The Trust Lapse

How Our Profession's Bedrock is Being Undermined

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WHEN AMERICAN GROUND forces' direct involvement in Vietnam ended in 1973, some soldiers returned home to be disparaged and forgotten by their fellow citizens. Many of the soldiers who were denigrated for their involvement in the war were compelled into service because of the draft. Public trust in the Army was at a low, with many blaming the military for the war as much as they blamed the civilian policymakers whose orders the military was carrying out.[1] Racial divisions among soldiers, rampant drug use, and poor leadership persisted in the Army even after completion of the war. Recognizing the need for major changes, the Army became an all-volunteer force and made major modifications to its training methods, weapons systems, and doctrine.

Then chief of staff of the Army Gen. William Westmoreland began the task of repairing the troubled Army of the Vietnam era. The focus of his reforms was what he termed "professionalism" which involved making improvements in training, education, and individual and organizational competence.[2] Over the next two decades the Army worked hard to improve its professionalism, and by the 1990s, the Army had established itself as one of the country's most respected professions. Fundamental to this rise in the Army profession was the establishment of trust—trust between the Army and the American people, and trust within the Army between soldiers and their leaders. As we contemplate the future of the Army profession into 2020 and beyond, we must examine the current state of trust that exists in our profession. I argue that the trust our Army has worked so hard to build has been diminished over the past dozen years of war, and we must stop that erosion before it undermines the force.

Numerous Army leaders have recognized the need to refocus and retrain our force in what it means to be a member of the Army Profession. The Profession of Arms Campaign conducted by Gen. Martin Dempsey in 2011, formally began this discussion.[3] With the war in Iraq now complete, and the war in Afghanistan seemingly coming to an end, now is the time to resolve our professional shortcomings before it is too late. There is nowhere better to start than with the bedrock of our profession—trust.

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PHOTO: President Lyndon B. Johnson, accompanied by Gen. William Westmoreland, decorates a soldier, at Cam Rahn Bay, Vietnam, 26 October 1966. (National Archives, 2987665)

The Importance of Trust

The chief of staff of the Army, Gen. Raymond Odierno, refers to trust as the *sine qua non*, or the essential component, of our Profession of Arms.[4] Army doctrine defines trust as "assured reliance on the character, ability, strength, or truth of someone or something."[5] In order for our profession to be effective, trust must exist between soldiers, between soldiers and their leaders, and between the Army and the nation. This trust is not simply given to us by virtue of putting on a uniform, but rather it is earned by becoming experts in our profession and demonstrating the moral courage that appropriately reflects the values of the American people. The trust our Army Profession has earned is not something we take for granted. Our history allows us to reflect upon times when our profession was not in high regard. We do not want to return to those times, nor do I think we are necessarily in danger of that, but as professionals we should aspire to obtain the highest levels of trust possible, both internal and external to our Army. Any degradation of this trust, no matter how small, can be harmful. Although marginal changes due to what might be considered "isolated incidents" may seem insignificant, over time the cumulative effect will take its toll.

A decline in the trust between soldiers and their leaders diminishes the Army's effectiveness. As Gen. Robert Cone has written, "If our trust as leaders is lost with our subordinates, we cannot effectively lead and will ultimately fail in our mission."[6] Soldiers who do not trust their leaders are primarily compelled to follow orders because of fear of consequences. This is dangerous for any organization, particularly one that is in the business of fighting wars. Soldiers motivated only by the threat of punishment, will weigh the penalty of refusal against the consequences of following an order.

If the soldier believes there is a great personal risk to following the order, then he might conclude

(U.S. Army)

U.S. Army 2nd Lt. Omar Vasquez, 2nd Squadron, 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment, points out where targets are going to be set up for Iraqi Army troop training to U.S. soldiers with 2nd Squadron, 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment, in Wasit, Iraq, 20 October 2010.

it is better to accept disciplinary action than to follow the order and risk being wounded or killed.[7] However, soldiers who have developed a strong trust in their leaders take actions directed at accomplishment of the mission regardless of the personal danger they face. They trust that their leaders are competent, that the mission is essential, and that their leaders have taken all available measures to minimize risk to their soldiers.

