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WHERE PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL ETHICS MEET

PRESENTED

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by

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One of the most sensitive issues facing military educators, especially those involved in leadership programs, is the relationship between military ethics and personal ethics. The former area of study is clearly legitimate; the latter has the potential to be litigious. Since most people develop their personal ethics in relation to religious doctrine (or in reaction to it), how can a large, secular institution such as the American military officially address the role of personal ethics? There seem to be enormous chances of offending the personally held beliefs of some of our members ~~w~~ho are drawn from all sectors of our pluralistic society. We usually approach the overall subject under the rubric of "military ethics." This sounds neutral enough, and it works fine until we get to the concept of "integrity." Here we approach the realm of personal ethics, and our grounds for teaching begin to get slippery, partly because the concept is vague. However, I think a comprehensive interpretation of integrity is exactly what we need to restore the divisive topic of personal ethics to its rightful place in a discussion of military ethics. This morning I will talk about, first, the problem we encounter in teaching integrity as a military virtue; second, develop a definition of integrity which will overcome most of those problems; and, third, explain what common standards of virtue I use to describe a person of integrity to a pluralistic audience.

To start this discussion, we should focus on the purpose of our teaching: the student. What goes through the mind of a military person of any rank when he or she learns of a require--

ment to attend a course in military ethics? Probably many things, but I'll hazard a guess that the "bottom line," especially for younger people, is something like this: "They are going to teach me how to act in various situations." Sometimes we do that --for example, when we explain the Code of Conduct. But I'll also hazard a guess that many times the instructor, especially if it is a senior ranking guest lecturer, goes into the session primarily intent on conveying a sense of why one should behave in a certain way. This noble purpose is fine unless all the instruction is on why one should be, say, a patriot and ignores the how of being a patriot. The student who expects to discover "how" will be very frustrated, and not much learning will have taken place. In my career, and in the school where I now teach, I have heard many speakers wax eloquent on the importance of ethics in the military. However, the first question in the question and answer period is almost always, "What do I do when my supervisor tells me to falsify a report?" The speaker talked about why, and the student wanted to learn how.

There are two points to be made from this illustration: the more obvious one being the need to blend our idealism with a healthy dose of pragmatism to get effective teaching. But more important is the fact that many students want to talk about ethics on a personal level--even though we seem officially reluctant to approach the subject. The military is not alone in this problem. In 1985 the U. S. News & World Report said there were over 11,000 college courses in applied or professional ethics, but not much on personal ethics.

It quoted Christina Hoff Sommers, the author of Vice and Virtue in Everyday Life as saying: "Too little attention is

paid to the personal aspects of morality--courage, compassion, generosity, honor and self-respect, or on the negative side, hypocrisy, self-delusion, jealousy and narcissism." ¹ Any profession that includes integrity among its virtues has a wonderful opportunity to correct the underemphasis on personal ethics.

Let's return to the problem of "why and how" and state that dichotomy in ethical terms. I have had some success by making them parallel to values and virtues. Values are those concepts, such as "duty, honor, country," which give meaning to our lives; they explain why we act. One of the surest ways to show that we value something is to modify our behavior away from the norm (e.g. short hair in the military or a priest's vows of celibacy). Virtues are standards of exemplary behavior; they are precepts which govern how we should act personally in relation to the values we profess.

Part of the solution in reconciling personal ethics to military ethics is understanding that most students (although they would never use this term) are interested in virtuous behavior. There is no formal code of military virtues, but many writers cite these as primary ones: obedience, courage, selflessness, loyalty, and integrity. Colonel Malham Wakin, a leading scholar of military ethics, says of these virtues, "[They] are not merely 'nice to have,' they are functional imperatives in the military profession." ² In other words, if we are going to keep the peace or win in combat, the military must inculcate these virtues in all of its members. The question is, How do we teach these military virtues?

There is no significant controversy in teaching the first four on the list. Samuel Huntington claimed that obedience is the

most distinctive principle of behavior in the military. But more recently, Wakin and other writers, such as Sir John Hackett, have emphasized the preeminence of integrity. If we follow the lead of these later scholars, then we as military educators must find an acceptable way to teach the behaviors expected of a person of integrity in our profession. How do we do that and avoid getting into the realm of religion or sectarian dogma?

