

THE NECESSARY IMMORALITY OF THE MILITARY PROFESSION

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Part Two

The first part of this paper presents, rather starkly, a position I will label the "accommodationist" approach to military ethics. Accommodationists hold that the military ethic must be drawn increasingly closer to the norms and mores of the civilian sector. "Ethical accommodationists" would argue that military ethics must be based upon, or at least be much more similar to, the ethics one finds in the civilian community. Thus, if there is a pattern of self-serving lying and cheating, never mind stealing, in the civilian or business community, perhaps the case can be made that the military ethic should become increasingly "sophisticated," "progressive," and "enlightened." Although the paper makes no forthright mention of its lineage, the core of the argument in the paper--that traditional military ethics is old fashioned and outdated--is hardly new. As long ago as 1957, Samuel Huntington was pointing out that "Liberalism's injunction to the military has in effect been: conform or die." Liberalism, he pointed out more than thirty-five years ago, customarily attempts either to transmute or to extirpate military values.¹

In the paper I tried to raise, with whatever sweet sophistry I could muster, the basic argument--made perhaps less fastidiously elsewhere--that the military profession is wholly out of step with the "times." Because others may lie or cheat or steal, I argued, the military may also do the same. In order to purchase a grain of respectability for my enterprise, I held back from blanket endorsement of such transparently unethical behavior. As the saying goes, the road to hell is paved with good intentions. And I suspect that most of us, in straying from the paths of righteousness, do so by degrees. That is, we err most grievously at the margins. We lie or cheat or steal for the wolf of self-promotion or of self-gratification which we routinely

¹Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State* (New York: Random House, 1957), p. 155.

clothe in the sheep's raiment of patriotism, service loyalty, or family responsibility. The gravest vice is camouflaged as the greatest virtue.

There is hardly any doubt that virtue and character, traditionally understood, are under assault.² In *The Chronicle of Higher Education* of 10 November 1993, for example, one reads of the new program in "Queer [*sic*] Studies" at a New England college (Wellesley).³ At another New England institution, MIT, a recent survey indicates that more than eight of ten undergraduates admit cheating at least once in their college careers. More than two-thirds confessed to committing some form of plagiarism and eleven percent cheated on at least one exam. The director of MIT's undergraduate program, who co-authored the study, observed, "Of course it's worrisome, but we're not looking at this in a moralistic way [that is re-assuring--JHT], to say people who do this is [*sic*] bad and they're beyond helping."⁴ The departure from the traditional canons of morality is much in evidence based upon these "educational" developments at two presumably respected Massachusetts colleges.

It is likely that there will always be tension between the expectations of civil society and the requirements of the profession of arms.⁵ But if the larger civilian community ever effectively "extirpates" or "transmutes" the ancient and, I think, noble traditional values of the profession of arms, it will have lost a principal propaedeutic source of what it means to be a lady and a gentleman.

The paper I wrote, of course, is filled with tendentious nonsense. Aside from errors of interpretation, the paper is plagued by numerous logical fallacies. Although the footnotes in the paper are correct citations, I have made a case which I trust readers (or listeners) were easily able to pick apart.

²See, for example, Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2d ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984). I presented my arguments at greater length in James Toner, *The Sword and the Cross* (New York: Praeger, 1992).

³See p. B63.

⁴Montgomery *Advertiser*, 15 December 1993, 6A.

⁵I have tried to deal at length with this problem, and with several of its manifestations, in a book to be published in the summer of 1994 by the University Press of Kentucky: *True Faith and Allegiance: The Burdens of Military Ethics*.

The best counter to the specious and somewhat minatory notions propounded in the paper is a paragraph from a remarkable talk given at the Air Force Academy nearly a quarter-century ago. In that talk, General Sir John Hackett offered the following explanation of how the military can serve the state:

A man can be selfish, cowardly, disloyal, false, fleeting, perjured, and morally corrupt in a wide variety of other ways and still be outstandingly good in pursuits in which other imperatives bear than those upon the fighting man. He can be a superb creative artist, for example, or a scientist in the very top flight, and still be a very bad man. What the bad man cannot be is a good sailor, or soldier, or airman. Military institutions thus form a repository of moral resource that should always be a source of strength within the state.⁶

I think he spoke better than even he knew. The accommodationists who would metamorphose military values into more demotically acceptable views wholly misunderstand the profession whose integrity they would thereby destroy.

⁶Sir John W. Hackett, "The Military in the Service of the State," in *War, Morality, and the Military Profession*, 2d ed., revised. Ed. M. M. Wakin (Boulder: Westview Press, 1986), p119.