A lack of trust between the Army and the American people can be just as harmful. The existence of an effective all-volunteer force is only possible if Americans are confident that joining the Army profession allows them to be part of a calling that cares for its members while providing for the defense of the nation. The president and Congress must trust in our ethic and our effectiveness to allow us the autonomy and the resources we require to maintain the readiness necessary to fight and win.[8] If we lose that trust with the American people then we will also lose the support of our civilian leaders, making it more difficult for us to fulfill our obligation of defending the nation and the Constitution as we have sworn to do.

Civil-Military Relations

Civilian leaders, duly elected by the people, have ultimate authority over the Army.[9] This concept of civilian control of the military is derived from our Constitution and is essential to maintaining an effective relationship between the Army and the nation. As experts in military operations, we have an obligation to advise our civilian leaders in matters relevant to national security. However, as Army leaders, we must understand the bounds of the political process in which we operate. As Samuel Huntington asserts in his theory of civil-military relations, objective civilian control of the military allows for this relationship to exist by creating a highly professional officer corps that stands ready to carry out the wishes of any civilian group that secures legitimate authority within the state.[10] Military professionals must understand and respect this relationship. Failure to support the civilian leadership or establishing a climate of insolence toward elected officials is insubordination and is contrary to our professional norms.

The most prominent and recent case of a breakdown in our norms for civil-military relations resulted in Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the commander of the International Security and Assistance Forces in Afghanistan, stepping down from his position. A 2010 *Rolling Stone* article anonymously quoted McChrystal's aides as criticizing President Barack Obama and his team.[11] The article portrays a climate in which McChrystal and his staff displayed contempt toward the Obama administration, which they doubted as being competent enough to effectively manage the war in Afghanistan. Although the accuracy of the story has been called into question, McChrystal has stated that "regardless of how I judged the story for fairness or accuracy, responsibility was mine."[12] Within hours of the article being publically released, Gen. McChrystal was on a plane back to Washington to deliver his resignation to the president.

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Regardless of how out of context some of the statements made by McChrystal's staff may have been taken, the *Rolling Stone* article highlighted a tension that existed between the Army and its civilian authorities as to how best execute a war that was becoming increasingly unpopular with the American people. These types of public disagreements are harmful to civil-military relations and degrade the trust between the Army and the nation.

Less overt insubordination toward civilian authority can also damage civil-military relations. Failing to offer civilian leadership with a sufficient range of options is one way military leaders can promote their desired course of action. In 2009, it became evident that a wedge existed between some military leadership and the Obama administration. A number of leaks to the media, which revealed the military's position that larger numbers of troops were needed in Afghanistan to be successful, made some in the administration claim the military was attempting to box-in the president during the strategy review process.[13] Although the input from

military professionals is vital to the development of effective national security policy, military leaders must ultimately understand the final decision rests in the hands of the president. Any action that creates the appearance that the military is trying to manipulate this process dilutes the credibility of the advice given by military officials and degrades the trust between civilian and military leaders.

As military professionals, we possess a unique set of expertise of value to policymakers who formulate and execute defense policy, but we must prevent ourselves from taking action that is inconsistent or contrary to the decisions that are ultimately made by our civilian leadership. A 2010 Army White Paper elaborated on this concept stating "Military Professionals . . . must also develop the judgment to recognize when the bounds of the policy making process might be breeched. When acts of dissent take them beyond representation and advice into policy advocacy or even public dissent, they must recognize that they have gone beyond the limits of their uniformed role and have exhibited behaviors that potentially undermine the authority of those elected officials responsible for policy formulation and execution."[14] Then Secretary of Defense Robert Gates also addressed this topic in a speech to the Association of the U.S. Army, stating "it is imperative that all of us taking part in these deliberations—civilian and military alike—provide our best advice to the president candidly but privately."[15] If we as military leaders fail to live up to this civil-military norm, we foolishly challenge the civilian control of our military and further diminish the trust in our profession.

