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Ethics on the Political Battlefield

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U. S. Army

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ABSTRACT

TITLE: Ethics on the Political Battlefield

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BRIEF SUMMARY:

This paper is intended to serve as an ethical primer for those professional military officers who are on an initial assignment beyond the familiar territory of their primary specialty training. It can also be used by more senior officers as they prepare for service at higher levels of government where the political aspect of their duties can cause increased stress on their ethical obligations.

Through a series of real life situations, the ethical dilemmas presented by service in the highly politicized environment of Washington, D.C. are analyzed and discussed. Ethical correctness and professional obligation are explored in an attempt to help the reader understand the environment in which he/she will be serving.

A model for ethical decision making is then presented and an ethical filter provided to aid in the ethical decision making process. Use of the model and filter by officers serving in highly politicized positions will enable them to make ethically correct decisions and take the action that ought to be taken.

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INTRODUCTION

In the last decade of the twentieth century our society seems overloaded with moral and ethical dilemmas every bit as important as the social and political events sweeping the world from the Baltic to the Pacific. We are informed daily of the ongoing debates on the right and the wrong of abortion, capital punishment, suicide, euthanasia, and foreign aid to non-democratic governments. Each day it seems we are faced with another scandal such as insider trading on Wall Street, Iran-Gate, the Keating Five, and truth vs sexual innuendo as in the Clarence Thomas hearings and the William Kennedy Smith trial. Too often we seem to be asking ourselves "what next?" and "why?" are these issues dominating the news, the courts, and our national politics. These issues raise frightening questions about our moral fiber and ethical foundations.

But are not the larger moral and ethical questions of our day simply the sum total or consequences of individual moral and ethical choices made along the way? It has been postulated that we have put so much emphasis on moral dilemmas and ethical behavior of large institutions such as Congress and the White House that we have neglected to focus on individual ethical behavior -- in schools, in training, in our professions and in our day to day lives. It would therefore follow that individuals who have developed with a less rigid connection to correct ethical behavior would tend toward unethical behavior in the aggregate thus leading to ethical shortcomings in our institutions. If this is the case, then it would behoove our

society to strength our individual ethical behavior. But how do we do this?

It is not the intent of this modest paper to take on the seemingly unsolvable ethical dilemmas of our day or to offer a foolproof method of inculcating ethical values in our citizens. Rather, this paper will be an attempt to focus on the personal and professional ethical requirements and obligations of a small but select slice of U.S. society -- the professional military office corps -- as it attempts to deal with its missions and functions in an imperfect world.

Specifically, I will look at the ethical behavior of the officer corps when it functions outside of its "line" role and when it must deal with the politics and people of Washington, D.C. I will begin by defining some ethical terms and then discuss the "why" of ethical behavior and the situational aspect of ethics. Finally, I will look at some real world ethical questions and wind up with a recommended model and ethical filter to deal with the realities of duty in Washington.

As you reads this paper it would be good to remember that it has recently been shown that often years of military experience do not necessarily prepare an officer for the unique pressures associated with duty outside the closely knit confines of his or her own branch of service. Even Ollie North admits in his recent book that the simple life of a career Marine left him ill-prepared to "wake up and find myself in Machiavelli's palace." (1)

I would hope that officers soon to be assigned to DC or

outside their normal "line" duties would have the opportunity to read this paper (in shortened form) to help calibrate their ethical gyroscopes before embarking on their new assignment. As a survival primer it could serve as an officer's guide for avoiding ethical pitfalls and help preserve the honor and ethical correctness of the officer corps.

DISCUSSION

No topic seems to get the juices flowing quite like a discussion of ethics. Most people feel that they have a good grasp of what ethics and ethical behavior are all about and feel that they can navigate through life quite well without a lot of help -- thank you very much! So relax, I am not going to lay down a lot of rules, ethical codes or dos and don'ts. But what I am going to do is set the stage for what follows and to do that we must understand a few things about ethics and how ethics fit into the military profession.

