

ETHICS AND HOW WE FIGHT

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## Forward

This paper has been written for the purpose of contributing on the subject of professional ethics as it relates to military performance and stimulating further thought. I have not written this paper as a member of the Marine Corps but rather as a member of the Defense Department. While I have relied extensively on Army studies and the works of Army writers, this reliance should not be construed as a parochial attack on another service. The problems mentioned herein are experienced by all the services. If anything the Army should be praised for the integrity and courage demonstrated in self examination. Finally, my motivation in writing this paper is my love for the military profession.

## The Reality

Today we stand on the verge of seeing our Department of Defense and Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) reorganized because of congressional and public dissatisfaction with the military. After spending over a trillion dollars in defense over the past five years, the American people have become angered with the \$700 wrenches discovered in defense contracts, officers who have sold classified information to foreign governments, as well as the revelations concerning difficulties in Grenada and Lebanon. When considering these relatively recent cases with those cases of Desert One, Koh Tang Island and Vietnam, it becomes increasingly difficult for us to explain these failures. While the military does not deserve complete blame for these failures, it must assume responsibility for major portions. Because of these difficulties Congress may force us to accept a reorganized defense system which it sees as a means of reform, but in reality may have serious consequences for our national security structure. Sadly enough, we will probably accept these changes without understanding the reasons why they occurred. The problem is not so much with the system as it is with the people who make up the system. What must be understood is that effective national security and defense depend upon the ethics and moral obligations of men and women who are tasked with these responsibilities. It is imperative that we in the military seek an ethical reawakening. Otherwise, we may be forced to accept external attempts at reform.

## Altruism versus Self Interest

The purpose of the military is to provide for the defense and security of the nation. Military service, therefore, requires altruistic men because of the magnitudes of power and responsibility which have been entrusted to them. Plato provided an insight into the nature of the military professional and what makes him different from others. In The Republic, Plato describes the soldier as a man of emotion, who lives for those emotions experienced when leading men to victory on the battlefield. The man of emotion differs from the man of desire who is the merchant seeking the accumulation of material wealth.<sup>1</sup> What can be inferred from Plato's writing, is that the military professional is an individual who derives satisfaction from giving of himself.

As Lewis S. Sorley once wrote, the ethic of the military professional is one of service and contribution to the general interests of society.<sup>2</sup> When acting on issues of relative importance in the military service, it is vital that this ethic take precedence over matters of self-interest. Not only do we accept the responsibility for maintaining the defense of the nation when taking our oath, but we also accept this ethic.

What is of concern is that perhaps too many members of the military have lost sight of their purpose, and altruism has been subverted by self-interests. For some, contributing on issues which require moral courage and conviction has come to mean

risk to such self-interests as promotion, career survival and image. For these individuals, contributing to self-interest has been given greater importance than contributing to the general interests of society. Unfortunately, this <sup>is</sup> a widely held perception which is becoming all too easy to quantify and qualify.

In a 1985 Army War College study on Military Professionalism, it was learned that of the 14,500 Army officers surveyed, 68% agreed the officer corps was focused on personal gain rather than selflessness.<sup>3</sup> In a similar study conducted in 1977, 30% of the officers surveyed believed that unethical behavior was rewarded while 63% believed that ethical behavior went unrewarded. The same study determined that the most frequently mentioned ethical problems centered on competitive pressures placed on officers, lack of integrity perceived in senior officers, career survival through statistics and little tolerance for mistakes.<sup>4</sup>

The Marine Corps 1981 Russell Leadership Conference on professional "Ethics and Leadership" confirmed much of the same problems within the Marine Corps. Major General Gregory A. Corliss stated that "amoral behavior and self-interest" have had an impact on the Corps. He stated, in a large organization in which frequent transfers occur, it is possible for self-serving individuals to conceal their motives. He further stated that the fitness report system "promotes loyalty to one's reporting senior and not some nebulous idea of loyalty and honor."<sup>5</sup>

The emphasis on self interest rather than integrity and commitment to nation has been detected in our military readiness reporting. In a 1977 study conducted by the Army War College's Strategic Studies Institute on the Army's unit readiness reporting, a survey of officers revealed that the reporting system was considered important, but generally regarded as ineffective. Those officers felt the system was not a reliable one because concern over image as well as individual and unit competition had caused inaccurate reporting.<sup>6</sup>

Not only does the value of self-interest lead to promotion being the standard of success rather than service and contribution, but it also leads to ethical disasters. The cases of Sergeant Major Wooldridge and Lieutenant Commander Walker when compared with those cases of officers who sought promotion at any price, differ only because they are examples of the extreme. When service to country and Corps is forsaken for matters of self-interest, the sense of purpose is lost, commitment to mission and men wanes and military competence degenerates. This effect is not always understood. For those who seek self-interests, service to nation is more often interpreted as doing what you are told. This interpretation allows an individual to avoid ethical judgments as well as his moral obligations. What is not understood is that military service means you are morally obligated to competently serve the general interests of society even if it means risk to your promotion, as well as your life.