Military leaders believe their expertise and competence allows them to provide the best advice to civilian policy makers in matters of national security. They may even think their expertise in an area is superior to civilian policymakers who are empowered with the responsibility to make the final decisions. When decisions are made that are contrary to the military professionals' advice, they may conclude that a poor national security decision has been made and in some cases they may be correct. However, as scholar Marybeth Ulrich points out, "military institutions in service to democratic societies should espouse as a fundamental norm of civil-military relations that the profession's first obligation is to do no harm to the state's democratic institutions."[16] In other words, military professionals in a democratic society are obligated to tolerate poor policy making outcomes to preserve the more important relationship that exists between the military and society. This is what Secretary Gates was alluding to when he warned military officials to offer candid, but private advice. Failing to do so hurts the credibility of our profession and degrades civil-military relations.

Aside from the tension that has been created in recent years between military and civilian leadership, there is another aspect of the civil-military relationship that is a growing cause for concern. Representative Ike Skelton said the following in 2010: "My greatest concern is that a chasm will develop between those who protect our freedoms and those who are being protected. I've often talked about what I perceive to be a civil-military gap, a lack of understanding between civilians and the military that has grown in the era of an all-volunteer force."[17] A growing separation between the military and civilian populations can be harmful for an all-volunteer force that derives its legitimacy from being a subset of the general population.

1st Lt. Donald Maloy, Company D, 1st Battalion, 8th Infantry Regiment, from Fort Carson, Colo., talks with Iraqi Army Cpt. Zatune Molood Hasaal, commander of 1st Company, 4th Battalion, 2nd Division, during an IA-led raid on a Mosul, Iraq, neighborhood, 1 April 2008. (U.S. Army)

A recent study from the Pew Research Center looked to further investigate if a separation between the military and society really does exist to the extent Ike Skelton claims. The study finds that during the past decade, as the military has been engaged in the longest period of sustained conflict in the nation's history, just one-half of one percent of American adults have served on active duty at any given time.[18]

This represents a massive change from previous wars our nation fought where the burden of wartime service was distributed much more evenly across the country. As the average American becomes increasingly separated from the military, personal connections between civilians and soldiers are lost, and the military is viewed more as a tool of the government than as an organization of fathers, mothers, sons, and daughters who have volunteered to serve their country.

Just as the American population has seen a decline in military participation, so has the U.S. Congress. The recently convened 113th Congress contains the least amount of veterans serving since World War II. In 1977, shortly after the Vietnam War, 412 veterans were sworn into Congress, but in today's Congress only 106 members have any military experience.[19] Less representation in Congress, particularly during a time of inevitable budgetary reductions, can foster an attitude among the armed forces that the dozen years of war fighting the military has done on behalf of the country is under-appreciated by our elected representatives.

A report by the Triangle Institute for Security Studies found that less than half of the civilian population believes military leaders can be relied upon to respect civilian control of the military.[20] Furthermore, only one-third of civilians believe the military shares the same values as the American people. More than 20 percent report they would be disappointed if their children joined the military.[21]

Army doctrine states that the trust between the Army and the American people is based upon a mutual confidence; soldiers swear an oath to the Constitution to serve the nation before all other considerations, and in return soldiers ask that fellow citizens remember their sacrifice.[22] The majority of Americans do still support the military, but the growing separation between the military and society is dwindling this support. As sociologist David Segal has stated, "The military is at war, but the country is not . . . and the military resents that."[23]

Former Secretary of Defense Gates in a 2010 speech at Duke University echoed many of these sentiments. He stated that although veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan have been supported when they came home, "for most Americans the wars remain an abstraction—a distant and unpleasant series of news items that do not affect them personally."[24] Even after the tragic events of 9/11, which highlighted the importance of having an effective and prepared military, Secretary Gates said, "in the absence of a draft, for a growing number of Americans, service in the military, no matter how laudable, has become something for other people to do."[25]

Trust within the Force

Our Army has been given great autonomy by our civilian leadership because of the high moral standards we have set for ourselves. We understand this independence in policing our organization can be quickly taken away if we fail to live up to the expectations we have established. The past dozen years of war have provided a number of examples of situations in which members of our Army have acted in ways completely contradictory to our professional norms. The abuse of detainees at Abu Ghraib, the rape-murders in Mahmudiyah, Iraq, and the "sport" killings of three Afghan civilians are just some of the examples of the severe moral failings of some who serve within our ranks.