Ethics, however it is defined, comes basically from three sources -- faith, reason and science. Ethical principles derived from faith are either from theological sources -- e.g. the Ten Commandants, the Bible, etc. -- or from secular sources -- e.g. Karl Marx's communism or Adam Smith's free enterprise. Ethical principles derived from reason are ethical norms of behavior derived from the use of reasoning and rational thought and come from the writings of the great philosophers such as Aristotle and Socrates. And ethics derived from science are those beliefs deduced from observation by the scientific method and from which

empirical data or other evidence can be obtained. (2)

Obviously, strict adherence to any one of these sources as the only source of ethical behavior creates a skewed view of reality and, for this reason, it is widely held that each individual's own ethics is a blend derived from the three sources. How one acts, then, in a given situation is based on these personal ethics, or internal gyroscope, and the social, psychological and professional pressure brought to bear in a given situation.

Military ethical training is, in the main, focused on developing and reinforcing individual ethical beliefs and those values of loyalty, honesty, obedience, courage and selflessness that are imperatives for effective armed forces. Basically, officers are taught what I term a utilitarian approach to ethics, roughly based on the philosophical approach of reason and rational thought, and concerned with the correct outcome of situations for the good of the society as a whole. Taken together over years of service in a relatively homogeneous working environment, this ethical approach and the instilled values weld the individual to the profession which expounds the same ethical values. Thus the officer is the profession and his every act becomes then either an affirmation or refutation of the ethical values of the profession. One can see the pressure starting to build to always do the ethically correct thing.

What then does this mean to military professionals? Above all it means they must weigh the ethical dimensions

of each decision and act within the context of the characteristics of competence, responsibility and corporateness which define our profession. (3) To do anything less would be to betray our own ethical beliefs, our training and profession. Now, where this gets really tough is when the personal ethical standards and professional characteristics one must uphold are challenged by the situational dynamics of the relationship between the military profession and politics.

Professional military service in our society requires an understanding of, and expertise in, dealing with the political realities of life and survival in an environment not purely military. We must be aware that the ethical "rules" or codes we are familiar with may no longer be totally operative when dealing with political realities. Courage and loyalty and obedience may be as much a liability as they were praiseworthy in the past! Doing what is right may not be so obvious -- to either you or your boss or your contemporaries when a career or reputation or personal gain may be adversely effected. In fact, it may all boil down to just you and your integrity -- and having the courage to do what ought to be done and not necessarily what is the most politically or professionally expedient. No one said it would be easy!

DEFINITIONS

ETHICS

Ethical training of the officer corps takes place throughout an officer's career from pre-commissioning through war college level with many officers having studied ethics at the graduate level. Additionally, yearly requirements for ethics refresher training is relatively common among the services. (4) What all the training has in common is that it instills in the officer corps the basic common core of values and beliefs -- the traditional bonds of trust which make up the environment in which most officers spend the majority of their career. Therefore, when asked to define ethics, recent war college students gave the following responses:

- a framework of moral behavior
- behavior that is morally and legally correct
- a moral standard of right and wrong
- a code of conduct to do what is right
- behaving so as to provide the greatest good for the greatest number
- a system of moral principles
- say and do the right thing
- doing what's right regardless of consequences
- taking responsibility for one's actions.

These are all good definitions and in line with the Code of Ethics for government employees. These are also congruent with ethical responsibilities as reflected in Army Field Manual 22-100 -- "Ethics are principles or standards that guide professionals to do the moral or right thing -- what ought to be done." (emphasis added) (5). For the purposes of this paper this will be the definition of ethics.

INTEGRITY (Honesty & Loyalty)

Integrity within the officer corps rests on the twin pillars of honesty and loyalty. Officers expect candor and forthrightness from each other and honest disagreement at the appropriate time. Similarly, they have been imbued with the spirit of honesty and schooled in the calamitous results of untruths and half truths on the battlefield. Such comfort with and expectations of honesty in the officer corps, while fostering trust, does not prepare one well for dealing with people and situations not so inclined.

