

MORALITY AND THE MILITARY PROFESSION:  
SOME PROBLEMS AND TENTATIVE SOLUTIONS

by

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The famous Battle of Hastings between Harold, the Saxon King of England, and Duke William of Normandy took place in the year 1066. This battle demonstrates how important technology is to war, and was important even 900 years ago. For in this battle a seemingly insignificant technological innovation proved to be the decisive factor. Both sides knew of its existence, but only the Normans employed it. This device had been employed by soldiers hundreds of years earlier; however, the Saxons failed to realize its possibilities. In fact the device had been perfected in France over the previous hundred years. At mid-morning the Normans advanced. The plan was to break the shield wall formed by the English with a cavalry charge covered by a hail of arrows from their bowmen. Nevertheless, the Normans were thrown back with the defensive force of spears and axes. In mid-afternoon the Normans staged a similar attack; once again the shield wall of the English repelled the attack. However, this time the English made a fatal mistake as they chased their attackers down the hill onto level ground. As the Normans realized what had happened, they turned on their pursuers, stood up in their stirrups (the device that allowed them to use their lances effectively) and in the words of one historian, ". . . the Norman Cavalry Shocktroop went through the English mass like a hot knife through butter."<sup>1</sup> It is lessons from history such as this that serve to remind us of the constant need to bring intelligence, imagination, and innovation to war technology. When military leaders fail to exercise such competence, soldiers die, battles are lost, and nations fall. Given these high stakes, the responsibility to be technically competent may be the first moral responsibility of military commanders and supervisors. However, technical incompetence is not the only source of an army's failure to function properly. One finding of the now well-publicized Army War College Study in 1970 was that ethical misconduct and incompetence were related in such a way that the failure in one leads to the failure in the other.<sup>2</sup> Assuming this is so, then soldiers die, battles are lost, and nations fall just as surely from moral incompetence as from technical incompetence. Given this close connection between morality and competence, and given that the writings of military professionals, and others, provide an accurate picture of the moral climate of the military services, then there is apparently some cause for concern; for these writers continually document failures in personal integrity, overconcern with image, careerism, and misplaced loyalty as typifying daily activity of military life.

What has produced this unhappy circumstance for the profession of arms? No doubt a number of factors, some of which I will comment on later, but as an

opening gambit we might consider the possibility that the high technology of modern war has made the need for ethical commitment less obvious than it once was. At the end of World War II General Patton was asked by a group of reporters to comment on the following statement:

"We've been told about the wonder weapons the Germans were working on, long-range rockets, push-button bombing, weapons that don't need soldiers." General Patton is said to have replied: "Wonder weapons? My God I don't see the wonder in them. Killing without heroics, nothing is glorified, nothing is reaffirmed. No heroes, no cowards, no troops, no generals. Only those who are left alive and those who are left dead. I am glad I won't live to see it."<sup>3</sup>

Probably none of us will live to see the General's worst fears fully realized, but there has already been a tremendous advancement in the technology of warfare. The modern soldier is commonly found in missile silos, computer rooms, engineering labs, management teams, personnel offices, finance centers, and so forth. Many of the television recruiting commercials for the services emphasize this fact. The appeal is not to enter the military service because it is a noble or good thing to do, but to enter because it will prepare a young man or woman for a technical occupation in civilian life. I think that this expectation, along with the technical requirements of soldiering in today's military, makes it difficult for these soldiers to comprehend the difference between what they are doing in the military and what they might do for IBM. As General Patton observed a number of years ago, it is not easy to perceive this technical activity, even in the military environment, as heroic or as affirming values. So, while the argument for integrity in the military profession based on the nature of war is no less valid than it ever was, perhaps it has become psychologically less appealing to the modern soldier. I recall a conversation with an Army sergeant who was a member of the component command in Japan. He related to me how he had been forced to engage in hand-to-hand combat with the Viet Cong because the supply system had failed to resupply his unit with ammunition. It struck me then, as it still does, how tremendously varied the duties of a modern soldier might be. This particular soldier was rigorously trained in combat so that he could engage in hand-to-hand combat and win, now he sat in my class learning to employ the programs of a third generation computer to plan for a future joint military operation. There are two points to be made here. First, this man, and others like him, understand very well the moral implications of failure to perform military duty; and second, he understands these implications in a way most modern soldiers never will. What is apparently needed is some way to instill in the modern technologically oriented soldier a keen sense of duty. In JSCOPE III it was decided that the only people who can really solve this problem are military commanders. I want to explore institutional possibilities for assisting commanders with this problem; but, first, let me say a bit more about the problem.