The relationship between the military ethic of contribution and our military functions has often been neglected. A general before an Army War College class, once stated that "ethics never won a battle." This officer obviously did not understand the connection between the two and was summarily dismantled by the class.<sup>7</sup> If you are committed to the ethic of service and contribution to the general interests of society, you will generally be concerned with serving in the best possible manner. The general would be hard-pressed to explain the failures of Vietnam and Desert One with this logic.

The military ethic can no longer be considered as some esoteric issue separate from the execution of our military functions. It is not just an area of interest for the chaplain but for all military professionals as well. The application of this ethic in our strategy and tactics can prove effective or its absence can be disastrous. Our failures in the past have resulted from our inability to make the connection between our ethic and the execution of these functions. However, we can no longer afford failure. Not only is the confidence of the American people in our ability to protect them at stake but so is their confidence in our dedication to them.

#### Competence Versus Pragmatism

If a leader in the military accepts the ethic of serving the general interests of society, he then becomes morally obligated to serve in a competent manner. Not only does the defense of society require competent service, but so do society's youth

who have been entrusted to the military. It should be remembered that World War I British military leadership while acting in the defense of British society, squandered the flower of its youth on the fields of Flanders and later contributed to the bankruptcy of the British labor force. Although British military leadership served the defense of society, its lack of competent service was not in the best interest of society. Competent service is more than just doing what you are told. As Lewis Sorley wrote, competent service requires knowledge of your profession, foresight beyond short term goals and understanding of the context within which you are working.<sup>8</sup>

What must be understood about the military is that the application of its force, as found in strategy in tactics, is not an exact science. It is instead a very subjective art acquired through education and experience. When most individuals consider the moral issues associated with the already elusive art, they tend to think in terms of extremes. They will recognize that it is wrong to develop a strategy or tactic which is based on genocide, torture or terrorism. However, the majority of the moral issues related to the development of strategy and tactics are not black or white. The majority of issues faced by leaders, as Henry Kissinger put it, fall into a gray area and it is only after a period of time that decisions made regarding these issues can be discerned as right or wrong. Many of the moral dilemmas faced by commanders in Vietnam were not extreme ones, but were instead lesser ones associated with intelligence



reporting, body counts, and purposeless operations. Because of these gray moral issues associated with the subjective nature of strategy and tactics, it is vital that a military leader be dedicated to the ethic of competent service to the general interests of society and follow the established principles of his profession. If a military leader is more concerned with self interests he will fear the risk of taking a position on a seemingly lesser moral issue which is related to this already subjective area of strategy and tactics. He will avoid moral judgments and pursue a course of action which minimizes risk to himself but may not be in the best interests of society.

The collective effect of such individuals within an organization is dramatic. Frances A. Schaffer in his book How Should We Then Live further describes the effect of declining social interests and increasing self interest within a society. He states that when self interests prevail within a society its values are not sufficient to sustain itself during difficult times.

The Leadership Instruction Department of the Marine Corps Development and Education Command parallels Schaffer's thoughts on the effects of self interest within the military. The following is a quote from the Department's instruction on Organizational Leadership Challenges: "Individuals motivated toward their own self aggrandizement have little place in an organization founded on principles of services, sacrifice, and brotherhood, but often one finds someone whose values and

motivation seem§ at variance with the organizations best interests. When an organization ceases to be a team, then it begins to fall apart at its very foundation and fails to accomplish its mission."<sup>10</sup>

The decline of the ethic of service within a military organization has a definite impact on the functions of the organization. Those who value self interest generally seek a more pragmatic approach to strategy and tactics, that is doing what seems to work without regard for fixed principles of right or wrong. Frances Schaffer bears this thinking out again in his book How Should We Then Live: "Pragmatism is largely in control. In both international and home affairs, expediency at any price to maintain personal peace and affluence at the moment--is the accepted procedure. Absolute principles have little or no meaning."<sup>11</sup>

We have heard all too often the quote from fellow officers "Hell, don't give me all that theory. I just want to know what works." This is theory of pragmatism. "What works is right."

