

Reconnecting With Our Roots Reflections on the Army's Ethic

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ON 7 JUNE 2010, Operation Enduring Freedom surpassed the Vietnam War as the longest war in American history.¹ The last nine years of persistent conflict forced an unprecedented operational and cognitive adaptation on our Army in which we experienced both successes and setbacks. Yet, despite monumental demands and stresses, repeated separations, and hardships, our Army's Soldiers and Families demonstrated both adaptability and resilience.

In light of all of our collective experiences, we have to ask ourselves if we are a better Army today than we were nine years ago. Now is as good a time as any to reflect on the war's influence on the Profession of Arms. Through this reflection, we hope to emerge with a renewed emphasis on and internalization of the Army Professional Ethic, to preserve its professional character, to improve the ethical decision making and actions of our leaders and our Soldiers, and to maintain legitimacy and trust in the eyes of the society we serve. Doing so ensures we will remain a professional military force striving for unmatched capability, character, and values in the future.²

The Army enjoys a strong ethical tradition, but as General Casey recently noted, "if you walked around the Army [today] and asked people what the Professional Military Ethic is, you would likely get a number of different answers" because a singular guiding professional ethic does not exist.³ While the lack of an articulated ethic has not prevented us from living up to the moral expectations incumbent upon military professionals in the past, the moral ambiguity in today's prevailing complex operating environment is likely to persist well into the future.⁴ Therefore, we should reconnect with our roots today so as not to run adrift in the future.

Articulating the Army's Ethic

General Charles Krulak's "strategic corporal" concept guided the last nine years of conflict and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.⁵ Specifically, our Army will continue to see junior leaders, and even Soldiers, making strategic-level decisions or taking actions that have strategic ramifications. Broad area security mission sets and decentralized operations characterize counterinsurgency operating environments with small unit leaders making life and death decisions daily.

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PHOTO: U.S. Army Sgt. Robert Newman, Bravo Company, 1st Battalion, 4th Infantry Regiment, watches the sunrise after a dismounted patrol mission near Forward Operating Base Baylough, Zabul, Afghanistan, 19 March 2009. (U.S. Army photo by SSG Adam Mancini)

Soldiers, led in some cases by junior leaders with as few as 12 months of service, have significant independent decision making latitude with little more than their own situational understanding, their grasp of their commanders' intent, and a limited list of rules of engagement.⁶ Operational and strategic success often depends on the value of decisions they make.⁷ In light of these circumstances, the Army as an institution needs to reflect on its organizational identity and the way it inculcates that identity.

The Army is part of a body of military professionals, the Profession of Arms, that serve this Nation.⁸ As Colonel Sean Hannah of the Center for the Army Profession and Ethic, has said, "to be professional is to understand, embrace, and competently practice the specific ethos and expertise of the profession and to [abide by] the profession's standards."⁹ The American Profession of Arms is a vocation comprised of experts certified in the ethical application of land combat power, serving under civilian authority, entrusted to defend the Constitution and the rights and interests of the American people. We therefore define the Army's Ethic as *the collection of values, beliefs, ideals, principles and other moral-ethical knowledge held by the Profession of Arms and embedded in its culture that inspires and regulates ethical individual and organizational behavior in the application of land combat power in defense of and service to the Nation.*¹⁰

Relevant Concerns for Reconnecting With Our Roots

Using those two definitions as benchmarks, operations over the last decade demonstrate that the majority of our force acts consistent with our espoused cultural values "time and time again under intense pressure."¹¹ However, a number of recent high-profile events and emerging trends, if left unchecked, may jeopardize our future professional status in the eyes of the society we serve.

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Operational moral failures. The Army still labors under the cloud of actions like those that occurred at Abu Ghraib Detention Facility in 2003. From a moral perspective, such actions do not accord with objective traditions of right behavior, and they are corrosive to the integrity of the Army, the Nation, and the civilized world. In war, legitimate violence and killing occurs under carefully circumscribed moral norms. Violation of those norms is anathema to professional Soldiers.

