



The Myths We Soldiers Tell Ourselves

*(and the Harm
These Myths Do)*

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When a man has so far corrupted and prostituted the chastity of his mind as to subscribe his professional belief to things he does not believe, he has prepared himself for the commission of every other crime. Can we conceive of anything more destructive to morality than this?¹

Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason*

A man who lies to himself, and believes his own lies, becomes unable to recognize truth, either in himself or in anyone else.²

Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*

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PHOTO: Muleskinner Jack Crabb (Dustin Hoffman) confronts Gen. George Armstrong Custer (Richard Mulligan) before the Battle of Little Big Horn in the film *Little Big Man*. (National General Pictures, 1970/Paramount, 2003).

THE ARMY ESPOUSES admirable values, and it is justifiably proud of its traditions of service. Today, America's Army is arguably the best-trained, most disciplined force in the nation's history, one that strives to fight effectively, legally, and ethically. However, while this self-image is certainly something we strive to fulfill, we have not always been as successful as we might wish. Regrettably, dishonesty and related trust problems plague the American Profession of Arms, human endeavor that it is. In the authors' 70-plus years of military experience, the root of this dishonesty is self-deception, something in which everyone indulges.

Illustrative of this malady was the Vietnam War, where self-deception and disillusionment watered America's loss of will at home and contributed to eventual defeat.³ In *Dereliction of Duty*, H.R. McMaster describes the lies from the National Command Authority that led to the war.⁴ The Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) supported these machinations with their silence. As McMaster describes it—

The president was lying, and he expected the Chiefs to lie as well or, at least to withhold the whole truth. Although the president should not have placed the Chiefs in that position, the flag officers should not have tolerated it when he had.⁵

Such lies set the conditions. In December 1964, Gen. William Westmoreland directed optimistic outlooks from senior military advisors, telling them: "As advisors we must accentuate the positive and bring best thought to bear to work out solutions to problems in a dynamic way."⁶ Consequently, reports

rarely reflected reality.⁷ Lt. Gen. William Peers, the lead investigator for the My Lai atrocity, reported a massive cover-up: “Efforts were made at every level of command from company to division to withhold and suppress information.”⁸ In a 1974 report that surveyed officers from six service schools, close to half admitted they had submitted false reports to higher, including inaccurate officer efficiency reports, body counts, and numbers of soldiers going absent without leave.⁹

When in command, Westmoreland not only believed he could control the media’s message but also fell victim to the upbeat propaganda he had directed: “The stubborn commitment of the high command to error defies belief,” the historian John Gates later said, referring to Westmoreland and other Vietnam War generals, “but the evidence of it would seem to be overwhelming.”¹⁰ Those leaders who lied to investigators about what had happened at My Lai or who, serving on juries, refused

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to punish the indicted had convinced themselves they were doing the right thing, protecting good Americans driven temporarily insane by the horrors of war.

To military leaders serving today, this analysis of the Vietnam War may strike uncomfortably close to home. A decade ago, the nation went to war in Iraq, ostensibly over weapons of mass destruction that the administration had convinced themselves were there. For media engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan, commanders have typically directed their subordinates to adhere to scripted talking points that may ignore some facts on the ground. There has also been little accountability exercised in the cases of officers and soldiers who have abused—or contributed to the abuse of—civilians and prisoners.

As before, there remains a huge gap between who we soldiers say we are and who we actually are, and

this gap is often due to institutionally reinforced self-deception.¹¹

The worst aspect of indulging in inaccurate self-assessments is the erosion of trust that accompanies it. When an institution adopts false beliefs about itself, it corrodes itself. Our institution’s unwitting promotion of self-deception remains not only the biggest obstacle to meaningfully professionalizing our military, but also remains a significant impediment to our Army’s fulfilling its core mission—defending the nation by winning favorable, enduring outcomes from our nation’s wars.

The Siren Song of Self-Deception

The impulse to self-deception calls to mind Nietzsche’s claim that the will to untruth is stronger than the will to truth.¹² Perhaps more accurately, we are sometimes driven by a “will to limited truth” to meet our selfish aims. People honestly calculate and, with good intentions, recalculate what reality is until they find a place where they are comfortable with their moral myths, where they can sit complacent. Soldiers cannot afford moral complacency.

The problem of “American exceptionalism.”

A prevalent form of this complacency involves rationalizing one’s own superiority above others. The myth of American exceptionalism permeating the U.S. military’s ranks is an example. It usually occurs when Americans apprehend the empirical fact that they enjoy remarkable freedoms and prosperity and transfer those accomplishments of their forebears into feelings of personal superiority. Instead of perceiving their heritage as a lucky accident, they irrationally perceive it as a personal virtue and a sign of their own superiority.

We can use the imagined racial superiority of the anti-Semite as a straw man to evaluate this sense of exceptionalism. Using this approach is not the same as saying that self-deceived soldiers dehumanize others to the degree that, say, German Nazis dehumanized Jews. Instead, it illuminates the psychological process underlying our own forms of exceptionalism by stretching this process to its logical extreme.

In *Anti-Semite and Jew*, Jean Paul Sartre says that by localizing all the evil in the world in the Jew, the anti-Semite objectifies himself as the Jew’s virtuous antagonist. He objectifies the Jew as the embodiment of evil and sees himself as an

elite human being.¹³ The anti-Semite is perhaps at first conscious of his fallibility, but finally rejects it through his hatreds. He lifts himself up by simply “being,” in this case by being non-Jew, rather than by “doing,” by acting in a manner that would in fact elevate himself.