Likewise, loyalty within the officer corps is expected and usually freely given. There are usually ways to voice loyal dissent and a chain of command, that if exercised properly, will eventually resolve to do the "right" thing. Such loyalty and a system to protect organizational members rarely exists outside the cloistered world of an individual officer's branch or service.

IDEAL WORLD

We all, as professional military officers, have "grown up" in our service in our own relatively closed and idealized world. We have been used to dealing primarily one-on-one with subordinates, peers and seniors. We have been held accountable and have held others accountable for property, other people and their actions. We have accomplished our tasks mostly through personal contact and have enjoyed the smallness of our organization and the sense of oneness with the organization this environment fosters. Our ethical values and our integrity have been nurtured in an environment which openly put high values on honesty, loyalty, fidelity and trust. We have lived in an ideal ethical world.

REAL WORLD

Service in a place like Washington, D.C. is not service in the ideal ethical world. For example, the first thing that strikes someone is the sense of largeness of the organization you are in and the immense span of the federal bureaucracy. There is no closeness, no oneness with the organization. You now deal in staff papers and studies which seem endless and often times work for and produce products for people you rarely if ever see. There often does not appear to be anyone in charge. You often don't know what direction your office or your project is or should be going. And probably the most irritating and frightening of all is the lack of accountability -- no one saying "I am responsible". It is here, in the real world, that ethics

-- integrity, honesty and loyalty -- are severely tested.

Is anyone ever really ready for this? I don't think so but, with a little preparation and better understanding of the environment and what pitfalls await, the prudent officer can be better prepared professionally, emotionally and ethically to continue honorable and ethical service in the "real" world.

WHY UNETHICAL BEHAVIOR?

What are the forces at work in the real world which cause an officer's ethical gyroscope to go off balance? What pressures, drives, requirements, situations, motives and people are at work in the real world environment that cause ethically thinking and acting professional officers to veer off course? A discussion of some of these influences and the potential threat they pose to an officer's personal and professional behavior is critical if you are to maintain your ethical balance.

Just as you were part of a group prior to an assignment to Washington, so too will you be a part of a group at your new duty station. But there will be a difference. Whereas your previous group was a product of like training, beliefs and values, your new group will in all probability consist of people with varying beliefs and many with beliefs and behaviors incongruent with yours. The temptation and the pressure to go along with this new group -- and adopt their group think and group psychology -- will be very strong.

All groups exert subtle and not so subtle pressures on

their members to conform to the group norms. In the large bureaucracies of Washington this is also very true. You must evaluate these group norms in the light of your training and values and not let group think overcome what you know is the right thing that ought, or ought not, to be done.

Another prime cause of ethical breakdown is rampant ego -- either on your part or the part of your organization. This leads to thinking that you and/or your organization are above the rules that are made for everyone. Within the beltway around our nation's capitol, the power of individuals and organizations is often far out of proportion to reality. The temptation to be egotistical about what you and your organization do -- that you are above petty and seemingly ludicrous rules and regulations -- is very strong.

For some, a tour in Washington will be the first time they taste failure. For all the reasons we have discussed, our capitol and the politics that are played here make it like no other place you have ever served. What has worked for you in the past may not work in Washington or may not be applicable. You may, for the first time, be uncertain about your own abilities. The fear that this causes -- the fear of failure, the fear of the consequences of failure, or the fear of "losing face" -- have been prime reasons for people to slip into compromising their ethical principles.

Power is what politics is all about and politics is what Washington is all about. Personal gain, career enhancement and power grabbing are very enticing in the Washington

environment. Success in Washington is not measured in how many widgets that you produce but in the ability of an individual or an organization to influence the political action.

Unfortunately, the allure of power often clouds judgement and compromises ethical standards.

A final caution on power. Lines of communication and channels of influence are not as clear in Washington as they are out with the troops or the fleet. You must learn early on from where your actual power flows and how you can use it correctly, not abusing your power or transgressing ethical values in the exercise of power. As is obvious, you must rapidly adapt to your new environment.