Earlier I listed several of the moral deficiencies of the military profession commonly cited by the professional literature. I now want to list more specifically what these are. One Army chaplain states:

All decisions, practices, goals, and values of the entire institutional structure which make ethical behavior difficult should be examined, beginning with the following: First, blatant or subtle forms of ethical relativism which blur the issue of what is right or wrong, or which bury it as a subject of little or no importance. Second, the exaggerated loyalty syndrome, where people are afraid to tell the truth and are discouraged from it. Third, the obsession with image, where people are not even interested in the truth. And last, the drive for success, in which ethical sensitivity is bought off or sold because of the personal need to achieve.<sup>4</sup>

In an article in Air University Review an Air Force Lieutenant Colonel makes these comments:

While the Chief emphasizes increased concern for the welfare of our people to promote greater productivity, many individual leaders seem to parrot the right words while they seek to fill the right squares in the right jobs to impress the right people in the right places at the right time. Our more perceptive personnel, especially the younger ones, who are more adept at reading body language, see through the double standard shown and lose faith in the integrity of the leader.<sup>5</sup>

He further reports that at a commanders' conference, when challenged to be completely honest a commander remarked, "Commanders are not martyrs. We did not make it this far by telling it like it really is."<sup>6</sup> Not one of the remaining 34 commanders challenged this statement. In their book Crisis in Command, Gabriel and Savage accused the Army of adopting "a new ethical code rooted in the entrepreneurial model of the modern business corporation."<sup>7</sup> All of these comments might be summarized as a general accusation that the traditional military values of integrity, duty, and selflessness have degenerated to imagemaking and self-interested careerism.

If I were to make an appraisal about the state of honor in the military profession strictly from my own experience, I would have to admit that, while there is some truth to these claims, I personally have never been asked to do anything I considered unethical. However, I do know people who have. One case I know of involved two units employing and exercising a new automated weapons system. Unit A could not make the system work and so continued to operate manually. Unit B reported that the system worked well. So, the commander of Unit A, fearing an unfavorable comparison with Unit B, required his personnel to submit false reports concerning the reli-

ability of the weapons system. In another case a unit commander pressured a young lieutenant to falsify a security investigation in order to cover for a friend. In still another instance, while I was observing two of the Air Force Academy's Honor Representatives brief a group of liaison officers, one of the officers, an Air Force major, made this comment, "I think that the Honor Code you have here at the Academy is just fine; it is exactly what you need here. However, when you get out in the Air Force, you may have to learn to tolerate." This comment was followed by another officer's, "Yes, remember, you can only fall on your sword once." My perception is that most junior officers believe these comments are correct. In addition, I continually hear reports from cadets returning from summer programs, which involve them in the activities of Air Force units, that they see breaches of integrity; apparently, they often get a poor impression of Air Force members.

I suppose that, given all of this, one might jump to the conclusion that ethical problems in the military are at an epidemic proportion. I doubt that this is so. However, ethical problems have reached the point at which they are certainly troublesome. If nothing else, they seem to affect our confidence in ourselves. I don't believe that I can provide a method of solving these problems that will ensure the level of integrity in the armed forces will reach a new height, but I do think that progress can be made in winning support for ethical standards. It seems to me that there is room for improvement by the military institution in three areas. First, I believe there is a certain kind of institutional pressure in the military that encourages officers to go beyond healthy ambition. Second, there is no clearly stated and promulgated ethical standard; and third, there is no well-thought-out ethics education program. Naturally the comments that follow are based on my experience and observations in the Air Force. So, what I have to say may not apply to the other services, although I think it will, at least in concept.