Mental Health Advisory Team (MHAT) reports from Operation Iraqi Freedom show a disturbing trend. The 2006 MHAT IV report notes that only "47 percent of the Soldiers and 38 percent of the Marines [surveyed] agreed that non-combatants should be treated with dignity and respect . . . Well over one third reported that torture should be allowed to save the life of a fellow Soldier or Marine. And less than half would report a team member for unethical behavior."¹² Further, only 71 percent of Soldiers and 67 percent of Marines stated that "NCOs and Officers in [their] unit made it clear not to mistreat non-combatants" and only 25 percent were willing to risk their own safety to help a noncombatant in danger.¹³

The 2008 MHAT V report did not specifically report statistics regarding battlefield ethics, but it did state that Soldiers expressed disdain regarding rules of engagement application and skepticism about pre-deployment ethics training effectiveness. One Soldier's remarks seem indicative of many: "A 30-minute [ethics] class won't change my opinion."¹⁴ Clearly, the survey responses indicate a negative attitude toward indigenous noncombatants specifically and ethical battlefield conduct in general. Such attitudes reflect an ignorance and disrespect for professional moral obligations that define the profession. These attitudes are not consistent with the Army values and the international laws and conventions we are sworn to uphold by our oath.

From a practical perspective, the abusive tactics of Army interrogators and the beliefs expressed by Soldiers and Marines created a moral wedge between the Army, the Iraqi leaders, and the Iraqi people we vowed to protect. That wedge resulted in lost credibility, lost support, and eroded trust between the United States and other Arab nations. It also provoked Islamic moderates caught between supporting other moderates and giving tacit support to violent

extremists. It served as the impetus for many to join the “jihad” against American efforts.

Domestically, abuses like those at the prison or portrayed in the MHAT assessments caused the American people to question our Army’s values and moral legitimacy. A handful of leaders and Soldiers failed our institution, and what is worse is that these Soldiers disrespected the moral traditions behind the laws of armed conflict.

Command climate and decentralized operations. The attacks on Combat Outpost (COP) Wanat, Afghanistan, on 13 July 2008, by a Taliban force of over 200 fighters resulted in the deaths of nine U.S. Soldiers. A similar attack on COP Keating occurred on 3 October 2009, killing eight Soldiers. These firefights demonstrate the high operational risk posed to decentralized operations that small units prosecute in the counterinsurgency (COIN) fight. The operational environment certainly requires these dispersed operations. However, we must be careful that we do not inadvertently decentralize the risk along with the operations.

The professional ethic under review here does not necessarily concern risk decentralization and where

to mitigate it. Rather, the reflection needed centers on establishing a multi-echelon *command climate* that enables a frank discussion between senior and subordinate commanders to occur. As leaders, we have an inherent responsibility to set the proper conditions to allow an open and honest dialogue between senior and subordinate to discuss risk and how to mitigate it.

Risk mitigation does not mean becoming risk averse. On the contrary, such action runs counter to our professional obligation for mission accomplishment.¹⁵ Disregard of Soldiers’ lives in the pursuit of mission accomplishment is equally morally corrupt. While such disregard did not occur during either of the battles mentioned above, the inherent nature of the Profession of Arms recognizes that “in war, battle is the mechanism by which we defeat the enemy. In battle, casualties are inevitable.”¹⁶

Civilian authority of the military. The disparaging remarks about civilian leaders and policy makers attributed to General McChrystal and members of his staff published in *Rolling Stone* magazine spotlight one of the core tenets defining the Profession of Arms and the Army Ethic: the profession serves its society.¹⁷



DOD, Air Force Master Sgt. Jerry Morrison

Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates awards the Distinguished Service Medal to GEN Stanley McChrystal with his wife Annie as he is honored at his retirement ceremony at Fort McNair in Washington, DC, 23 July 2010.