Other pressures and driving forces which can lead to unethical behavior need little elaboration but are nevertheless valuable to review. Some of these are: (6)

- fear of judgment by others whose opinion you value
- inability to otherwise overcome an unfavorable situation
- pressure from boss
- avoidance of responsibility and consequence
- can't afford - legally or monetarily - to do it the right way
- greed
- loss of conscience through repetitive "white lies".

Finally, it must be remembered that it appears from a review of recent headlines that there are a rising number of people

who believe something is wrong only if you get caught! (7)
Fortunately, most professional officers have not developed in an environment where these types of people or their attitudes have flourished. Suffice it to say that this attitude exists and the prudent professionals must be cognizant of it and not let it upset their own ethical balance.

ARE ETHICS SITUATIONAL?

This question is a major philosophical issue and it is not my intent to debate it here. I mention it and will present a brief view of this question as it needs to be addressed in the context that the situation is often used as the rationale for less than ethical behavior. I believe that it is important that the professional officer not confuse our utilitarian ethics with a rationale for vacillating ethical standards based on a given situation.

There is no one set of ethical rules or norms that are universally applicable to all situations. Even the Bible can be said to be contradictory where a commandment forbids killing and another part of the Bible allows killing under certain "situations". Our rational thought must be operative at all times when applying ethical beliefs to any situation. Our ethical norms should always be the same but the situation can be different. What is important is the application of the ethical beliefs to the situation and our intent in taking a particular action which will ultimately determine the ethical correctness of the action. This issue of intent and the

application of ethical norms to a situation is the distinction between situational ethical behavior and rationalizing ethical behavior based on the situation.

Often you will find yourself in a situation where each of the available alternatives contain some ethically questionable dimensions. What do you do now? There is some right and some wrong in either course of action. The gray area has expanded and there is no perfect right answer. This, unfortunately, is more often the case than not.

You must now examine the situation very carefully and examine your own motives completely before deciding what to do. If you sincerely attempt to select the alternative that will best serve the interests of the organization as a whole without regard to your personal gain or cost, then you are acting ethically. Your intent was right and based on reason and rational and logical thought. However, if you select the alternative that doesn't provide the greatest good but is an expedient for yourself without regard to the impact on others, then your action has been unethical. Your intent was not based on solid ethical grounds.

Application of ethics can, therefore, be situational, but it is the intent, the desired outcome, that ultimately determines the ethical correctness of actions in a particular situation. Ethical norms should stay the same and intent determine how these norms should be applied in any given situation. Thus, intent and application of ethics to situations using reason and rational thought, should yield an acceptable ethical outcome;

whereas the diluting of one's ethical norms based on a particular situation, coupled with a less righteous intent will result in justification of one's actions, or rationalizing the action, and yield an ethically unacceptable result.

It will be important to keep in mind this issue of intent and application as we analyze some real world situations.

REAL WORLD ETHICAL SITUATIONS (8)

We need to now get a feel for some of the situations you will face. As you read these "real" examples it will be hard to believe that some of our senior leaders would be involved in such unethical behavior. Keep in mind the reasons for unethical behavior, as we have previously discussed, and try to determine why these people acted the way they did and what they should have done. Also try to gauge what your actions would have been had you been involved in the situation.

Situation #1

An officer on a CINC's staff grew concerned with the CINC's handling of, and granting access to, classified information outside authorized channels. The information was politically sensitive and reflected U.S. views on various world situations. What should he do? The CINC was willingly and knowingly skating on the edge of unauthorized disclosure of sensitive information. Should the staff officer take unilateral action to limit access, personally talk with the CINC -- or let it slide because events in the world were moving so fast that U.S. assessments and

positions were rapidly becoming out of date and meaningless?

Situation #2

A general officer deliberately falsified a document to avoid the transfer of manpower spaces to another organization. The rationale for sending forward false information was that the "ends justified the means" -- his organization needed the manpower spaces more than another organization. The general officer deliberately took the action away from subordinate staff officers to ensure the "facts" were reported as he wanted them reported.

