



# Commentary: Doing the Right Thing

Command Sergeant Major Anthony Mahoney, U.S. Army

*“Well, you see Willard . . . In this war, things get confused out there—power, ideals, the old morality and practical military necessity. Out there with these natives, it must be a temptation to be God because there’s a conflict in every human heart between the rational and the irrational, between good and evil. The good does not always triumph. Sometimes the dark side overcomes what Lincoln called the better angels of our nature. Every man has got a breaking point—both you and I have. Walter Kurtz has reached his. And very obviously, he has gone insane.”*

— From the film, *Apocalypse Now*

**T**HIS DIALOGUE BETWEEN the characters Corman and Willard during a scene in *Apocalypse Now* indicates that each of us, as mortals, struggle with temptations of moral conduct. One may simply acquiesce, citing the original sin from the Garden of Eden as evidence that we lack the ethical sinew to withstand the winds of moral turpitude. Or conversely, one may, to paraphrase Nancy Reagan, “just say no” to conduct that is illegal, immoral, or unethical, and therefore prejudicial to the good order and discipline of an organization.

George Washington once noted, “Discipline is the soul of an Army. It makes small numbers formidable; procures success to the weak and esteem to all.” Army Regulation 600-20 states that military discipline is founded upon self-discipline, respect for properly constituted authority, and embracing of the professional Army ethic with its supporting individual values. Furthermore, discipline is manifested in individuals and units by cohesion, bonding and a spirit of teamwork; by smartness of appearance and action; by cleanliness and maintenance of dress, equipment, and quarters; by deference to seniors and mutual respect between senior and subordinate personnel; and by the prompt and willing execution of both the letter and the spirit of the legal orders of their lawful commanders.

These characteristics are subjective metrics we use to compare and contrast the discipline of military units. We are all guilty of forming snap judgments as to the discipline of a unit simply by observing it during training or during a walkthrough of its motor pool areas and billets. For example,

Command Sergeant Major Anthony Mahoney is the command sergeant major of the United States Military Academy, West Point, NY.

PHOTO: A U.S. soldier provides security atop a mountain during Operation Oqab Behar VI in Paktika province, Afghanistan, 20 May 2011. (U.S. Army, SPC George N. Hunt)

a first sergeant may display Army values posters on the orderly room walls, but does he require his subordinates to display those values through their personal conduct? A command sergeant major may require soldiers to recite the seven Army Values during promotion board procedures, but does he demonstrate those values through his personal example? Plainly stated, our actions speak much louder than our words.

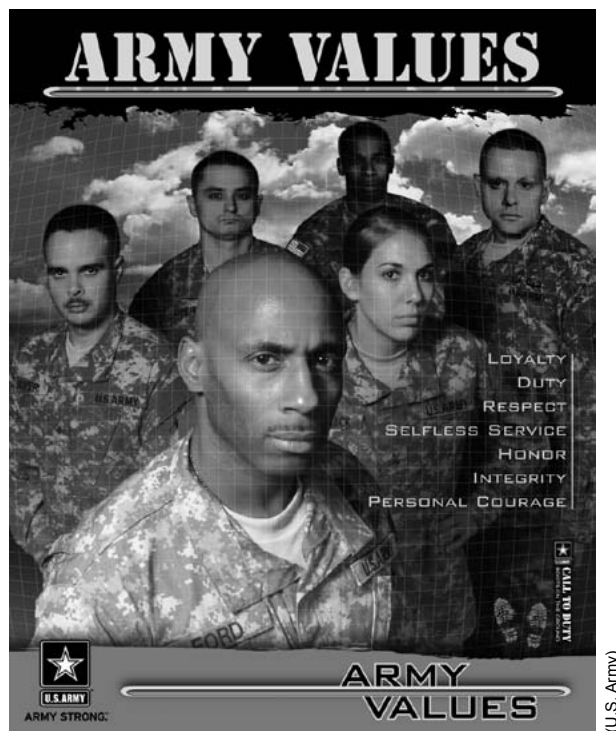
Additionally, in the “Army Strong” of today, the actions of a few may bring discredit upon the many. We are all familiar with the concept of the strategic corporal. The actions of a few undisciplined individuals at the Abu Ghraib Detention Facility in Iraq resulted in a fury of public outcry around the world and a concomitant decrease in the prestige of the U.S. military, both at home and abroad.