In an Army where over a million soldiers have deployed to combat, some multiple times, it is naïve to think there will not be instances where individual soldiers take actions that bring discredit upon our country. In today's world where the media is regularly embedded with military units and has the capability of quickly disseminating information, any unethical act committed by American soldiers is likely to be shared with the rest of the world in a matter of hours. In most instances our civilian leadership is quick to condemn the actions of U.S. service members who have committed atrocities and point out their conduct is not representative of the values instilled in our fighting men and women.

As unacceptable as these tragic events may be, our society does seem to recognize there are some who are unable to emotionally and psychologically manage the stress of war. Unlike the My Lai

Massacre of 1968, where U.S. soldiers killed over 300 Vietnamese civilians, the tragic failings some of our soldiers have made during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are seen more as individual shortcomings than as a collective military failing. However, the Army does face a more institutionally prevalent problem in the declining "health of the force" that has occurred over the past several years.

Forefront in these problems is the escalation in suicides among the military. In 2012, 182 soldiers in the Army committed suicide, outpacing the 176 soldiers who were killed in combat while serving in Operation Enduring Freedom.[26] Former Vice Chief of Staff of the Army Gen. Lloyd Austin III, who became personally involved in finding ways to reduce Army suicide rates, has stressed the importance of recognizing this is an Army-wide problem that requires involvement from commanders at all levels.[27] Many attribute this rise in suicides to the stresses being endured by soldiers who are deployed to war. Research has shown the connection between combat stress and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and the adverse consequences on the mental health of returning veterans.[28] While the connection between combat and PTSD is clear, the link between combat and suicide is not. A recently published study that sought to understand the contributing factors to suicide found that military related variables, such as whether or not a soldier had been deployed or exposed to combat, showed no significant relationship to suicide.[29] In fact, of all the soldiers who took their own lives last year, over a third were never deployed.[30]

Although it is not clear as to what exactly is causing the increased rates of suicide in the Army, this phenomenon may reflect the moral erosion of our profession by indicating a decline in trust between soldiers and their leaders. The Army offers countless resources to soldiers to help counsel them through difficult situations. So why are so many soldiers choosing to end their own lives rather than accept this help and work through their problems? By trying to understand the suicidal soldier's situation, one can imagine that trust issues, especially violations of trust would play a part. If a suicidal soldier trusted that their peers and leaders would provide them the support they needed to resolve their problems (most often associated with relationships gone bad), perhaps suicidal ideation would not drive them to act. Rather than appear weak or undesirable to the team, they take what they perceive to be the easy way out.

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Martin Dempsey, has identified the importance of regaining trust within our profession as a way to solve the Army's suicide problem stating, "If we get to the point . . . where young men and women trust each other enough that if they feel these impulses, that they will approach a battle buddy . . . with their fears, their anxieties, their stresses and that the battle buddy cares enough about them to trust the chain of command to deal with them, then I think we'll make a difference."[31] Regaining the trust between soldiers and their leaders is the first step in finding a solution to this problem.