Recall the previous discussion about power and the length organizations will go to get it and maintain it. Maybe the organization really needed the spaces to accomplish its mission! What was the real situation and what was the real intent? Were ethical norms being applied with good intent or was behavior being rationalized? What was the ethically correct thing to do?

Situation #3

Officers working in the Pentagon often take Physical Training (PT) tests on their own. They are "on their honor" to administer the test to themselves and report the score. Unfortunately, some cheat on the self-administered test. What about the guy who you saw cheating and who outranks you by two grades? And what about the perversion of the PT regulation which spells out exactly how tests are to be administered? Is more than

one ethical corner being cut here? What should you do?

Situation #4

In a briefing to a high level official, a general officer willingly and knowingly withheld important, critical information so as to present the decision maker with easier decision choices. Staff officers for the general were aware of what he was doing but they remained silent. When discovered, the general let the staff officers take the fall rather than owning up to his own culpability.

Obviously there are some serious integrity and ethical flaws in the general's actions. But what about the staff officers? Was their silence ethical if they knew they/their boss was presenting false information? Where does loyalty and loyal dissent get evaluated in the decision making process to arrive at the ethically correct course of action?

Situation #5

A senior staff officer is to testify before Congress and his instructions from his boss are -- "don't lie to Congress but don't tell them the whole truth if you can help it." This particular dilemma is often seen in intra and inter agency and service correspondence where full and honest disclosure would weaken one's position. In any case, this puts one on the horns of a significant ethical dilemma. Do you compromise your ethical standards and reputation to support the organization and your boss? How important is this issue? Has your boss

thought this one all the way through?

Situation #6

An officer working an acquisition issue in OSD is consistently assured by a project manager (PM) that the light infantry item he is managing will be delivered by the contractor at or under the specified weight. However, the officer in OSD doubts this is possible. Nevertheless, the information from the PM is accepted, the Army and Marines contract for a joint buy, two other proposals are shelved and the Army Chief of Staff is given a "good news" briefing. When the item is finally delivered it is 11 pounds over weight and it is obvious that the PM has been playing both ends against the middle -- bringing his program to a conclusion and keeping the contractor (read "future employer") happy. The PM compromised ethics. But what about the officer in OSD? He doubted the PM from the start -- why didn't he challenge him? Was the organizational pressure or climate such that to rock the boat would have been career hampering?

Situation #7

A fairly senior officer working on the acquisition of a new system is the object of repeated overtures from a contractor who wants information and is promising a lucrative job offer after uniformed service. This, unfortunately, is a rather common occurrence and the ethical dilemma is compounded by the potential dollars available to the officer in future employment.

Proprietary information involving DOD acquisitions should be treated like classified information and to release it to unauthorized personnel compromises personal ethics and honor as surely as not safeguarding secret material compromises security. Potential personal gain can put a whole different spin on an ethical dilemma. Is the right thing to do limited to just the individual's decision on how he or she should act in response to the request? Do his ethical obligations extend to reporting the contractor's actions? How would this action affect future relations with this contractor?

Situation #8

As a new staff officer in the Pentagon you are called upon to support and execute a program with which you don't agree. Do you give it your best shot or only make a half-hearted attempt when you write about it and brief it? No one will ever know if you pushed it or were half-stepping. What is the right thing to do -- what ought you to do with your limited time and resources?

So how do we decide what to do in all these varied and complex situations existing in the real political world of our nation's capitol? Hopefully the final portion of this paper will provide some guidelines for navigating the political battlefield.

ETHICAL DECISION MAKING ON THE POLITICAL BATTLEFIELD

As we have seen, ethics is a tricky subject with many pitfalls and dilemmas -- some tougher than others but all requiring some thought and soul searching. So, how do we get an operational handle on "ethics"? What can we use to help us more readily and easily choose the correct ethical path and maintain our ethical balance in this challenging environment.