As Sartre points out, if the Jew did not exist, the anti-Semite would create him. Sartre concludes, “Anti-Semitism is thus seen to be at bottom a form of Manichaeism.”¹⁴ By this he means the extreme, dehumanizing black-and-white outlook that led to pogroms against Jews and the Holocaust of World War II. Such attitudes are not entirely unfamiliar to some American service members. There is, for example, the American soldier in Iraq who said, “A lot of guys really supported the whole concept that if they don’t speak English and they have darker skin, they’re not as human as us, so we can do what we want.”¹⁵ There is the soldier at Abu Ghraib who, while forcing a detainee to masturbate above the face of another detainee, remarked, “Look at what these animals do when you leave them alone for two seconds.”¹⁶ And then there is the Army chief

of staff who compared Fallujah to “a huge rat’s nest” that was “festering” and needed to be “dealt with”—a metaphor that may be more unconsidered machismo than willful dehumanization, but that is still unsettlingly reminiscent of the depiction of Jews as a scurrying horde of rats in the infamous Nazi propaganda film, “The Eternal Jew.”¹⁷

Such extreme, dehumanizing words about the “other” is today the exception rather than the rule within our ranks. More commonly, this form of self-deception asserts itself as half-hearted applications of *the ethic of reciprocity* (what is more commonly known as “The Golden Rule”). That is, to some American “exceptionalists,” a restriction that applies to other nations and militaries does not necessarily or fully apply to the United States if, by applying it, an apparent American advantage is taken away.

The slippery slope of dehumanization. Failure to fully consider the ethic of reciprocity is apparent in the ongoing debate on torture. Nearly all American service members would call it “torture” if they were subjected to waterboarding, forced nudity, water



U.S. Army official SHARP poster. The Army’s problems with sexual harassment illustrate the efforts to overcome objectification of others.

dousing, extreme hot and cold temperatures, sleep deprivation, or any one of the so-called “enhanced interrogation techniques” (EITs). After all, the goal of these EITs is to inflict suffering so great that it overcomes the subject’s will to resist without physically marking or injuring the subject. Many of these same service members, though, become offended when any description of Americans applying these techniques refers to “torture.”¹⁸

Hazing, sexual harassment, sadistic “corrective training,” detainee abuse, torture, and murder usually derive from the similar delusion that other people are commodities and that it is okay to treat them as such. The difference is one of degree, rather than quality. This is why serious crimes often have small beginnings, and people refer to a “slippery moral slope” when discussing right and wrong. For the soldier at war, objectifying oneself as superior and the “other” as inferior can rapidly transform even minor abuses into very serious crimes.

At the heart of this delusion is self-interested self-deception. There is not only the desire to feel superior, but also there is the wish to make one’s core task—the killing of one’s enemies—as easy as possible. Soldiers tell themselves that the enemy is an inhuman “kraut,” “Jap,” “gook,” “dink,” or “rag-head,” and, by doing so, hope to remove all natural empathy toward those they aim to kill.

Leaders often condone this self-deception because they believe they are helping themselves and their troops to do what “must be done.” Unfortunately, while attempts at dehumanizing the enemy may make killing easier for some (at least in the short-term), these attempts can be the first steps on the road toward atrocities—acts that cannot occur without such dehumanization. Such attitudes cause unjustifiable harm to others, inspire the enemy to fight while hurting morale at home, and often inflict upon the perpetrators cognitive dissonance, deep regret, and “moral injury” (a condition that can lead to severe psychiatric problems and even suicide).¹⁹

An abundance of absolute princes. Reinforcing and strengthening self-deception within the ranks is what John Stuart Mill termed the “unlimited deference” accorded the powerful:

[W]hile everyone well knows himself to be fallible, few think it necessary to take any precautions against their own fallibility, or admit the supposition that any opinion, of



U.S. Army Values Tag. In the view of the authors, the implementation of Army values needs a review.

which they feel very certain, may be one of the examples of the error to which they acknowledge themselves to be liable. Absolute princes, or others who are accustomed to unlimited deference, usually feel this complete confidence in their own opinions on nearly all subjects. . . .²⁰

The U.S. military often suffers from virtual “absolute princes” in the form of command authority gone awry. Though not a general condition, it remains common enough among senior military leaders and commanders. Even popular culture makes fun of this tendency at the Army’s expense. In the satirical film *Little Big Man*, there is a scene where Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer (played by Richard Mulligan) announces his ability to tell a man’s profession just by his appearance.²¹ All of his subordinates assent to the truth of his special perceptive power. When he pronounces Dustin Hoffman’s character, Jack Crabb, to be “a muleskinner”—contrary to fact—even Jack himself assents to it so that he can get a job with the Army. Custer rides off satisfied with his powers of perspicuity. Such self-deception of course catches up with him at the Little Big Horn. The satire is funny because it evokes a truth we all recognize.

Those who assent to everything the “prince” says encourage further erosion of his ability to see error. The cycle toward incoherence becomes ever more pernicious as blind spots become entrenched. Leader and led immerse themselves in self-deception. The authors call this the “unlimited deference syndrome,” a condition that leads to real problems with managing agreement toward the best outcomes.