The decline in the health of our force is also evident in the unprofessional levels of sexual harassment and sexual assault that is occurring within the ranks. Since 2006, reports of sex crimes in the Army have increased by 28 percent.[32] While some of this rise may be due to an increased willingness to report these crimes, the current levels of sexual harassment and sexual assault indicate a severe lack of professional conduct in our Army. These types of crimes, particularly those that go unpunished, have a corrosive effect on Army units. Sexual crimes destroy unit cohesion and therefore readiness. A 2012 study by the Department of Veterans Affairs found

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the vast majority of soldiers who reported being sexually harassed or assaulted stated their offenders were fellow service members, nearly half of whom held a higher rank.[33]

Intolerably high levels of suicide and sex crimes are just two contributing factors to what Don Snider, a scholar on professional military ethics, calls a "Moral Corrosion" within our military profession. Snider's explanation for this decline is that the Armed Forces focused too much on developing individual and unit military competence at the expense of developing moral character.[34]

Perhaps the most surprising indication of the decline in morality that has occurred throughout our Army reflects in the extremely disturbing trend of moral and ethical failures of senior leaders. Those individuals promoted to the highest ranks have an obligation to hold themselves to the highest standards. Actions contrary to the values of our organization have the effect of undermining the professional norms. Misconduct from the top sends a signal to the entire force that our personal wants and desires can come before our loyalty to our professional military ethic. They demonstrate that the moral code we so frequently tout is more of a facade than a foundation, form over substance.

Recent offenses committed by senior Army officers such as sexual misconduct, inappropriate use of government resources, fraud, and bigamy have contributed to an increasing cynicism among soldiers. Although the vast majority of senior officers hold themselves to high standards, the recent rash of inappropriate conduct has fostered a perception that our senior officer corps suffers from a sense of entitlement.

Even David Petraeus, the man who so many pointed to as one of the greatest military leaders of this generation, succumbed to temptations by engaging in an extramarital affair. All across the Army, soldiers, NCOs and officers were left wondering why someone who has commanded at the highest levels of the Army would allow himself to be put into such a situation and violate the moral code he advocated throughout his career in the Army. Col. Mike Meese, who served as a top staff member for Petraeus, best described the sentiment felt among the military community upon learning of Petraeus's affair saying, "It was a punch in the gut for those of us who know him."[35] Much has been written in recent years criticizing America's general officers as careerists, incompetents, and mediocrities who are unwilling to provide our civilian leaders with an accurate assessment of the wars.[36] The proponents of these views claim there is a systematic problem in the way our military promotes and educates senior level officers, which has resulted in junior and mid-grade officers losing confidence in their general officers.

Don Snider refers to this as a "trust gap" that has developed where junior leaders feel they have been let-down by their superiors.[37] If this gap already exists, then it is only widened by the recent string of immoral and unethical conduct by some of our senior leaders. For our senior Army officers to be described as "incompetent" is bad enough, but much worse is for them to be characterized as hypocritical and unwilling to abide by the same professional standards soldiers are expected to live by.

A Threat to Our Profession

As we look forward to the Army of 2020 and beyond, it is important for our Army to recognize these areas where we have fallen short of our professional expectations and ultimately lost some of the trust our Army Profession has worked so hard to obtain. If we claim our ethos is built upon a foundation of trust, then we must take action to correct our deficiencies that have started to undermine the bedrock of our profession.

Our civil-military relations need to be repaired to restore the trust between the Army and the American people. Military leaders must provide candid advice to civilian officials without overstepping their bounds. When decisions are made, they should be faithfully supported. To maintain a healthy all-volunteer force, we should also find ways to reach out to our neighboring communities to reverse the separation between soldiers and civilians that has been occurring.

Additionally, we need to reflect on the state of morality in our Army and find ways to improve the present situation. The high levels of suicide in the Army are unacceptable for a profession that prides itself on esprit de corps, discipline, and pride. Escalating rates of sexual harassment and sexual assault continue to diminish the trust between soldiers, which is vital to developing cohesive and effective units. The conduct of our senior officer corps must change if we hope for soldiers to take the Army Values seriously. Our best leaders understand the importance of our Army being a learning organization. Steps are already being taken to try to rectify some of these issues, but we must start by underscoring to the Army the importance of trust to our profession. As we continue to reeducate our units on the fundamental importance of the Profession of Arms, we must ensure all leaders are directly involved and accountable. Now is the time to address these challenges. Ultimately, the bedrock of our profession is at stake. ***MR***

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