First, what is the nature of this pressure that induces many officers to move from healthy ambition to what might be described as blind ambition? Officially it is called career management. It is backed up by the "up-or-out" promotion system; and it looks, on the surface, like a benign, efficient method by which to engage talented people in fair competition to fulfill career goals and ensure the right people are promoted to the right rank and job. It may actually accomplish these objectives in many cases. But I am quite certain that this system also produces unhealthy and, therefore, undesirable side effects. Officers are constantly encouraged to engage in what often look like ticket-punching exercises and square-filling projects. We must attend the right schools, pursue the right jobs, work for the right endorsements, avoid low promotion career fields, etc. There is nothing wrong with career advancement; but all too often career advancement is manifested as careerism where the real aim is to game the system in order to create a good record for a promotion board, rather than earnestly try to do a good job and allow promotion to follow as a matter of course. And is this so surprising? What is at stake for each officer at a promotion board (at least up to the grade of O5) is not merely a promotion or self-image, but a career, a life's work. I have talked to a number of officers who express

great relief when they make this promotion. They tell me that it is not the thought of working less or being less dedicated than they once were, but that this promotion provides relief from a coercive system. So now, should they feel that their commander is asking them to do something they consider either stupid or unethical, there is not the coercive threat of a death blow to a career that there once was. Many captains and majors I have talked with express this same sentiment as they look forward to the promotion that marks a successful career and basically guarantees a complete career. In Vietnam the officers who most often refused to obey orders they considered either stupid or unethical were not the career professionals, but the reserve officers who were not career minded.<sup>8</sup> Should we conclude from this that reserve officers are persons of greater integrity than career officers? I think not. The difference is that the reserve officer could not be so easily coerced by the threat of a bad effectiveness report. The reserve officer did not have so much at stake.

If it is true, and I think that it is, that the up-or-out system is the underlying cause of the pressure to conform in situations where protest is proper, then what should the services do? I think the services may have to decide what they want most. The present promotion system has proved to be an effective means of control and perhaps has provided necessary healthy competition in many cases. However, if I and others who think this way are correct, then the system has also produced a great deal of pressure to conform to or even initiate unethical activities. Remember the liaison officer who said to an Honor Representative that "you can only fall on your sword once." It is so easy to rationalize away each small unethical act as relatively unimportant and to think it is not worth risking a bad effectiveness report over, until a life-long habit of rationalization begins to guide all such decisions. Perhaps it is too much to ask of morally good people that they risk a career to uphold a standard, even one they believe in. After all, how many of us are made of the stuff of martyrs? Recall the remark of the commander who said, "Commanders are not martyrs. We did not make it this far by telling it like it really is." What is needed here is a safe avenue of protest, or perhaps the whole promotion system needs to be reconsidered in light of its true cost.

The second factor, which I earlier suggested affects moral integrity in the services, is the absence of a clearly stated and well-promulgated ethical standard. If this sounds like a call for a military code of ethics, that's because it is. This suggestion proved to be quite unpopular at JSCOPE III when proposed by Professor Richard Gabriel, but I want to examine the issue of a written code a bit further. In general, I think that it would be a good thing for the military profession to state what its standards are, just as in 1955 President Eisenhower placed into effect the Code of Conduct. This code was to serve as the moral standard for soldiers in combat, and especially for prisoners of war. What is needed is a similar code which embodies the ethics of the everyday which commanders would be charged to uphold. Let us examine some of the standard objections to a written code. It is often argued that there is an unwritten code and it is this code which is transmitted by the practice of the senior members of the profession.