Even in the formal process of studying operational options, anticipating what will please the boss (via doctrine and built-in assumptions) is often the main shaper of proposed courses of action. In the authors’ experience, the courses of action a staff presents the commander are usually just shades of the anticipated. In going through formal motions of “analysis,” everyone loses track of the fact that foregone, unacknowledged conclusions are driving the process. Thus, flawed discourse yields flawed options. The rise of “design” in U.S. military planning is a tacit acknowledgement that this problem exists. Design methodology is an attempt to correct an institutional inability to properly frame problems, but it probably will not change the underlying problem of unlimited deference.²²

Enshrining self-deception. Military doctrine encourages self-deception via key articulations within each service’s codified ethos. Consider the Army’s well-worn leadership rubric “Be—Know—Do,” which was recently revamped as “attributes” (who leaders are and what they know) and “competencies” (what leaders do, because of their attributes).²³ The sequence of concepts in both of these frameworks leads people to think that “being” something precedes “doing” anything to achieve it. It reverses Aristotle’s virtue ethics, from which this approach was originally derived.²⁴ Aristotle wrote: “The virtues arise in us neither by nature nor against nature, but we are by nature able to acquire them, and reach our complete perfection through habit.”²⁵ Acquiring virtues is how character develops. Only when one develops the knowing habit of right action, does one become good. One learns, one does, and one becomes. Habit eventually forms the person one has educated oneself to become. So, for instance, one cannot simply pronounce oneself a “warrior” or “professional” and reasonably believe it must thus be so. Whether one is a philosopher, mason, physician, muleskinner, or machinist, only

training and habit lead to the realization of what one becomes, to being.

One expression of the pervasive be-do philosophy is the Army Values rubric. This rubric contributes to self-deception by convincing people that they are good, an ethical member of a values-based organization, even though it does very little to actually encourage right action. For example, before the Detainee Treatment Act of 2005 made “enhanced interrogation” illegal, one could employ Army Values to endorse harsh treatment of detainees. Those who used torture could argue they displayed

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“loyalty” to their nation and fellow troops by helping extract intelligence that might save lives. They could display “duty” to country and “selfless service” by their hard, dirty work for good ends. They could show proper “respect” for detainees, since they treated detainees like evil terrorists should be treated (meaning, with no respect). They could show “integrity” through the use of only approved techniques. They could embody “honor” by fulfilling the other Army values, especially the “personal courage” needed to deliberately agitate dangerous detainees.²⁶ Indeed, it is difficult to think of any tough ethical problem that this paradigm could help a soldier solve. For example, does one lie in service to one’s country? To protect one’s fellow soldiers?

The biggest problem with the Army Values is how they are sloganeered. By simply saying them, we soldiers frequently delude ourselves into thinking they make us more ethical, like they are a talisman. Indeed, they can actually set the stage for unethical action by inspiring moral complacency and allowing us to justify nearly any action that appears legal.²⁷

Another expression of the be-do philosophy is the enshrinement of key policies and programs, thereby stymieing honest debate. Such stultification is fairly common in large institutions, where the tendency is

to create a narrative that makes assent to form fashionable, demonizes the naysayers, and then enforces buy-in with rewards and punishments. Those who possess the proper faith are righteous, those who do not are unrighteous. The result is groupthink rather than a helpful, continuous, living dialectic concerning the problem at hand. Thanks to the unlimited deference associated with rank and command authority, the U.S. military is especially prone to this tendency.

Some examples of Army projects that have been susceptible to this dynamic include worthy endeavors like counterinsurgency, mission command, the “warrior project,” and the Profession of Arms campaign. All of these programs have suffered from various degrees of debilitating dogmatism, of which some advocates and participants may be blissfully unaware. The recent fall from grace of counterinsurgency, for instance, seems to have stemmed primarily from its over-zealous execution as the new religion.²⁸

Self-Deception Goes to War

Recent wars have brought moral issues into focus, which is a normal outcome. Acknowledging the good with the bad, we can gauge the force’s professionalism by how openly it addresses failures and takes steps to limit them.

Valuing form over substance. Unfortunately, our Army has suffered from mediocre, narcissistic, appearance-obsessed leaders too frequently. As an extreme instance, the book *Black Hearts* by Jim Frederick documents the downward spiral of one platoon in Iraq, its members so distraught by the deaths of comrades that they became increasingly abusive of Iraqis. Meanwhile, its brigade and battalion leadership remained completely ignorant of the moral cancer spreading within this platoon, focusing its attention instead on soldier appearances and by-the-book solutions to tactical problems. For example:

A lieutenant colonel down from brigade headquarters asked the platoon leader, Lieutenant Paul Fisher, why none of his men had shaved. Fisher, after the Alamo bridge incident, after all of the work and all of the loss, couldn’t hide his exasperation. “We drink all the water we have, sir, so that we don’t dehydrate,” he said. “We have been running nonstop since our guys got abducted. We are not really concerned

about our looks right now.” “I am just trying to keep the heat off of you, Lieutenant,” the lieutenant colonel said. “You guys are not looked upon too favorably these days.”²⁹

Members of this platoon eventually gang-raped a young Iraqi girl, then shot and immolated her, her little sister, and her parents. Months later, senior leaders were shocked at the revelations. However, the reader is left questioning whether this horrendous crime could even have occurred if these leaders and their subordinates had cared less about haircuts and shaves and more about what was really going on inside their soldiers’ heads.

Manipulating and ignoring the truth. Probably the most futile, quixotic endeavor in an age of the Internet and ubiquitous hand-held information devices are the attempts by many commanders to control what the media reports. In the authors’ experience, “controlling the narrative” has emerged as the hallmark of Army public relations. Via talking points and feel-good, often unsustainable public relations projects, commanders and their staffs vainly expend energy trying to convince everyone (sometimes themselves included) that, thanks to their efforts, progress is being made. They appear to believe that, if they trumpet something as “true” loudly and frequently enough, this thing will actually become reality. Leading the way in this regard, former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld vehemently denied there was an insurgency in Iraq, something he maintained for more than three years as he called insurgents everything but insurgents.³⁰ In such cases, the leader thinks he is right, and if he has a momentary moral epiphany that he is being dishonest, he tells himself how complicated things are and that the end justifies the means. If he has to manipulate appearances of reality to make his narrative “true,” so be it. Of course, such manipulation nearly always backfires, taking away the leader’s credibility and whatever strategic or tactical benefit that may have been at stake.