As professionals, we take an oath to support and defend the Constitution, which clearly establishes civilian authority over the military. We take an oath to support and defend a set of moral beliefs, political ideals, and specific laws and rights. The founding fathers recognized the need for a standing army to defend their newly won freedom from outside powers and internal ambitions. To avoid the dishonorable historical pattern of military takeovers, they dispersed power over the Army between the Executive and Legislative branches of government.¹⁸ If society perceives a breach of this principle, the military loses societal trust and popular support.

Maintaining popular support is not unique to the American 20th- and 21st-century experience. Mid-19th century Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz highlights that the population's passion is directly related to the political decision to remain engaged in a protracted conflict: "as the [people's] incentive fades away [over time], the active element gradually becomes passive. Less and less happens... and the half-hearted war does not become a real war [to achieve a political objective] at all."¹⁹ Once people perceive "that the expenditure of effort exceeds the value of the political object, the object must be renounced and peace must follow."²⁰

Released in July 2010, the Afghanistan war documentary *Restrepo* offers a modern example on how a population's resolve can weaken. Soldiers from 2d Platoon, B Company, 2-503 INF (ABN), 173d BCT, created Outpost (OP) Restrepo overnight to extend the company's firepower up a ridgeline in Kunar Province's Korengal valley.²¹ Those familiar with and understanding COIN doctrine recognize the importance of the platoon's position. Yet despite the Soldiers' daily heroic, disciplined behavior, the film leads viewers to question B Company's mission, why their leaders put the unit there in the first place, and if the effort was worth it. When a popular documentary produces such influence on American

public opinion and support, as professionals we should examine its effects on the Profession of Arms and to the trust relationship we have with our client, the American people. We only have to look back 40 years to America's last protracted conflict to see the impact a breach of trust has on the social trustee civil-military relationship.

Media relations. The *Rolling Stone* article highlights another area directly related to maintaining trust between the military and the society it serves. While "strained at best" is a conservative description of the media-military relationship since the 1968 Tet Offensive, at times it could also be characterized as "openly hostile." Such a relationship breeds a feeling of mistrust, not only between the media and the military, but also among the American people, the U.S. government, and the military.

Information proliferation increasingly characterizes 21st-century military operations.²² Our adversaries easily compete with us in the information domain, but the realm is more than merely another battleground. It provides us an avenue to promote transparency to the American public regarding operations and intentions. If the Army acts in good faith, the information domain can promote trust between it and the rest of the world. However, that opportunity only occurs if we maintain an open and honest relationship. Negative fallout based upon skewed perceptions from the *Rolling Stone* article has the potential to reverse significant progress made in media-military relations over the last decade.²³ Nevertheless, the Army has an obligation to work openly and in good faith with the media. The existence of a free press represents an aspect of the Constitutional guarantees and values we are charged to protect.

Education and leader development. Leader development is also a matter worthy of reflection. Trends indicate that today fewer leaders opt for developmental experiences outside the operational domain. While operational demands rightfully have priority, increasingly leaders forgo professional educational opportunities believing that operational assignments provide the best benefit to their development and career advancement.²⁴ As such, they lack the time or the education needed to make sense of their experiences. The current trend is disturbing because *not* pursuing broadening educational opportunities leads to a proportionately less reflective and less mentally agile leadership corps, one that's ill

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Photo by T. Anthony Bell

A Soldier reacts to an attack during the Warrior Tasks and Battle Drills, part of the Department of the Army Best Warrior Competition held 28 September - 2 October 2009 at Fort Lee, VA.

suited for handling the complex and novel problems of unforeseen contingencies. To paraphrase Frederick the Great's chiding of his own officer corps, a mule after twenty campaigns is no better tactician for all that experience.²⁵ For the best moral outcomes, we need educated, imaginative, well-developed leaders.

Implications for the Army Ethic

As an Army, a failure in education and leader development means we will lose the "bench" of leaders we will need after our current operations conclude. While today's Army arguably has more collective operational experience than at any other time in history, that experience only encompasses a partial component of the Army's need for expertise across the full operational spectrum.