And, further, that even if there was a written code, it would still be the practice of senior members that transmits the real code. No doubt this is true, but I fail to see how this diminishes the value of a written code. A written standard provides guidance to senior as well as junior members and is a measure of the mentors as well as the "mentees." It would also be easier for the senior members of the profession to call attention to the standards if they were written. Another objection to the idea of a written code is that the written code may create more problems than it solves because there would be a thousand interpretations of it. This argument is quite puzzling. If it is meant that the written code will be subject to various interpretations while the unwritten code will not, then this is indeed very curious. What sort of immunity from numerous interpretations is it that an unwritten code enjoys that a written code does not? If the unwritten code can be spoken, then it too, just like a written code, can be misinterpreted or interpreted in various ways. If it is true that there will be a thousand interpretations of a written code, then we must be a thousand times worse off without it because there will be a thousand interpretations of a thousand different unwritten codes. Now, just what is the unwritten code? I think that a real case could be made that at least one of the unwritten codes is the following: "It's a dog-eat-dog world; you've got to look out for yourself because no one else will. Take care of yourself first, your friends, and your boss." I can't recall how many times I heard the first Air Force officer that I worked for, a lieutenant colonel, tell me, "You've got to look out for old number one." Unwritten codes like this have led me to believe that it would be useful for the services to adopt a written statement of professional ethics. Presently, these unwritten codes go unchallenged by any official ethic. Generally, the most forceful argument against a written code is that it is impossible to enforce. That is, if anyone is thinking of administering the code with honor courts or honor boards, then that is just impractical. With this argument I am in complete agreement. After working closely with the Honor Code at the Air Force Academy, both its instruction and administration, and observing the difficulties associated with the administrative process, I fear that any attempt to similarly administer a code on a vastly expanded scale would end in an administrative nightmare. Notice that granting the merits of this argument does not show that a code is either useless or impossible, but only indicates that there are limits on how a code could be enforced. Perhaps a more realistic way to encourage support for professional ethics is to evaluate an officer's performance in this area as the Air Force presently evaluates human relations skills, and that is to include the evaluation on the effectiveness report. My real interest in having a written code is not, however, for the purpose of enforcement, but of enlightenment. This, then, brings us to the third area which I identified as a problem area for the military institution, ethics education.

As I reflect back on my own ethical training in the military, there is very little to reflect on. At Officer's Training School, which I attended nine years ago, I recall a great deal of instruction on drill and ceremonies, communication, leadership, management concepts, and Air Force organization; but I don't recall a single lesson on ethics although I am sure there must

have been at least one. One is exactly what I recall from Squadron Officers' School (a three-month school for junior officers). Currently, there is no ongoing ethics education program in the Air Force as there is for human relations, drug, and alcohol abuse. Both West Point and the Air Force Academy teach a single ethics course as part of the core. I believe that an independent assessment, by anyone who understands the complexity of the subject, would require officer candidates to know more about ethical decisions and particular ethical dilemmas than a one-semester course at an Academy or its equivalent in officer training programs elsewhere could possibly provide. One contemporary psychologist states:

But if the movement to teach ethics is serious about developing not only the capacity to think ethically but also the commitment to act ethically, then it will have to find ways to fire the will as well as the intellect, to engage the heart as deeply as the mind, and to put will, intellect, and feeling to the test of behavior. Armchairing alone won't do the job. Engaging and developing the whole person is unquestionably a tall order, more than any one-semester course can do adequately, perhaps more than many educational instructions are prepared to tackle, but that, from the standpoint of moral psychology, is the size of the task.<sup>9</sup>

The point is that the military services have never really made a wellplanned and comprehensive attempt at ethics education. I don't mean to fault them for this because, in times past, perhaps there was no real reason to think they should. But given present circumstances, there is.

Of course the question can always be raised, and I think it needs to be raised, what is the connection between ethics education and ethical behavior? Is there a connection? Many would argue that there is not. In an interview after Watergate, John Dean was asked:

"Do you think that the outcome of your career might have been different had the law school focused on the questions of professional responsibility to a greater extent?" He replied, "No, I don't think so. I must say that I knew that the things I was doing were wrong, and one learns the difference between right and wrong long before one enters law school. A course in legal ethics wouldn't have changed anything."<sup>10</sup>

John Dean should have taken a course in ethics, and then he might not have made this comment. If he had taken a course of ethics, he would have learned that, in most courses at least, there is no attempt to teach a student right from wrong, at least not in the ordinary sense. What most university ethics courses teach is ethical theory and moral dilemma resolution. This amounts to trying to understand what makes a right act right or a wrong act wrong and then applying whatever moral insight is obtained through this study to some difficult moral questions. I suspect that what