Frustrated by the media’s tendency to emphasize “bad news” rather than “good news” stories (“good news is no news,” we soldiers like to say), we tend in turn to dismiss all media and nongovernmental organization reporting as biased and unworthy of consideration. This is a grossly counterproductive

response: just because the media may have a bias to focus on sensational “bad news” does not make such news untrue.

The soldier and torture. As discussed above, objectifying others and treating them as commodities, as less than human, can lead to serious abuse. Compounding this problem is another delusion—the belief of leaders that such dehumanization can be controlled.

Consider the role that “enhanced interrogation techniques” and military Survival, Escape, Resistance, and Evasion (SERE) schools played in the abuse of prisoners in Iraq and Afghanistan. When EITs were formally promulgated via policy memoranda, one assumption was that they would be used only under strict supervision. After Rumsfeld approved EITs for use at Guantanamo Bay (“Gitmo”) in December 2002, this assumption largely held true at that location. There, the relatively high interrogator-to-detainee ratio and the presence of supervisory psychologists and, even more importantly, of large numbers of law enforcement personnel all helped limit occurrences of EITs evolving into worse crimes.

Tragically, this was far from the whole story. Soon after their approval at Gitmo, EITs migrated via formal policy memoranda to Afghanistan and then, shortly after, to Iraq.³¹ At places like Bagram, Abu Ghraib, Mosul, and al Qaim, relatively minor detainee abuse turned into horrific crimes that shocked the world.

However, more widespread and just as damaging was the informal, unsanctioned promulgation of harsh detainee treatment that grew from the set conditions. This occurred via the transfer of interrogators from one facility to another. Also, service members applied tactics they had learned or heard about at SERE schools.³² Most commonly, soldiers applied the same physical “corrective training” they themselves sometimes received to their prisoners.³³ Such informal promulgation occurred despite SERE cadre regularly briefing their trainees that they were not to treat detainees like they themselves were being treated and despite the assumption of some noncommissioned officers that their subordinates would realize that corrective training was only intended as a disciplinary measure for soldiers, not prisoners.

It seems that, once the impulse to dehumanize and degrade the other is set free, putting the genie

back in the bottle is nearly impossible. The result in the ongoing conflicts has been a steady boon for recruiters of America’s enemies.³⁴ Thus it is that another form of self-deception—the idea that we can control how, where, and when we dehumanize others—has greatly damaged our nation’s recent war efforts. Better to completely avoid the self-deception and insist detainees and adversaries be considered the human beings that they are.

A failure of accountability. The scale at which detainee abuse took place during the first few

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years of our conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq is disturbing. The military’s abject failure to hold offenders accountable for their crimes is almost as bad. Of the 100 detainees who died in U.S. custody between 2002 and 2006, 45 are confirmed or suspected murder victims.³⁵ Of these, eight are known to have been tortured to death.³⁶ Only half of these eight cases resulted in punishment for U.S. service members, with five months in jail being the harshest punishment meted out.³⁷

This is only a summary of the most extreme cases. During the last decade, the military opened hundreds of investigations concerning detainee abuse. Investigators closed most of these quickly, not because there was nothing to them, but because investigators lacked the resources, command support, or willpower to meaningfully investigate them.³⁸ Even in those cases where investigators found criminal negligence, military juries and commanders consistently chose not to punish wrongdoers. Of the hundreds of cases of alleged abuse the under-resourced “Detainee Abuse Task Force” investigated in Iraq, not one went to court martial: “It didn’t accomplish anything,” John Renaud, the warrant officer who led the task force later said. “It was a whitewash.”³⁹

A 2006 report by three human rights organizations found, “Of the hundreds of personnel implicated in detainee abuse, only ten people have been

sentenced to a year or more in prison”—four of these as a result of the highly publicized crimes they had committed at Abu Ghraib.⁴⁰ More worrying still, strong anecdotal evidence suggests that reported crimes were only the small, visible portion of the massive iceberg of detainee abuse, the vast bulk of which is impossible to accurately measure because it went unreported.⁴¹

Mental Health Advisory Teams conducted two surveys in Iraq and Afghanistan that support this conclusion. At the request of Gen. David Petraeus, the Multinational Forces-Iraq commander, the fourth iteration of their survey included questions pertaining to battlefield conduct—the first time since World War II the ethics of service members had been systematically surveyed during combat.⁴² The results of this 2006 survey were distressing:

The survey found that only 47 percent of soldiers and 38 percent of marines agreed that noncombatants should be treated with dignity and respect. More than one-third of all soldiers and marines reported that torture should be allowed to save the life of a fellow soldier or marine, and less than half of marines said they would report a team member for unethical behavior. Also, 10 percent of soldiers and marines reported mistreating noncombatants or damaging property when it was not necessary.⁴³

