



# The Imaginary Army Ethic

## *A Call for Articulating a Real Foundation for Our Profession*

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**A**LMOST EVERYONE IS familiar with the story of the “Emperor’s New Clothes.” The Emperor is tricked into believing he has the finest suit of clothes made from a fabric that is invisible to those who are either unfit for their positions or hopelessly ignorant. Although neither the Emperor nor his ministers can see the imaginary suit of clothes, they pretend they can and in fact loudly proclaim its value and beauty. The townspeople follow suit. During a parade in which the Emperor “wears” his imaginary clothes, a child calls out that “The Emperor has no clothes!” It is only then that everyone realizes and admits that the Emperor’s fine set of clothes is in fact imaginary. The situation in this well-known story is analogous to that of today’s U.S. Army and its “ethic.”

For many years the Army has routinely talked about something imaginary—the “Army Ethic.” While references to the Army Ethic or our “professional military ethic” appear in any number of discussions about the Army and the profession and are even included in doctrine, the fact is that one of America’s most important and longest-existing organizations does not have a unified professional ethic.

Over the years, the Army has talked itself into believing it has an Army Ethic when in fact it has no such thing. The Army has an *ethos* or spirit. We have mistakenly referred to and regarded our ethos as an ethic. Although the two words share a common etymological background, the two terms have little in common. Any organization can have an ethos, and it need not be an ethical one. Certainly, Al-Qaeda has an ethos as do criminal organizations like the Yazuka. Neither ethos seems to be an ethical one. Ethics answers questions of right and wrong and is normative in nature. In others words, it tells us what we ought to do and provides guidance for us.

Current and evolving Army doctrine provides evidence for the claim that we have an ethos but not an ethic. While we may be committed to an ethic,

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PHOTO: U.S. Army 2LT Joseph Ivanov, center, with the 2nd Cavalry Regiment, discusses a situation report with his squad during a mission rehearsal exercise at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center in Hohenfels, Germany, 8 March 2013. (SPC Tristan Bolden, U.S. Army)

one wonders what it is or where we find it. One cannot point to it, read it, or clearly articulate it. The initial draft of Army Doctrine Reference Publication 1, *The Army Profession* (ADRP-1) which “defines and doctrinally describes the Army Profession and Ethic” illustrates the fact that we do not have an articulated unified ethic. In its text and glossary, ADRP-1 defines the Army Ethic as “the evolving set of laws, values, and beliefs deeply embedded within the core of the profession’s culture and practiced by its members to motivate and guide the conduct of individual members bound together in common moral purpose.” What work does this definition do for us as members of the profession? The answer: very little.

In fact, ADRP-1 merely defines the general term “professional ethic.” Such a definition could just as easily be applied to any profession. There is nothing in it unique to our institution, and it provides

no account of our ethic. Nor does defining the Army Ethic in this manner provide any substance or ethical guidance to the institution or its members.

Consider an analogous definition such as one for the U.S. Constitution. Simply defining the Constitution as “the fundamental principles on which the United States is governed” is of little or no help if we actually wish to govern. We need to know what those principles are. We need them articulated in a clear manner that we can refer to and use to guide our actions and decisions. Thankfully, our Constitution goes on to do this. Unfortunately, this is not the case for the Army—our generic definition is completely unsatisfactory as a guide for Army professionals.

Similar to its definition, the description of our ethic provided in the draft of ARDP-1 also fails to provide much utility in guiding Army professionals. It provides the following chart as a framework to describe the Army ethic and its sources:

<b>The Framework of the Army Ethic</b>		
	<b>Legal Foundations</b> <i>(codified)</i>	<b>Moral Foundations</b>
<b>Army as Profession</b> <i>(Values/norms for performance of collective institution)</i>	<b>Legal-Institutional</b> The U.S. Constitution Titles 5, 10, 32, U.S. Code Treaties of which U.S. is party Status of Force Agreements Law of Land Warfare	<b>Moral-Institutional</b> The U.S. Declaration of independence Just War Tradition Army Culture-“Can-do” Trust Relationships of the Profession w/Public Civilian Leaders, Jr. Leaders
<b>Individual as Professional</b> <i>(Values/norms for performance of professionals)</i>	<b>Legal-Individual</b> Oath of: Enlistment Commission Office U.S. Code - Standards of Exemplary Conduct Uniformed Code of Military Justice Army Regulations Rules of Engagement Soldier’s Rules	<b>Moral-Individual</b> Universal Norms: Accepted Human Rights Golden rule for interpersonal behavior Creed & Mottos: Duty, Honor, Country NCO Creed, Civilian Creed 7 Army Values Soldier’s Creed, Warrior Ethos

**The framework of the Army’s ethic**



**U.S. Army SPC Daishon Newton, assigned to the Zabul Provincial Reconstruction Team security force, provides security as team members make their way to a canal project site in Zabul Province, Afghanistan, 14 June 2011.**

This is a useful framework for understanding an ethos, but it is not an ethic. Simply asserting, as the draft of ADRP-1 does, that the Army Ethic is “rich and varied in its sources and its content” neither creates an ethic nor illuminates it.