The starting point is to be more precise on the meaning of the word "integrity." It is a much used, seldom explained word. Frequently, one will hear a speaker say something like, "Integrity is ~~z~~essential because . . ." But saying it is essential does not define it. In 1983 the then Air Force Chief of Staff, General Gabriel, said, "Integrity demands of each individual the highest standards of personal and professional honesty, and an unfaltering devotion to duty." Again, this is not a definition, but it does convey what I think is the most common understanding of the word--the idea of truthfulness. However, truthfulness by itself is not enough. Suppose a man's wife should ask him every Monday morning if he was unfaithful during the weekend, and he answers "yes." We may admire his truthfulness and still question his integrity.

Many speakers seem to be calling for much more than honesty when they speak of military professionals having integrity. When Colonel Wakin says, "Integrity is the foundation virtue for military leaders,"³ he clearly has in mind an ideal of officers and NCOs with highly developed moral sensitivity and convictions. The Oxford English Dictionary cites the root word "integer" and the basic idea of wholeness (i.e. no part taken away or missing). It gives

two useful definitions when "integrity" is used in a moral sense: First, "Unimpaired moral state; freedom from moral corruption; innocence, sinlessness." (This definition stresses spiritual wholeness.) Secondly, "Soundness of moral principle; the character of uncorrupted virtue, especially in relation to truth and fair dealing; uprightness, honesty, sincerity." I submit that what is really meant by most speakers who plead for integrity is contained in the phrase "the character of uncorrupted virtue." They envision a military professional who because of the virtuous conduct of his or her own life would have the moral authority (in addition to the legal) to demand obedience, loyalty, courage, selflessness, and integrity in others; he or she would be trusted by the public to lead their sons and daughters in service to their country.

If integrity is indispensable to the military profession, we ought to teach it; but with the great diversity of people coming into the military from differing value systems and with various educational backgrounds, is it feasible to hope that some common understanding of the word "integrity" and the phrase "character of uncorrupted virtue" can be achieved? If personal integrity is truly the "foundation virtue" of military leaders, then we have no choice but to find some behavior standards which are so basic to our society that almost all citizens of good will could recognize their moral authority. I believe there are ethical guidelines which have enough historical lineage and philosophical breadth to appeal to men and women who have committed to serving their country.

These standards are known to many as the Seven Cardinal Virtues:

Justice
Courage
Temperance

Prudence
Faith
Hope
Charity

These principles of virtuous behavior have the traditional sanction of Greek, Roman, and Judeo-Christian teaching behind them; they also have appeal based on the grounds of reason alone. The military as a secular institution cannot be in the business of propagating religious doctrine, but neither does it have to ignore the wisdom of the ages simply because some of it has been incorporated into the teachings of one or more religions. Regardless of "functional necessity," much of the insistence on integrity in the military professional can be reduced to the desire (or hope) that our leaders be good people. And in western civilization, the traditional way to become a good person is to model oneself on these seven virtues.

There are a few points of clarification an instructor can mention about this list which will dispel student fears that they have walked into church instead of a military briefing. The most important is what I reference in my title--on the issue of integrity, professional and personal ethics meet. Next, these standards are not a rigid code requiring no thought; instead they are guidelines by which we can judge moral actions. While they can make us more aware of some of the ramifications of moral actions, they are certainly not going to lead all people to the same conclusion about a specific moral dilemma such as abortion.

A thorough explanation of each virtue would fill several volumes, but the following brief comments will show how adherence to these principles could help us in moral dilemmas and lead us

toward the "character of uncorrupted virtue" which a person of integrity should have. When this list of seven virtues was being formulated by the philosophers of the Middle Ages, it brought together the best thinking on moral conduct of the ancient Greek, Roman, and Hebrew worlds. The first four virtues on the list can be found in the writings of Aristotle and Plato, and the Old Testament contains such gems as, "He that ruleth over men must be just." (II Samuel, 23:3) These were not the only virtues the classical philosophers discussed, but they emerged as the most important.