A fifth survey reported a similar percentage of service members saying they had mistreated non-combatants and unnecessarily damaged locals' property.⁴⁴ However, for this 2007 survey, the particularly troublesome, previously highly publicized attitudinal questions were not asked.⁴⁵ Worse, although this 2007 report concluded that “soldiers who screened positive for mental health problems of depression, anxiety, or acute stress were significantly more likely to report engaging in unethical behaviors,” subsequent surveys did not pose any questions pertaining to U.S. battlefield conduct—thus avoiding potentially problematic findings.⁴⁶

Likely underlying much of this dismal, self-deceptive lack of accountability is the aforementioned myth of exceptionalism. A sense of American superiority makes it easier to tolerate and forgive offenses that we would decry if committed by the enemy. How can we hope to curtail such abuse

when we systematically fail to punish it? How can we hope to be trusted by local nationals and the international community when we so grossly fail to live up to our own proclaimed principles? The obvious answer to non-Americans is that Americans cannot be counted upon to curtail this abuse in the future, nor can we be trusted to keep any population's best interests in mind but our own.⁴⁷

What is also obvious is that the mistrust stemming from our failure to punish criminals in our ranks works against the legitimacy of U.S. military actions abroad. For instance, U.S. forces withdrew from Iraq earlier than desired because the Iraqi government insisted on jurisdiction over major crimes committed by American service members.⁴⁸ After the previous ten years, most Iraqi leaders had concluded that the American system of accountability was unjust.

Poor stewardship. One of the authors recently served in Afghanistan as the chief of intelligence for Task Force 2010, a joint, interagency unit consisting largely of law enforcement, intelligence, forensic accounting, and contract specialists. This unit is charged with reducing the flow of American taxpayer dollars via pilferage and U.S.-contracted insurgent front companies to the enemy.

During his deployment, the task force uncovered a massive criminal enterprise that, over the previous year, had stolen tens of millions of dollars of U.S. goods. Task Force 2010 needed the help of two tactical units to shut this operation down. The author and two of his analysts briefed a small group of staff officers from these units, hoping to persuade them to help. He prefaced this brief by saying, “I know counter-pilferage isn't sexy, but we'll get to the sexy stuff shortly.” One of his analysts gave the background to the investigation, then his other analyst described how profits from the sale of these stolen goods were supporting transnational terrorist and insurgent groups operating out of Pakistan.

The brief finished, one of the officers in the small audience said, “Ok, now where is the sexy stuff?” The author's jaw dropped: “What do you mean? The American taxpayer is giving millions of dollars to bad guys who are killing our troops. What's not important about that?” The officer asked, “Where are the guys planting IEDs? Where are the suicide bombers?” The author responded, “These guys provide bad guys with enough funding to buy tens

of thousands of IEDs, not to mention pay the salary of thousands of recruits. That's a helluva lot more important than killing someone planting an IED every night." Despite his impassioned plea, the staff officers ultimately left the brief unconvinced, promising to provide only limited support.

These staff officers clearly had a blind spot. Even if convinced that stopping this criminal enterprise would impact the insurgency far more than, say, removing 10 Taliban foot soldiers, they would not have cared. The root cause of their shortsightedness lay, not in ignorance or a lack of common sense, but in the lies we soldiers tell ourselves. We idealize ourselves as warriors, as noble killers, and we produce metrics of success to reinforce this objectification. For combat troops, preventing an IED network from receiving the support it needs to operate may seem unimportant—even if this support is indirectly, unknowingly, and shamefully provided by American taxpayers.⁴⁹

Although "body count" fell from favor long ago as an acceptable measure of effectiveness, our military is not all that far removed from this metric culturally. Most daily command briefs in combat zones begin with a roll-up of "SIGACTS" (significant acts) tallying friendly versus enemy casualties, and much reporting is likewise dominated by such SIGACTS—text that implicitly evaluates only friendly and enemy casualties as "significant." Combat support troops suffer from similarly flawed metrics. Logisticians, for example, love to report that supported combat troops are "green" on ammo, fuel, and food, but they rarely report or reliably track how many supplies were stolen enroute to the troops (even when these stolen supplies support the enemy). Losses of 10, 20, or a much higher percentage are acceptable, as long as combat troops are "green" on all supplies.

Becoming Who We Say We Are

We reap the fruits of our actions in ways too many military leaders simply fail to see, let alone acknowledge. This strategic sowing and harvesting is a pattern the Army has to break.

For example, when we fail to hold adequately accountable those soldiers who have abused locals, we are repeating a pattern within the history of expeditionary warfare. The Roman Empire's troubled experience in the Middle East illustrated

this problem. In Palestine, the lack of soldier accountability contributed heavily to the revolts the Romans suppressed there. Roman satirist Juvenal complained that Roman military courts in the provinces would rarely serve justice to soldiers abusing the inhabitants:

Military law: no soldier, it's stated, may sue or be tried except in camp, by court-martial. "But still, when an officer's trying a guardsman, surely the proceedings must be conducted with exemplary Justice? So if my complaint is legitimate I'm sure to get satisfaction." . . . Easier [to] find a witness to perjure himself against a civilian than one who'll tell the truth, if the truth's against a soldier's honor or interest . . . And it's in any commander's interest to see the bravest soldiers obtain the best recompense . . .⁵⁰

The U.S. military has to learn this lesson if we expect to achieve any success in the future from counterinsurgencies.

The authors argued in a previous essay, "War is a Moral Force," that the most critical considerations of human conflict are moral ones.⁵¹ These considerations were as important to the Romans as they are now to us, not something new to modern war. However, the information age has amplified the effects. There may have been a time when self-mythologizing served a useful purpose in war, but only ignorance could make it work. Today, in an age in which information flies around the world at the speed of light, immediately bringing great coherency and power to moral opinion, we can no longer assume such ignorance will last. We cannot long hope to be allowed to say we are one thing while actually being something else. Our spoken words (and values) must be indicative of our actions.

