treatment of the detainees, to see an example of what situational ethics and moral relativism will bring if it is allowed to seep into our ranks. How much of an impact on the overall mission has that incident had? Did that situation help to fuel the insurgency and lead to the deaths of more American service members? Hindsight being what it is, we can look back and understand the leadership failures that led to the Abu Ghairab debacle. But how many commanders' are purposely creating preventative training solutions to counter these incidents long before a Private First Class is given the opportunity to do something that explodes into an international incident and a shameful embarrassment for our great nation?

Leaders are responsible for ensuring that their Soldiers are not practicing situational ethics especially when it comes to the established bedrock values of loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage. A strong ethics training program should be implemented by every command and should hold leaders accountable. The current "once a year" ethics training by a JAG officer is not going to satisfy the order if we are to continue to thrust young Soldiers into dangerous situations of high responsibility requiring ethical decision

making. Each unit down to the squad/section and team level should ensure that the leaders are teaching, coaching and practicing sound ethical behavior based upon the Army Values and the Soldiers Creed and not just rubber-stamping a command policy. First line leaders can take daily events in the motor pool or in training to reinforce the army values. They can do this by asking the difficult questions of why someone chose the course of action that they did and how those actions reflect the Army values. If this is done from the top down, Soldiers will soon get the message that this is not just a minimum requirement, that we are not just checking the block to say that we have done it, but that we are actually serious about ethical conduct of the highest caliber being the norm for every Soldier.

Unfortunately, there are leaders that often times do not set the best ethical example in their daily conduct and the Corps of Noncommissioned officers (NCO) is primarily responsible. That's right! The NCO Corps is responsible. The officers in command can, and do, establish policies but it is the NCOs that enforce those policies and make it real to the Soldiers. The sooner we take responsibility for the lapses in judgment and the atmosphere of situational ethics and moral relativism, as demonstrated by our daily example, the sooner we can begin to repair the damage in the ranks that has turned ill-equipped Soldiers into "Strategic Corporals" and allowed them to embarrass this great nation and damage our strategic goals. Again, both junior and senior NCOs are responsible! I can see the heads wagging back and forth now and as long as we have those "naysayers" in our ranks that do not demand high ethical standards from themselves and from their Soldiers, we will continue to have incidents where we will find ourselves saying, "What were they thinking!" Senior NCOs who talk the talk and do not walk the walk when it comes to ethical behavior and living the Army Values do great harm to our Soldiers, the Army, and our nation.

It starts with our leaders in the Noncommissioned Officer corps and the sooner we reemphasize ethical behavior, the Army Values, the Soldiers Creed, and the professionalism outlined in the NCO creed, the better our great Army will be. We need to equip our junior Soldiers to effectively deal with ethical dilemmas that we know will come, and discontinue the "check the block" mentality that permeates both Values and Army ethics training. While moral relativism may be increasingly permeating our society, once a citizen joins the Army he or she becomes a part of an elite group of Americans. Those that serve and protect freedom's frontier, stand on that wall, and to quote a phrase, stand ready to do violence to those who would do America harm.

In conclusion, the American Soldier stands out, far and above in the history of warfare as one who carries out his or her duties with honor, integrity, and a sense of justice and fair-play. We can not allow our image and reputation to be tarnished by our own inability to teach our core values and make them stick. Individual Soldiers need to begin their ethics training at the recruiting station, continue relevant values and ethical behavior training in Basic Combat Training and all the way thru to their squads and platoons. Yes, the recruiter should not only talk to the new and potential recruits about ethical behavior and the Army Values but should also exhibit these traits on a daily basis. Long gone are the days when a recruiter can get away with telling a potential recruit a "little white lie" in order to get them to sign on the dotted line. We can not afford to do that anymore. This type of situational ethics sets a standard that some Soldiers will apply at some crucial point in the future. Some Soldiers arrive into the Army with no moral compass and it is up to us, the Noncommissioned Officers to ensure that we instill the absolute rights and wrongs in our Soldiers that will serve them well once they find themselves staring an

ethical dilemma in the face. Then the NCO can step back with pride and watch as his or her Soldiers react in such a way as to bring honor upon our Army, and our great nation.