As a conclusion to this paper I will present a few guidelines I believe you will find helpful, and a model or framework for ethical decision making, within which you can more easily discern the right thing to do -- what you ought to do. Finally, I will provide a filter to evaluate the correctness of an ethical decision.

Ethical decision making requires 3 essential elements:

- (1) Ethical Commitment. This is simply a strong desire to act ethically. Military professionals by training and experience have this commitment. Surveys have shown that most people believe they are, and should be, ethical.

- (2) Ethical Consciousness. This is the ability to recognize and perceive the ethical implications of actions.

- (3) Ethical Competency. This is the ability to understand, recognize and act on the knowledge that there is more to ethical decision making than simply being committed to act ethically and recognize ethical issues. This is where understanding the situation and ones intent are critical; and where the use of ones reason and problem solving skills come together to produce the ethical decision which answers the question of what ought to be done.

Keeping these three elements of ethical decision making in mind, let's examine the following model for ethical decision making.

Model for Ethical Decision Making (9)

Following these steps when faced with a situation requiring an ethical decision, or in trying to determine if there is an ethical question, will help you avoid some of the pitfalls we have discussed.

STEP 1 Determine which ethical values are operative in the situation. Is the issue one of honesty, trustworthiness, integrity, character, fairness, respect, consistency, etc? Does the decision revolve around ethics as it's core problem to be resolved?

STEP 2 If ethics are the major issue, which ethical values are in conflict? Determine which values are operative and to what degree is a value at risk of being compromised.

STEP 3 Determine who the players are. Who will be affected by the decision? What is at stake for your organization, your boss, your peers and your subordinates in your decision?

STEP 4 Determine what, if any, legal or regulatory standards apply. The law or regulation may have already resolved your ethical dilemma -- or, equally as likely, their ambiguity or contradiction may aggravate your situation. It is extremely important in this step to recall your oath of office and remember to whom and what (the people and the constitution) you have sworn your loyalty.

STEP 5 Determine the external pressures. This may be self-evident from previous analysis. However, you must examine these pressures and be honest with your self in realizing how much influence they are having on your decision. Does your boss expect a particular decision? Will a particular decision put you in a more, or less, favorable position? How will the decision affect your future? Questions like this

must be addressed in a complete analysis of external pressures.

STEP 6 Determine what your options are to resolve any conflicts and make a decision. These options should now be obvious from the foregoing analysis. List them and evaluate their utility and ethical correctness for the situation.

STEP 7 Make your decision based on the following criteria:

- a. discard unethical options
- b. choose clearly ethical options over non-ethical or "shady" options
- c. if both options are ethically correct, choose the option resulting in the highest moral good, the most good for the most people, and the option which ought to be followed.

Now, as a check on your decision derived from the model, I would suggest that you pass the decision through the following filter.

Ethical Filter (10) Ask yourself the following questions:

1. Why did I choose this option? Was it for selfish reasons or a sincere desire to do what ought to be done?

2. Was the decision fair to all the players? Did it harm anyone? Did the decision result in the most good for the most people?
3. Does the decision violate any laws or regulations?
4. If the decision was published on the front page of the Washington Post, could you live with it?
5. Would most reasonable people make the decision you made and would the overall effect of your decision be favorable?
6. How would you feel if your family knew about your decision?
7. How do you personally feel about the decision? Can you look yourself in the mirror?
8. If someone else was making the decision, what advice would you give?
9. Place yourself five years in the future and look back at the dilemma. Which options would "wear" best?

If your decision made it through the filter then it is a safe bet that you have probably made the most ethically correct

decision possible. Hopefully, the model and filter will be useful as you negotiate through the political battlefield that is Washington.

In conclusion, you must remember that virtually all important decisions and actions will reflect your sensitivity and commitment to ethics and ethical values. As a professional officer negotiating the political labyrinth of Washington, your values will be assaulted from all quarters on many issues. Remember, your oath as an officer requires loyalty, honor and ethical behavior wherever you serve--with the troops or on the political battlefield. Use the ethical decision making model and the filter as regular tools of your trade in carrying out your sworn duty as a professional officer.

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