Within war's "moral domain," especially critical are judgments of right and wrong actions and the impact such judgments have on the fighting spirit of nations, communities, and warfighters. Self-deception, however, encourages an orientation toward the world that is antithetical to success in this domain. Believing the myth that we are *prima facie* better than others leaves us vulnerable to committing acts of strategically grave moral error that sustains our enemies' will to fight



Carrying off the Menorah from the Temple in Jerusalem depicted on a frieze on the Arch of Titus in the Forum Romanum, Via Sacra, Rome, Roman Forum, c. 82 C.E. Roman insensitivity to Jewish religious customs and abuse of civilians led to the Great Revolt that ended in 70 A.D. The ramifications of the war caused much political turmoil for Rome.

while sapping the fighting spirit of Americans and America’s allies.

Today, getting out of the self-mythologizing business as much as we humanly can has become a mission essential task. All human beings deceive themselves about why they do the things they do. The difference is one of degree. Officers and soldiers who practice real moral leadership are those who resist their own self-deceptive tendencies toward superiority, who genuinely care about others and their opinions, who judge people (themselves included) in accordance with their actions, and who actively search for ways that they could be wrong in order to correct their own courses. In John Stuart Mill’s words, these leaders treat their own fallibility seriously. Humility needs to be an Army Value.

Specifics. The following are some steps the modern Army should take to become a true, more effective profession:

- Transform the “be-do” misapprehension at the heart of Army doctrine to “Learn-Do-Become.”
- Give more serious attention to virtue education, to include reidentifying and redefining our selected values. Is it really necessary that we confine ourselves to virtues that fit the “LDRSHP” rubric? Should we not instead choose virtues based on meaning and mutual compatibility?⁵²
- Actively seek, and frankly acknowledge, truth from subordinates and external, disinterested sources (such as journalists), even when it contradicts earnestly desired narratives about events and ourselves.
- Actively fight the impulse to dehumanize our enemies and the populations in which they hide via doctrine, education, and leader-exemplars. Real honor comes from honoring humanity.
- Educate soldiers more thoroughly on the circumstances under which killing is justified and hold leaders more accountable than their subordinates.

- Develop a written professional ethic reinforced with a robust education and training program that actually prepares soldiers for tough ethical choices.
- Make leader efficiency reports more honest by ensuring text from 360-degree feedback is incorporated into these reports (especially critical for the evaluations of senior leaders).
- Make indicators that a unit is a learning organization an important element of leader evaluations.
- Always integrate moral with operational concerns when teaching military leaders how to successfully “manage violence.”⁵³ Simply avoiding what is clearly illegal should not be the point; striving to do what warring parties and allies will deem “the most just alternative” should be the point.
- Make operational leaders the moral “subject matter experts.”

What the Army values. Answering these issues of unlimited deference, self-serving idealizations, exceptionalism, valuing form over substance, manipulative communication, and

poor accountability must grow out of leadership. Serious accountability among the leadership and more honesty at the top could go a long way to shoring up self-deception in the force at large. Gauging the force’s opinions on these matters through data may help, but the stewards of the Army Profession should have the wisdom to see further than those they lead. They should seek a better integrity for the force at large.

In an organization as large as our military, one expects the institution to be vulnerable to myth making and to moral errors. The fact that these errors have already contributed to gross and counterproductive outrages at home and abroad, while greatly disturbing, is not what is most troubling. What is most troubling is that we can do far better than we have been doing but remain too blind, complacent, and self-deceived. Earning lasting success in war and the full trust of all will be impossible to achieve until we soldiers challenge, head on, the myths we tell ourselves. **MR**

NOTES

1. Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason*, available at <<http://www.deism.com/images/theageofreason1794.pdf>> (15 January 2013).

2. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, translated by Andrew R. MacAndrew (New York: Bantam Books, 1970).

3. The literature regarding U.S. military and political deception during the Vietnam War and its profoundly disillusioning effect on veterans and the American public is voluminous. Three of the best books are Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), Arnold Isaacs’s *Vietnam Shadows: the War, Its Ghosts, and Its Legacy* (New York: Modern Library, 2009); and H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998). The treatment of this subject in movies is also vast, of which Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* is probably the best known.

4. McMaster, 329-31.

5. *Ibid.*, 331.

6. Lewis Sorley, *Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011), 74.

7. *Ibid.*

8. William R. Peers, “Summary of Peers Report,” The University of Missouri-Kansas City, March 1970, <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/frtrial/mylai/summary_rpt.html> (16 February 2013).

9. Thomas E. Ricks, *The Generals* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2012), 312; U.S. Army War College, *Study on Military Professionalism*, 30 June 1970, B-31 through B-34.

10. John Gates, “American Military Leadership in the Vietnam War,” in *Military Leadership and Command: The John Biggs Cincinnati Lectures, 1987*, edited by Henry S. Bausum, 185-209, Lexington, VA: The VMI Foundation, Inc., 1987, 198.

11. This statement, which is this essay’s thesis, is supported by the 16 December 2011, “Army Profession Campaign Overview,” <<http://cape.army.mil/Army%20Profession/AP%20Campaign%20Briefing.pdf>>. The Center for the Army Profession and Ethic (CAPE) produced this brief, slide 8 of which says that “corrosive effects [exist] of [our] not always practicing what we espouse.”