Further, we must recognize that education prepares leaders not just for today's fight, but for tomorrow's, which may have a very different character. *Education* entails a learning process focused on gaining knowledge, intellectual skill, and cognitive development. *Training* involves physical action and demonstration of acquired skills in varied situations.²⁶ *Development* entails

human transformation that must occur as part of a leader's overall growth. Development also includes changes in identity, values, resilience, and—significantly, for this discussion—ethical outlook.²⁷ These changes occur simultaneously with the growth of expertise.

Lieutenant General Caslen recalls a particular experience:

I recall assuming responsibilities as an Infantry platoon leader 34 years ago in a unit that returned from Vietnam just 18 months or so earlier. At the time, we had two noncommissioned officers (NCOs) in my platoon, my sergeant first class platoon sergeant and an E-5 sergeant. After leading the platoon for about six weeks, my platoon sergeant was arrested and court-martialed, leaving me with only one other recognized legitimate leader to fall back on. We made our E-4 specialist squad leaders acting corporals to provide some positional legitimacy and authority (as junior NCOs). However, based on our limited experience, we all lacked requisite expertise.²⁸

Such was the condition of our NCO corps after Vietnam, our last protracted conflict. The profession as a whole suffered too, as Don Snider notes, "from an evident malaise, particularly within the officer corps."²⁹ From an ethical perspective, the Army hit rock bottom.

Today we find our NCOs serving admirably. These remarkable first-line leaders are as technically and tactically competent as ever before. Our ranks are filled to 100 percent strength, while we re-enlist our Soldiers to meet 100 percent of our mission before the year is over, and our accessions remain at 100 percent. However, given all the positive trends in the NCO corps in the last 40 years, the realities of continued operational commitments and a force generation cycle that rotates leaders out at the end of a deployment (rather than throughout), leave inexperienced junior leaders responsible to rebuild the unit during the next reset phase. During this critical period great units lay the foundation of a command climate grounded on the Army Ethic that serves as a moral baseline for actions and decision making in combat.

One could easily discount the information presented in this paper as outliers, anomalies given the

size and activities our Army successfully, morally, and ethically completes each day. One could also overreact to the information presented and think that the dark days following the end of the Vietnam War are around the corner. The truth probably lies somewhere in between.

If we, as a force, intend to remain relevant in the second decade of the 21st century as the dominant land power, we must reconnect with our roots through a reemphasis on and internalization of the Army's Ethic to retain our professional character, improve ethically-based decision making and action among our leaders, and maintain legitimacy and trust in the eyes of the society we serve. This is what true professions periodically do if they are to self-regulate and continuously improve. Doing so ensures we will remain a professional military force striving for unmatched capability, character, and values in the years ahead.

In reconnecting with our roots, we should take the time over the next few months to reflect on what this war has meant to our Profession of Arms and to us as professional Soldiers. **MR**

NOTES

1. Rick Hampson, "Afghanistan: America's longest war," *USA Today*, 28 May 2010. On-line edition at: <http://www.usatoday.com/news/military/2010-05-27-longest-war-afghanistan_N.htm>, (28 July 2010). While the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, records U.S. casualties between the years 1956 and 1975, the conflict is generally recognized as beginning with the passage of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution on 7 August 1964 and continuing until the last U.S. troops withdrew in March 1973 for a total of 103 months. Operation Enduring Freedom began 7 October 2001; 7 June 2010 marks 104 months of combat operations.

2. Don M. Snider and Gayle L. Watkins, "Introduction," *The Future of the Army Profession*, ed. Lloyd J. Matthews (New York: McGraw-Hill Publishing, 2002), 9. Snider and Watkins note that armies in which members fail to promote and internalize a self-concept identifying themselves as "professionals" risk losing their jurisdictional status as a profession granted to them by society. Snider recently remarked, "you're not a profession just because you say you are a profession" as quoted by GEN Martin Dempsey, "GEN Dempsey Discusses the Army Profession, June 2010," interview (Fort Monroe, VA: U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), July 2010) available on-line at: <https://forums.bcks.army.mil/secure/communitybrowser.aspx?id=1116385&lang=en-US> (28 July 2010).