Mao Tse-tung understood well this concept when he published *Basic Tactics*. He observes, “Whether or not the military discipline of a unit is good influences the reputation of our whole Army and its ability to secure the sympathy and support of the popular masses.”

We can bring discredit upon ourselves, our unit and the Nation through our own egregious acts of willful misconduct and through our inaction in the presence of malfeasance. There is no defense or excuse for one’s conduct when you know that the deed is wrong and you proceed anyway.

As soldiers, we have the general military authority to take action. The road to military dereliction is paved with the deeds of commission, as well as the sins of omission. I am evangelical in my conviction that all failure at the individual level can be attributed to one of three ultimate causes: lack of training, lack of resources, or lack of motivation. If lack of these ingredients is a recipe for failure, then if present in the correct proportions, they can also produce success. Knead the mixture with a little “leadership by example” and the result will be a productive, cohesive unit.

Field Marshall Viscount Slim records the importance of discipline in the final chapter of his memoir *Defeat into Victory*. He observes that, “At some stage in all wars Armies have let their discipline sag, but they have never won victory until they make it taut again . . . We found it a great mistake to belittle the importance of smartness in turn-out, alertness of carriage, cleanliness



Army Values poster.

of person, saluting, or precision of movement, and to dismiss them as naïve, unintelligent parade-ground stuff. I do not believe that troops can have unshakable battle discipline without showing those outward and formal signs, which mark the pride men take in themselves and their units, and the mutual confidence and respect that exists between them and their officers.”

Remember, your actions speak much louder than your words, and do not ever compromise your honor. The concept of honor, while considered quaint and perhaps old fashioned to some, is the inculcation of those individual and group values we hold dear. Martin Van Creveld describes it best when he wrote, “When rewards become meaningless and punishment ceases to deter, honor alone retains the power to make men march into the muzzles of cannon trained at them.” In 1783 Thomas Paine observed that “Character is much easier kept than recovered, and . . . any man, who from any sinister view, or littleness of soul, lends his hand to injure it, contrives a wound it will never be in his power to heal.”

In today’s decentralized operating environment leaders at all levels are required to make ethical

and moral decisions. Much like the lyrics of an old Bob Seger song we sometimes find ourselves “standing on a mountain top, staring at the great divide, I could go east or I could go west, it is all up to me to decide.” People display their true character when they make the ethically correct decision—regardless of any potential personal discomfort and without expectation of any personal reward.

True character is manifested by action, by their deeds and not their words. One may deceive with flowery words and embellished appearances, but one’s actions reveal his true character. Theodore Roosevelt said it best: “Alike for the nation and the individual, the one indispensable requisite is character—character that does and dares as well as endures, character that is active in the performance of virtue and no less firm in the refusal to do aught that which is vicious or degraded.”

During the movie *Apocalypse Now*, Walter Kurtz got off the boat and quickly descended into the dark,

decaying abyss of insanity. Good did not triumph, and Kurtz allowed the darkness to overtake his better angels. In today’s decentralized operating environment opportunities abound for soldiers and leaders to discover that they have impaled themselves on the horns of an ethical dilemma.

Much like Dorothy and her companions—the Tin Man who lacked a heart, the Scarecrow who needed a brain, and the Cowardly Lion who sought courage—during their journey to find the *Wizard of Oz*, our soldiers today must display that same sort of grit to navigate their “yellow brick road” on the slippery slope of ethical ambiguity. They must use their intelligence to distinguish moral issues in the fog and confusion of rapidly developing events, their heart to discern moral lassitude, and their courage to execute the ethically correct option, even when it may not be the most comfortable personally.

In the final analysis, what matters most in the real world is not one’s deceptive outward public appearance, but the real man behind the curtain. **MR**



(U.S. Air Force) SSGT Logan Tuttle

**A U.S. soldier looks down into villages in the Yayakhail District from an Afghan police station, 17 December 2009.**