Over the past 25 years pragmatism has been allowed to exist within the military. This pragmatic approach to our functions has resulted in our failure to follow the precepts of our profession which have previously been established by Clausewitz, Sun Ztu, Liddell Hart and even our own doctrine. This deviation from established principles had a devastating effect on our professional competence as evidenced by Vietnam, Koh Tang and Desert One. However, of all these, Vietnam warrants the

greatest study. It is the most severe case of the military's deviation from established principles. We must come to a realization that a primitive nation of 19 million was able to strategically defeat a superpower such as the United States partially because the military, as Colonel Harry Summers Jr., put it, was in "violation of the truths" pertaining to the established principles of war. Not only do we owe this realization to the society we will serve in the future, but also to the 55,000 men who gave their lives in this war.

#### The Results of Pragmatism: The Case of Vietnam

Assistant Secretary of Defense, Noel C. Koch, calls Vietnam the least studied war in our history.<sup>13</sup> This statement is testimony to our aversion to analyzing the moral dilemmas which lead to our strategic defeat. We in the military have attempted to avoid the agony of self criticism by relying on the trite excuse that political leadership was responsible for the failure of Vietnam. This excuse is not entirely valid. Colonel Harry Summers Jr, a moral hero for our ranks, has provided us with more than sufficient evidence of strategic military failings in his book "On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War." Should we avoid our psychoanalysis of this war we will not achieve the moral catharsis necessary to prevent future failure.

Vietnam serves as an extreme example of a pragmatic approach to military strategy. Strategic military leadership failed to follow the precepts established in Clausewitz's On War and it is this work which both Bernard Brodie and Colonel Summers call the

unsurpassed seminal work of our profession.<sup>14</sup> & <sup>15</sup> In developing strategy we are morally obligated to follow these precepts much the same as a doctor is morally obligated to follow the principles of surgery.

In On War, Clausewitz describes the moral obligations of the military in the civil-military relationship. He states that a military leadership must adopt strategic military objectives which will support the accomplishment of civilian leadership's political objectives. Clausewitz goes on to say that strategic military objectives will generally be related to the destruction of enemy forces, the occupation of his territory and the erosion of the enemy's will to fight.<sup>16</sup>

Complaints concerning civilian leadership restraints were true. The Kennedy administration's involvement in Vietnam was not motivated by a specific political objective but rather by a "Cold War Syndrome." As David Halberstein<sup>sm</sup> put it, the administration saw a need to demonstrate a tough position against communism.<sup>17</sup> The political objective was not one focused on Vietnam. Kennedy's political objective was instead nebulous in nature. It was "to stop the advance of communism."<sup>18</sup>

Such a political objective was difficult for the military to support. General McArthur described the difficulty of supporting such an objective in 1951: "When you say merely 'we are going to continue to fight aggression,' that is not what the enemy is fighting for. The enemy is fighting for a very definite

purpose--to destroy our forces." He further elaborated on the strategic military objectives in a war: "... it seems to me that the way to resist aggression is to destroy the potentialities of the aggressor."<sup>19</sup>

The solution to adopting strategic military objectives in the Vietnam war and accomplishing Clausewitz's three precepts: destroy the forces of the North as well as those in the South, occupy the North and subsequently break the will of the North.

However, this course was blocked by the Johnson administration out of fear of Chinese intervention. The administration further limited the military by forcing a strategy of "gradual response" upon them.

But, what of the military's role in this relationship? Are military leaders morally absolved because they have been directed by their civilian leaders to adopt a flawed strategy for an illusive political objective? General Westmoreland reflects on the moral obligations of military leaders when he quotes Napoleon in his autobiography: "A Commander in Chief cannot take as an excuse for his mistakes in warfare an order given by his sovereign or his minister, when the person giving the order is absent from the field of operations and is imperfectly aware or wholly unaware of the latest state of affairs. It follows that any Commander in Chief who undertakes to carry out a plan which he considers defective is at fault; he must put forward his reasons, insist on the plan being changed and finally tender his resignation rather than be the instrument of the Army's downfall."

General Westmoreland went on to say: "I suffered my problems in Vietnam because I believed that success eventually would be sure despite (civilian policies and objectives), that they were not to be as Napoleon put it, instruments of my Army's downfall."<sup>20</sup>

While civilian leadership establishes policies and its objectives, military leadership is morally obligated to advise the seniors on matters of war since it is only the military which possess the unique experience of battlefield. Contrast the case of military leadership in Vietnam with that of World War II. General George Marshall under political and diplomatic pressure threatened resignation unless his personnel assignments were accepted for the US Army and the combined commands of Europe.<sup>21</sup>