3. GEN George W. Casey as quoted in Matthew Moten, *The Army Officers' Professional Ethic—Past, Present, and Future* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, February 2010), 1.

4. For the Army's doctrinal view of the future operational environment see TRADOC PAM 525-3-0, *The Army Capstone Concept Operational Adaptability: Operating under Conditions of Uncertainty and Complexity in an Era of Persistent Conflict 2016-2028* (Fort Monroe, VA: TRADOC, 21 December 2009), 9-15.

5. Former Marine Corps Commandant GEN Charles Krulak first advocated the concept in his article, "The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War," *Marine Corps Gazette*, January 1999, 18-22.

6. Erik N. Anderson, "Closing the Discovery Learning Gap: A Leader Development Training Strategy for Company-Grade Officers for the Conduct of Stability and Reconstruction Operations" (monograph, United States Army Command and General Staff College [CGSC], School for Advanced Military Studies, Fort Leavenworth, KS, May 2006), 9.

7. Casey, "Advancing the Army Professional Military Ethic" *Joint Forces Quarterly* Issue 54 (3d Quarter 2009): 14.

8. The foundational scholarship related to the military as a profession is attributed to Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957) and Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1960). Since their initial work, much of the recent effort dedicated to

military professionalism can be attributed to Don M. Snider. Some of his work that contributed to the thoughts of this paper can be found at <<http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/people.cfm?authorID=53>>, and in two anthologies he and Gayle Watkins served as project directors for, *The Future of the Army Profession*, ed. Lloyd J. Matthews (New York: McGraw-Hill Publishing, 2002), and the rev. and expanded 2d ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill Publishing, 2005). Specifically, professions exist within the context of a society performing a needed service on behalf of other societal members. To perform their required service, the profession generates and applies its expert knowledge in both routine and novel situations. Society grants its trust and a degree of autonomy to regulate professional activity based on the successful application of that expert knowledge. If the society at large approves of the profession's self-regulating behavior and demonstrated competence and character, they grant the profession legitimacy and greater levels of trust and autonomy.

9. COL Sean Hannah, "Information Paper on the Army Profession Campaign" Center for the Army Profession and Ethic (CAPE), U.S. Military Academy, West Point, NY, 30 July 2010.

10. COL Sean Hannah, et al, "Owning Our Army Ethic," *Military Review* Special Edition, September 2010, 3.

11. Casey, "Advancing the Army Professional Military Ethic," 14. Espoused values form the middle of three layers of organizational culture (artifacts and basic underlying assumptions forming the upper and lower layers respectively) as articulated by Edgar Schein, Society of Sloan Fellows Professor of Management Emeritus, Sloan School of Management, MIT. For more information on organizational culture see Edgar Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 3d ed. (Boston: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2004).

12. These findings come from an OIF 05-07 study by Mental Health Advisory Teams who surveyed 1,320 Soldiers and 447 Marines. Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs, Dr. S. Ward Casscells (Pentagon, Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense News Briefing), 4 May 2007, transcript.

13. *Mental Health Advisory Team (MHAT) IV Operation Iraqi Freedom 05-07 Final Report* (Office of the Surgeon General, Multinational Force-Iraq and Office of the Surgeon General, U.S. Army Medical Command, 17 November 2006), 34-41.

14. *Mental Health Advisory Team (MHAT) V Operation Iraqi Freedom 06-08* (Office of the Surgeon General, Multinational Force-Iraq and Office of the Surgeon General, U.S. Army Medical Command, 14 February 2008), 63-64.

15. For a deeper discussion regarding risk aversion as a threat to the Army's professional ethos see Don M. Snider, John A. Nagl, and Tony Pfaff, *Army Professionalism, the Military Ethic, and Officership in the 21st Century* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, December 1999).