I would now like to discuss a couple of points on each of these virtues to show how I use this list in my teaching.

Justice usually heads the list, and its importance for the training and conduct of today's military leaders cannot be overestimated. The theory of "just wars" and the complications which nuclear weapons have brought to the concept of proportionate force are issues that should affect almost every strategic and tactical decision we make. On a more personal level, an officer or NCO who is not just (and this includes honesty and fairness) will have a hard time leading his or her troops. That person may get obedience, but will not be given any loyalty.

Courage, of course, is so basic to the profession of arms that it has made its own way onto the list of military virtues. Without physical courage, a leader cannot set the example; without moral courage, he or she cannot be trusted.

Temperance brings the principle of moderation into consideration. In combat this virtue would probably be subordinated to courage and daring, but in reality we do not spend much time in actual combat. The rest of our lives the virtue

of temperance would be as applicable to us as to anybody else. One important point here is that these virtues are not rigid and codified as are, say, the ten commandments. At times justice may be more important than charity (or mercy), just as courage may be needed more at a given moment than temperance.

This leads to the fourth item on the list, prudence. To many this concept would not normally be thought of as a virtue because of its modern, negative connotations (prude, lack of conviction). But to the ancient world, this virtue meant "practical wisdom."⁴ It was the ability to accomplish things--to decide, for example, if a situation demanded more courage or more temperance. Odysseus was the great example of practical wisdom among the Greek warrior heroes. He exemplified this trait many ways--perhaps the most famous was his creative idea to end the Trojan War. Aristotle thought of these virtues as means between extremes; for example courage was the mean between cowardice and foolhardiness. Prudence would be the mean between excessive caution on the one hand and expediency on the other. While, in modern times, we have let the idea of expediency taint the word "prudence," it is instructive to note that the ability to get things done was considered a major virtue by the classical philosophers and that the same characteristic is used by some contemporary scholars to define "leadership." Aristotle gave particular importance to it: "Virtue makes us aim at the right end, and prudence (practical wisdom) makes us take the right means."⁵

The last three virtues all have special meaning in Christian theology, but their normal, secular meanings are still relevant

to military professionals. Random House lists as the first meaning of faith, "confidence or trust in a person or thing" and later, "belief in anything, as a code of ethics." Both of these definitions are frequently used by soldiers, and all of the former prisoners of war who address the students at my school speak cogently of their faith in the Code of Conduct. Those so inclined also speak rather unabashedly about the importance of religious faith to their survival, which is further proof of the validity of "faith" as a model of virtuous behavior for the military professional.

The virtue of hope has similar worth even in its secular definition: First, as a noun it means "the feeling that what is desired is also possible, or that events may turn out for the best"; and second as a verb, "to look forward to with desire and reasonable confidence." Clearly, hope sustained the prisoners of war; and given the uncertainties of war, hope is a much better model of behavior for a leader to adopt than its antonyms: hopeless, despairing, despondent, and desperate.

The final virtue, charity, has a multitude of meanings, but two from the Oxford English Dictionary seem particularly appropriate in the American military context: First "Love, kindness, affection, now especially with some notion of generous or spontaneous goodness"; and second "A disposition to judge leniently and hopefully of the character, aims, and destinies of others, to make allowance of their apparent faults and shortcomings; large-heartedness." The latter definition might be shortened to "magnanimity" (once called the trait of kings) or "compassion." Too much of this virtue, of course, could make one "too soft" to be

a good leader; but, conversely, absence of this virtue could destroy the loyalty and crush the spirit of one's troops. Again, the power of this list of virtues is the flexibility it gives one to adopt the most appropriate combination of virtuous behaviors. In less grandiose terms, every effectiveness report we write requires us to balance justice against charity. The command system has a perfect right to ask us to judge accurately the capabilities of our subordinates; however, if we want to get them promoted, we know we must greatly exaggerate (a euphemism) on the report. This is a conflict between truthfulness and compassion which prudence helps most of us resolve in favor of compassion. Why? Because most of us are willing to live with the guilt of a small lie to uphold one of the great principles of leadership: take care of your troops. That noble end, however, should not deaden our moral sensitivity to the fact that we have compromised our integrity. Could we still then have a "character of uncorrupted virtue"? Yes, probably. If we were consistent in our efforts to balance these concerns for all of our subordinates, our character would have the reputation for fairness--and practical wisdom. We would know the compromises we have made, and we would have to accept the fact that the seven cardinal virtues are guides, not guarantees, to moral perfection.