12. Friedrich Nietzsche, Aphorism no. 4 in “Prejudices of Philosophers,” *Beyond Good and Evil* (Project Gutenberg: *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*), available at: <<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/nietzsche/1886/beyond-good-evil/index.htm>> (10 October 2012).

13. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), 40.

14. *Ibid.*, 15. Leonard Doyle, “A Dead Iraqi is Just Another Dead Iraqi: You Know, So What?” *The Independent*, 12 July 2007.

15. Seymour M. Hersh, “Torture at Abu Ghraib,” *New York Times*, 10 May 2004.

16. Richard Myers, “Perspectives,” *Newsweek*, 3 May 2004; David Livingstone Smith, *Less Than Human: Why We Demean, Enslave, and Exterminate Others* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2011), 254-55.

18. A completely different problem is the number of service members who would precisely call it torture and consider it legitimate. This essay addresses only the problem of soldiers who consider torture wrong but deceive themselves about American instances of it.

19. Moral injury is the cognitive dissonance that occurs when people see or do things that conflict with their own deeply held values: when a transgression is great enough to lead to serious inner conflict, it is the source of the moral injury. The notion that moral injury can lead to suicide is anecdotally but compellingly and poignantly explored in two recent books by journalists, Joshua E.S. Phillips, *None of Us Were Like This Before: American Soldiers and Torture* (New York: Verso, 2012) and Justine Sharrock, *Tortured: When Good Soldiers Do Bad Things* (New York: Verso, 2012).

20. John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, available at <<http://www.constitution.org/jsm/liberty.htm>> (17 September 2012).

21. *Little Big Man*, available at <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0065988/>> (14 February 2013).

22. Design methodology is the Army’s version of Systemic Operational Design developed by the Israeli Defense Forces under Brig Gen. Shimon Naveh as a means for developing better analysis of emergent conditions in framing complex situations. See U.S. Army Field Manual (FM) 5-0, *The Operations Process* (Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office [GPO], 26 March 2010), 3-1.

23. U.S. Army, Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 6-22, *Leadership* (Washington DC: GPO, August 2012), 1-5; FM 6-22, *Leadership* (Washington DC: GPO, October 2006) 2. In the Foreword to FM 6-22, GEN Peter Schoomaker, the Chief of the Staff of the Army at the time of publication, describes Be-Know-Do as the doctrine’s foundation, stating that the rubric expresses “what is required of leaders.”

24. FM 22-100, *Leadership* (Washington DC: GPO, August 1999) 1-6. This statement is testament to Aristotelian virtue ethics at the foundation of the Be-Know-Do rubric: “Character describes a person’s inner strength.”

25. Aristotle, “Habit and Virtue,” in *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by Terence Irwin (Indianapolis, Hackett, 1985), 33-40.

26. Both ADRP 6-22, *Leadership*, and the field manual it recently replaced, FM 6-22, *Leadership*, define the Army Value of “respect” as treating someone as they deserve. This definition does little to promote the humane treatment of prisoners, when captors believe that prisoners are “evil terrorists” and deserve to be treated like inhuman monsters or animals.

27. James R. Schlesinger, Harold Brown, Tillie K. Fowler, Charles A. Horner, James A. Blackwell Jr., “Final Report of the Independent Panel to Review DOD Detention Operations,” *FindLaw*, August 2004, <<http://news.findlaw.com/wp/docs/dod/abughraibrpt.pdf>> (16 February 2012), 124-5. The Schlesinger Panel’s independent investigation into the scale and causes of U.S. detainee abuse recognized that core values programs like the Army Values do more to promote self-deception than ethical behavior, concluding: “Core-values programs are grounded in organizational

efficacy rather than the moral good. They do not address humane treatment of the enemy and noncombatants, leaving military leaders and educators an incomplete tool box with which to deal with 'real-world' ethical problems. A professional ethics program addressing these situations would help equip them with a sharper moral compass for guidance in situations often riven with conflicting moral obligations."

28. T.X. Hammes, for example, states: "Counterinsurgency is not a strategy but rather a range of possible ways in the ends, ways, and means formulation of strategy. Furthermore, population-centric counterinsurgency, as documented in Field Manual 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, is only one possible approach to counterinsurgency." From "Counterinsurgency: Not a Strategy, but a Necessary Capability," *Joint Force Quarterly* 65 (April 2012): 49.

29. Jim Frederick, *Black Hearts: One Platoon's Descent into Madness in Iraq's Triangle of Death* (New York: Random House, 2010), 323-24.

30. Paul Richter, "Rumsfeld Hasn't Hit a Dead End in Forging Terms for Foe in Iraq," *Los Angeles Times*, 30 November 2005. Rather than call insurgents what they were, Rumsfeld used such terms as "Former Regime Loyalists," "Former Regime Elements," "Anti-Iraq Forces," "Deadenders," and "Enemies of the Legitimate Iraqi Government." He also denied there even was an insurgency.

31. Carl Levin, U.S. Senator Michigan, Senate Armed Services Committee, "Inquiry into the Treatment of Detainees in U.S. Custody," 2009, <<http://www.levin.senate.gov/issues/treatment-of-detainees-in-us-custody>> (16 November 2012), xvii-xxiv.

32. Douglas A. Pryer, *The Fight for the High Ground: The U.S. Army and Interrogation During Operation Iraqi Freedom, May 2003-April 2004* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Command and General Staff College Foundation Press, 2009), 27, 54, 58-60. As described in these cited pages, key leaders and/or other personnel of at least four of the facilities most notorious for employing torture during the first year of Operation Iraqi Freedom had previously attended Survival, Escape, Resistance, and Evasion (SERE) school. One interrogation chief had even been a SERE instructor.