16. GEN Charles C. Campbell, "Army Action on the Re-Investigation into the Combat Action at Wanat Village, Wygal District, Nuristan Province, Afghanistan on 13 July 2008" (memorandum for Secretary of the Army John M. McHugh, Department of the Army, Headquarters, U.S. Army Forces Command, 13 May 2010), 15.

17. Michael Hastings, "The Runaway General," *Rolling Stone Magazine*, vol 1108/1109, 8-22 July 2010, available at <<http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/17390/119236>> (28 July 2010).

18. For further information regarding the framers intent and concerns regarding civilian authority over the military see Alexander Hamilton, "Federalist No. 28," and James Madison, "Federalist No. 41" in Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison, *The Federalist: A Commentary on the Constitution of the United States*, ed. Robert Scigliano (New York: Random House, 2002, Modern Library Paperback Edition, 2001), 168-73, 255-65.

19. He further notes, "It would be an obvious fallacy to imagine war between civilized people as resulting merely from a rational act on the part of their governments and to conceive of war as gradually ridding itself of passion . . . If war is an act of force, the emotions cannot fail to be involved. War may not spring from them, but they will still affect it to some degree, and the extent to which they do so will depend . . . on how important the conflicting interests are and on how long the conflict lasts." Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed and trans by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 218, 76.

20. The principle here is that one opponent strives to make the expenditure of effort through attrition not worth the potential gain whereby the "duration of the war [brings] about a gradual exhaustion of [the people's] physical and moral resistance." Clausewitz, 92-93.

21. Filmmakers Tim Hetherington and Sebastian Junger record the experiences of 2/B/2-503 IN (ABN), 173d BCT in National Geographic's documentary *Restrepo* winner of best documentary at this year's Sundance Film Festival. OP Restrepo is

named after PFC Juan Restrepo, a 20-year old combat medic killed shortly after the unit arrived to the valley in the spring of 2007. During their 15-month deployment, the unit engaged in more than 500 fire fights. More information regarding this film can be found at <<http://www.restrepothemovie.com/#/home>> (4 Aug 2010).

22. GEN Martin Dempsey, "GEN Dempsey Discusses the Army Profession, June 2010," interview (TRADOC, July 2010) available at <<https://forums.bcks.army.mil/secure/communitybrowser.aspx?id=1116385&lang=en-US>> (28 July 2010).

23. The denial of embed privileges to *Rolling Stone* reporter Michael Hastings on 4 August 2010 could be an early indication of fallout. "The unit decided they didn't feel the trust necessary for an embed." CNN, "*Rolling Stone* reporter denied embed after McChrystal piece," 4 August 2010, available at <<http://www.cnn.com/2010/US/08/04/rolling.stone.reporter.embed.denied/?hpt=Sbin>> (6 August 2010).

24. U.S. Army, Center for Army Leadership (CAL), *Annual Survey of Army Leadership: Army Education* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: CAL, 2010), 2; CAL, "Intermediate Level Education (ILE) Backlog Information Paper," 30 July 2010; and RAND Corporation, *Leader Development in Army Units* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008), 23-29.

25. *Frederick the Great on the Art of War*, ed. and trans. Jay Luvaas (New York: Da Capo Press, 1999), 47.

26. Erik N. Anderson, "Closing the Discovery Learning Gap, 15.

27. LTC Joe Doty and MAJ Walter Sowden, "Competency vs. Character? It Must Be Both!" *Military Review* (November-December 2009): 69-76.

28. For a more detailed explanation of a leader's sources of power and their importance, see John R.P. French and Bertram Raven, "The Bases of Social Power," ed. Dorwin Cartwright, *Studies in Social Power* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1959).

29. Don M. Snider, "An Uninformed Debate on Military Culture," *America the Vulnerable: Our Military Problems and How to Fix Them* (Philadelphia, PA: Foreign Policy Research Institute, July 1998), 127.

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A U.S. Soldier walks to a joint district community center after securing combat outpost Rajankala in the Kandahar province of Afghanistan, 26 November 2009.