How would this list be accepted by students in a military ethics course? Well, it does have pretty good authority behind it, and it does allow for mature judgement (prudence). But let's not forget the need for realism. Fortunately, the philosophers understood that too. The world is a dangerous place. Simply trying to practice virtuous behavior without any regard for the vices which

can lead one astray from what is morally correct is both naive and imprudent. Just as some virtues were important enough to list as cardinal, the philosophers found some vices were particularly liable to destroy one's character and undermine one's virtuous behavior. They called these vices the Seven Deadly Sins:

Pride
Anger
Envy
Greed
Sloth
Gluttony
Lust

This list needs less explanation than the one of virtues, but teaching it in combination with the virtues builds credibility for this concept of integrity. Having these fourteen standards of behavior helps students understand the moral aspects of the world around them.

One important distinction, however, that instructors can make is that the first four vices are sins of the intellect. Pride, anger, envy and greed are in our minds. The last two, gluttony and lust, are sins of the appetite (or flesh). Sloth is a combination of undisciplined intellect and appetite. Traditionally, sins of the intellect have been considered more serious. In Dante's Inferno, the lovers are consigned to one of the outer rings of hell; but Satan, for his pride in wanting to be equal to God, sits at the center of hell.

This traditional attitude still persists today; we tend to worry less about the sin of lust than the others. For example, 61% of the people polled by U. S. News & World Report thought premarital sex was "not wrong." We all know of the stories of successful military officers and some previous commanders in chief

who were lax in regard to this vice. Few would condone this behavior, but it seems that if a person is otherwise trustworthy, we as a people are willing to tolerate it. In teaching ethics, however, one would have to point out that sinful actions have consequences. While philosophers differ over the seriousness of an occasional lapse in virtuous behavior, most agree that habitual indulgence in one of these vices deadens one's moral sensibility and creates the likelihood that one will lose his or her reputation for integrity.

One final observation that might be useful for an instructor: pride has traditionally been viewed as the worst of the sins because it can lead a person into the other vices. The Greeks called it hubris, and their great tragedies are built around it. Of course, some pride is justifiable, and we encourage it in the military. However, remembering the traditional wisdom about pride can keep us as individuals from losing our moral bearings and our integrity.

With these seven virtues and seven vices, it seems to me that we have a usable matrix by which we can judge the development of our personal ethics. And we have a concept of integrity which now makes it worthy to be called a "foundation virtue" of military ethics. We also have a teaching tool broad enough to reach our military students without offending anybody's religious sensibilities. If they complain about examples such as I have used from literature and religion, there are plenty of "real life" examples for each virtu/e and vice. I had good success using Ralph Sampson's outburst during last summer's NBA championship to show several of the vices and virtues at work in everyday life.

To the student who wants to know how to act when told to falsify a report, we can give an "official" answer: "Don't." But we can also use the vices and virtues to let him or her understand the ramifications of any moral dilemma. If we could all incorporate the thousands of years of wisdom that went into the development of this matrix of morality, we would probably find ourselves known for a "character of uncorrupted virtue"—at least the students in our military ethics courses would have a better idea of what was meant when a speaker used the word "integrity."

ENDNOTES

1. Christina Hoff Sommers, quoted in "The State of American Values," U. S. News and World Report, 9 Dec 1985, p. 55.

2. Malham M. Wakin, "The Ethics of Leadership II," War, Morality, and the Military Profession, ed. Malham M. Wakin, Westview Press, Boulder, Co., 2nd ed., 1986, p. 208.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 208.

4. "Prudence," The great Ideas: A Syntopicon, ed. Robert Maynard Hutchins, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., Chicago, 1952, Vol. 2, p. 472.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 476.

6. "Morality," U. S. News and World Report, 9 Dec 1985, pp. 52-53.