John Dean meant when he said that he knew right from wrong was that he knew it was against the rules to do what he did. Knowing some act violates a rule and understanding the validity of the rule and believing in the rule and the point of view that backs it up are two different things. Consider the things you tell your children about morality. What rules do you recommend to them? Do you merely tell them the rules or do you attempt to provide an explanation of the importance of the rules? It seems obvious to me that the explanation of why right is right and wrong is wrong is as important as the rule itself. This is what ethics courses typically explore. I cannot say for certain that if John Dean had taken an ethics course, even a good one, he would not have behaved as he did; but neither should he say, as he does, that it would have made no difference. The point is, if explanation and justification are taken to be important in gaining allegiance to a moral standard, then ethics education can be a valuable part of professional training.

One might ask: What would a credible ethics education program look like? I think that the service academies should require at least two courses: a basic course in ethical theory followed by a problems course, focusing on moral problems relevant to the military profession. This will allow time to adequately cover both topics whereas a single course does not. Further, the courses could be spaced at last a year apart. Some studies indicate there is a "sleeper effect" following a course in ethics. This means that the effects of the course do not show up in the students' thinking or behavior until a year later. By spacing the courses out in this manner, the second course could better take advantage of that effect, plus whatever natural maturing might also take place. A comparable program could be worked out for other commissioning sources. Beyond this, there needs to be an ongoing program aimed at continuous ethics education for all service members. I think that there are some parallels between the need for an ethics program and the need that existed in the Air Force ten years ago for a social actions program. In 1971 the Chief of Staff of the Air Force established a functional area to address problems of race relations and drug and alcohol abuse. This move was made in response to the civil rights movement and the "now generation," both of which had a significant impact on the attitudes of persons entering the military service in the sixties and seventies. The perception was that an immediate and, hopefully, well-thought-out counter-attack was in order. The result was the social actions program.<sup>11</sup> Hasn't there been similar phenomena with regard to ethical attitudes? Whether we call it the "now generation," the "me generation" or whatever, the attitudes of young people towards the traditional military values are not what they once were. I have seen the following experiment conducted several times. An Honor Representative at the Academy is teaching the fourth classmen a lesson on the Honor Code. He asks, "How many of you cheated in high school?" Inevitably 95% of them will hold up their hand. Just as inevitably, the group with their hands up accuse the others of lying. The declaration is that "everyone cheats in high school." The simple virtues of honesty as required by the Honor Code are a drastic change for most new cadets. It seems clear to me that a major counterattack is called for here, that a functional area needs to be established within each service to devel-



op an initial and ongoing ethics education program that will address the moral issues in the military profession. It seems that the Army has already taken a step in this direction with the establishment of the Ethics Division at the Soldier Support Center. Perhaps some sort of joint service task force should be established to develop a program that could then be tailored and administered by each service to suit its own needs.

Let me now briefly summarize the ground I have covered. The basic assumption was that only commanders and supervisors can make a significant change in the military. This is true whether we are talking about moral development or dress codes. The question then posed was, what can the military institution do to help commanders and supervisors ensure high moral standards are maintained? My answer, three things. First, the institution can take the pressure off by providing a safe avenue of dissent over moral issues, and this may mean modifying the promotion system's up-or-out policy. Second, adopt a written ethical standard similar to the Code of Conduct so that the ethical requirements of the military profession will be clear, uniform, and well promulgated. Finally, create an office of primary responsibility for ethics education. If these actions are taken, it seems to me that we could anticipate, in the long term, significant improvement in the moral climate of the military services. If some substantial effort is not adopted, which will certainly include an investment of manpower and money, I fear that we may find ourselves like the Saxons, being hacked to pieces by the Normans, not because they thought to use a stirrup when we didn't, but because our moral failures destroyed, along with our personal integrity, the integrity of the military instrument as a fighting force.

#### NOTES

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