33. Phillips, 58-62; Scott Ewing, "Discipline, Punishment, and Counterinsurgency," *Military Review* (Special Edition, Center for the Army Profession and Ethic) (September 2010): 27-37.

34. Matthew Alexander, "I'm Still Tortured by What I Saw in Iraq," *The Washington Post*, 30 November 2008, <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/11/28/AR2008112802242.html>> (22 April 2009). The interrogator Matthew Alexander is one of many who have testified to the recruitment boon that detainee abuse scandals provided anti-U.S. jihadist groups. During his in-brief at a special operations interrogation facility in Iraq, he was told that "the number one reason foreign fighters flocked there to fight were the abuses carried out at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo."

35. Hina Shamsi, "Command's Responsibility: Detainee Deaths in U.S. Custody in Iraq and Afghanistan," *Human Rights First*, edited by Deborah Pearlstein, February 2006, <<http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/wp-content/uploads/pdf/06221-etn-hrf-dic-rep-web.pdf>> (16 February 2012), 1.

36. *Ibid.*

37. *Ibid.*

38. Phillips, *None of Us Were Like This Before*, 110-29. This chapter ("Crimes of Omission") is a well-researched summary of both the inadequacies of U.S. military investigations into detainee abuse and the causes of these inadequacies.

39. Phillips, "Inside the Detainee Abuse Task Force," *The Nation*, May 2011, 26-31, 26.

40. Center for Human Rights and Global Justice, Human Rights First, Human Rights Watch, "By the Numbers: Findings of the Detainee Abuse and Accountability Project," *Human Rights First*, 22 February 2006, <<http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/wp-content/uploads/pdf/06425-etn-by-the-numbers.pdf>> (16 November 2012), 2.

41. Phillips, *None of Us Were Like This Before*, 50-67, 179-201; Tony Lagouranis and Allen Mikaelian, *Fear Up Harsh: An Army Interrogator's Dark Journey through Iraq* (New York: New American Library, 2008), 57-140. Phillips describes waterboarding and other tortures at a facility run by an armor battalion that was never investigated for abuse. Tony Lagouranis describes abuse at a facility that was investigated and that an investigator confirmed as abusive of detainees. However, despite the investigator's recommending punishment, no punishment was delivered, and when Lagouranis later interrogated at this facility, the abuse seems to have gotten even worse—abuse which subsequently went uninvestigated. See also Jim Frederick's *Black Hearts: One Platoon's Descent into Madness in Iraq's Triangle of Death* (UK: Pan MacMillan, 2010), which describes abuses of both locals and detainees that went uninvestigated. Such evidence, while anecdotal rather than conclusive, indicates that publicized detainee abuse may have only been the tip of the iceberg of what actually occurred.

42. Office of the Surgeon Multinational Force-Iraq and Office of the Surgeon United States Army Medical Command, "Mental Health Advisory Team (MHAT) IV, Operation Iraqi Freedom 05-07, Final Report," *Army Medicine*, 7 November 2006, <http://www.armymedicine.army.mil/reports/mhat/mhat_iv/MHAT_IV_Report_17NOV06.pdf> (3 June 2013).

43. Sara Wood, "Petraeus Urges Troops to Adhere to Ethical Standards," *U.S. Department of Defense News*, 11 May 2007, <<http://www.defense.gov/News/NewsArticle.aspx?ID=45983>> (3 June 2013).

44. Office of the Surgeon Multinational Force-Iraq and Office of the Command Surgeon and Office of the Surgeon General United States Army Medical Command, "Mental Health Advisory Team (MHAT) V, Operation Iraqi Freedom 06-08: Iraq; Operation Enduring Freedom 8: Afghanistan," *Army Medicine*, February 2008, 14, <http://www.armymedicine.army.mil/reports/mhat/mhat_v/mhat-v.cfm> (3 June 2013).

45. *Ibid.*

46. The 2008 and 2009 surveys can be found at <<http://www.armymedicine.army.mil/reports/reports.html>>.

47. A 2008 Pew Report based on a survey of 23 countries described growing anti-Americanism across the world, concluding, "In the view of much of the world, the United States has played the role of bully in the school yard, throwing its weight around with little regard for others' interests," <<http://www.pewglobal.org/2008/12/18/global-public-opinion-in-the-bush-years-2001-2008/>>.

48. Tim Arango and Michael S. Schmidt, "Iraq Denies Legal Immunity to U.S. Troops After 2011," 4 October 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/05/world/middleeast/iraqis-say-no-to-immunity-for-remaining-american-troops.html?_r=1&partner=rss&emc=rss> (15 October 2011).

49. Douglas A. Wissing, *Funding the Enemy: How US Taxpayers Bankroll the Taliban* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2012). Wissing's book is probably the best researched, most comprehensive open-source account of the extent to which American taxpayers unknowingly fund Afghanistan's insurgents.

50. Juvenal, XVI, translated by P. Green, quoted in Michael Grant's *The Army of the Caesars* (New York: M. Evans and Company, 1974), xxv.

51. Peter Fromm, Douglas Pryer, and Kevin Cutright, "War is a Moral Force," *Joint Force Quarterly* 64 (1st Quarter 2012).

52. For a philosopher's deconstruction of the Army Values and a more rational alternative, see Timothy Challans, *Awakening Warrior: Revolution in the Ethics of Warfare* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press), 2007, 85-91.

53. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge: Harvard College, 1957). Samuel Huntington famously described the peculiar skill of the military officer as being the successful "management of violence."