Furthermore, the sum of these documents does not serve as a useful tool in articulating what ethical obligations we have as military professionals. Certainly, the expectation cannot be that every soldier is familiar with all of these policies, traditions, treaties, agreements, rules, creeds, and rights, let alone be able to analyze, synthesize, and apply them to the situations they will face in the course of their professional duties. This particular framework makes an Army Ethic appear as if it is everywhere when in fact it is nowhere. The situation is comparable to “When everything is a priority, nothing is a priority.” Despite its failure to clearly articulate, prioritize, and provide professional ethical guidance for its soldiers, the Army still expects them to act morally and in accordance with something that does not exist.

Why the Army has not developed a unified professional ethic as other mature professions and fields have done is puzzling. The conclusion must be that, as members of a profession, we believe no ethical guidance is necessary or that we are utterly incapable of providing such guidance. A number of arguments have come forward along these lines, such as “We all know what the ethic is, so why do we need to articulate it?” Or, “If we articulate it, we will somehow get it wrong or not be able to capture the essence of what we take our ethic to be.” Others stress that the members of the profession are simply themselves the embodiment of the ethic. These views are problematic. They obscure and reduce the appreciation for our ethic. Take a moment and ask your peers what the Army Ethic is, and see what the result is. Ask them to describe it to you. I am guessing the best you will get is a rehash of the Army Values. While this is helpful, it is not an ethic. In fact, many of these values would be desirable in organizations we consider morally wrong. Courage is a virtue for a terrorist

and loyalty is a virtue for members of organized crime syndicates. If we cannot articulate the Army Ethic to ourselves, how can we possibly expect to articulate it to new members of the profession or the American public? If we are to be the embodiment of the Army Ethic, we need to know what it is before we can embody it.

Finally, while it may not be possible to fully capture all the nuances of the Army Ethic, it appears other professions and fields have been able to do good work in codifying their own ethics. We can see this is the case for health professionals, lawyers, teachers, engineers, and law enforcement officials. Moreover, we also find clearly stated ethical codes for business with many corporations having their own refinement of the basic business code. These codes demonstrate the falseness of assertions that codes of ethics are implicit and cannot be articulated.

Other militaries also offer examples of clearly articulated codes of ethics. The Israeli Defense Force has a short, unified document that sets forth the sources, values, and principles of Israeli Defense Force service. Likewise, the Australian Army has a very simple list of core behaviors that identify what it means to be an Australian army soldier. While we should not necessarily adopt all of these for our use, they do show that developing such a code is possible.

The Army needs a professional ethic to guide its members in the performance of their duties. Up to this point, the Army has failed to adequately express such an ethic. If the Army intends to call itself a profession, it must address this issue sooner rather than later. There is a great deal to gain in doing so, including:

- Enabling and improving the moral development, moral confidence, and moral performance of our soldiers as Army professionals.
- Enhancing the relationship of trust that exists between the Army and its client—the American nation.
- Improving our status as a profession vis à vis other professions with existing professional codes of ethics.
- Unifying the various parts of our profession—branches, uniformed service members, and the Army Civilian Corps (the draft of ADRP-1 adds nonuniformed members and Department of the Army civilians to the profession).

Like the characters in the “Emperor’s New Clothes,” our professionals need to realize that their belief in something imaginary does not make it real. Once we do this, we can begin the important work of articulating an Army Ethic that is normative, unified, and accessible to the force.

The means and talent to articulate this type of ethic already exist within the Army. In fact, we have an organization focused along these very lines in the Center for the Army Profession and Ethic, which has already done tremendous work with respect to the Army as a profession. Likewise, Army professionals have offered numerous ideas and suggestions for and about the ethic in *Military Review* and other journals. All the Army needs to do is put the right people together and give them the mission to articulate our ethic. Given the will, this entire process could be complete in under a year and we could celebrate the Army’s birthday in 2014 with the release of an ethic for our profession. **MR**