Too much evidence exists that military leadership recognized the failings of civilian directed policies but chose to remain silent. Brigadier General Douglas Kinnard in his book War Managers referenced a 1974 survey which stated that 70% of the army general officers who commanded in Vietnam were uncertain of the war's objectives.<sup>22</sup> While this survey reflects on the civilian leadership's ability to adopt tangible policy objectives it also reflects on the military obligation to advise its seniors. Colonel Herbert Y. Schandler in his book The Unmaking of a President stated that "It does not appear that military leaders threatened or even contemplated resigning to dramatize their differences with the opposition to the limitations on the

conduct of the war insisted upon by the president and his civilian advisors."<sup>24</sup>

Most military leaders realized that sound strategic thinking required that the war be taken to the North and Clausewitz's three precepts accomplished. However, as Colonel Summers put it, "Our military leaders evidently did not feel so strongly about their strategic concepts that they were willing to 'fall on their swords' if they were not adopted."<sup>25</sup>

Even when military leadership was presented the opportunity to speak out on strategic matters concerning the war, it remained silent and complied with the politically accepted. Today we often lament the lack of national will necessary to support our military efforts in Vietnam. However, one of the key elements to invoking the national will and also a necessity to military planning in Vietnam was the mobilization of the reserves. President Johnson had lead the Defense Department to believe that this mobilization would occur. When the decision time came in July 1965, President Johnson asked General Earle Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, if he agreed with the decision not to mobilize the reserves. Wheeler agreed. David Halberstam described the scene in his book the "Best and the Brightest": It was, said a witness, an extraordinary moment...Everyone in the room knew Wheeler objected...but Wheeler was boxed in; he had the choice of opposing and displeasing his Commander in Chief and being overruled anyway, or he could go along. He went along.<sup>26</sup>

In January 1967, when the Nixon administration eagerly sought strategic military advice for the war, Kissinger complained of unimaginative thought. He stated. "For years the military had been complaining about being held on a leash by the civilian leadership. But when Nixon pressed them for new strategies, all they could think of was resuming the bombing of the North."<sup>27</sup>

It is difficult to speculate on the motives of individual men. However, one cannot help but question their reasons for acting as they did. Why did such men with distinguished combat records from World War II and Korea remain silent? What made them unwilling to risk their careers for professional principles which they knew to be correct? Whatever their reasons, one may conclude that their failure to provide their leaders with their expertise and advice was not in the best interest of society.

Those who study Vietnam must be careful not to make incorrect assumptions. The men who failed were not evil men. They were as David Halberstam put it, The Best and The Brightest. Vietnam serves as an example of what happens when men fail to follow the ethic of their profession and those professional principles which ensure competent service. It should also not be assumed that the entire military failed in Vietnam. The real heroes of the war were the leaders and men found at the tactical level. They not only achieved tactical success on the battlefields of Vietnam but they also gave of themselves in the name of service to their nation.



## Summary

We in the military must never forget that we exist to competently serve the general interests of society. When this ethic is overshadowed by self interest, individuals seek a pragmatic approach to their functions rather than follow established principle. The strategy of Vietnam should serve as a continual reminder of the cost of such an approach. Adherence to our ethic of service requires the military to continually educate and reinforce this ethic as well as the principles of our profession. The relationship between ethics and performance must be realized if effective military service is to be rendered. For the individual, adherence to this ethic requires knowledge of his profession and the moral courage necessary to state his professional opinion to his seniors. It is a paradox that a man would claim to be a paragon of physical courage on the battlefield but yet be afraid to face his seniors concerning an issue which he knows to be important. Additionally, failure to adhere to this ethic cannot be justified by saying that an individual's senior is unethical. This is to imply that ethics is someone else's problem. Ethics is a problem of everyone. Competent service to society means risk to career as well as to life. Should we fail to internalize this ethic in our ranks the consequences may be severe. We may be forced to accept a politicized general staff in the name of reform while the lack of ethical commitment may still remain in our ranks. However, the greatest consequence of our failure to internalize this ethic may be experienced by the people we serve. It is their defense and security which may suffer.

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3. U.S. Army "Study on Military Professionalism," U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, 1984.
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7. Chaplain (Major General) Kermit D. Johnson, USA (Retired), Military Ethics, Military Chaplains Review, Summer 1985, p. 5.
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10. U.S. Marine Corps "Organizational Leadership Guide," Leadership Instruction Department, Education Center, Marine Corps Development and Education Command, Quantico, Virginia, p. 10.
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12. Colonel Harry G. Summers Jr., USA (Ret), On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War (New York, New York: Dell Publishing Company, Inc., June 1984) p 241.
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24. Colonel Harry G. Summers, Jr., USA (Ret), On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of Vietnam, p. 166.
25. David Halberstam, The Best and the Brightest, p. 728.
26. Colonel Harry G. Summers, Jr., USA (Ret), On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of Vietnam, p. 148.