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COMMANDING OFFICER FIRINGS FOR PERSONAL MISCONDUCT:  
CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE NAVY'S LONG-TERM ETHICAL LEADERSHIP  
STRATEGY.

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
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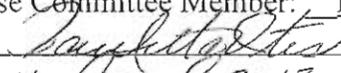
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## *Preface*

This thesis examines the issues surrounding the current rise in firings of Navy commanding officers due to unethical personal behavior and offers suggestions for positive actions to be included as part of an overall strategy that navy leadership can apply to address the issue in the long-term. I originally conceived of the idea for exploring this topic at my last operational command as I read news articles and heard stories about commanding officers being fired at an alarming rate. As measures to deal with the problem were made known to the force, I started to wonder what the navy could learn from psychology, business, and organizational behavior disciplines concerning constructive ways to build a comprehensive strategy to stem the tide of unethical behavior at the command level in order to reinforce and maintain the trust we place in our leaders as sailors and as a society.

I would like to thank Dr. Erickson for his patience and guidance while I completed this thesis. His ideas for possible research approaches and encouragement were key factors in my ability to focus the scope of the thesis and translate my ideas into a logical analysis of problem. I would also like to thank the outstanding commanding and executive officers with whom I have served. Their stellar examples of personal and professional ethics inspired me to strive for Command and instilled in me the belief that service is the highest ideal of leadership.

## *Executive Summary*

**Title:** Commanding Officer Firings for Personal Misconduct: Considerations for the Navy's Long-term Ethical Leadership Strategy.

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**Thesis:** Current Navy initiatives to reduce the number of commanding officer firings for personal misconduct incompletely address the underlying issues and will not entirely solve the problem.

**Discussion:** An alarming trend of Commanding Officers being fired in the Navy for personal misconduct began in 2010 and has continued through 2012. There has been a significant amount of negative media attention as a result and some people in and outside of the service have wondered if the overall culture of the Navy is broken and to blame. Navy leadership reacted vigorously as the trend developed, instituting several administrative measures to stem the tide of firings and restore the trust in naval commanders. There has been a fair amount of discussion between naval professionals about what the underlying causes may be, but surprisingly little attention given to scholarly research on the subject. This paper seeks to examine the possible contributing factors to the rise in personal misconduct firings using a social science and business focused lens while offering suggestions based on the research for use as part of a long-term solution to the problem that more thoroughly addresses root causes and points to a sustainable plan that could be implemented by naval leadership.

**Conclusion:** A more holistic approach to building a strong culture of ethics in Commanding Officers can be best achieved through career-long ethics education, active mentoring for Commanding Officers, and an increase in the monitoring of ethical behavior throughout the officer career path.

## **Introduction**

There has been an alarming rise in the number of commanding officer (CO) firings in the navy over the last three years (2009-2012). What has been especially troubling is the large percentage of those firings that are due not to professional errors such as hazarding a ship at sea or failing a major inspection, but instead have been directly attributable to CO personal misconduct. The Navy is well aware of the trend and has instituted measures to address the issue. To what extents can current Navy efforts to reduce reliefs for personal misconduct be effective, and if not, what might the Navy do to improve the situation?

This paper will answer the research question by exploring possible reasons for the rise in personal misconduct firings amongst COs, reviewing current and prospective initiatives to address the problem, and offering additional measures for consideration. The purpose is to examine possibilities that may create a framework around which a long-term solution could be built. Unchecked, this problem could cause a serious erosion in the confidence in our COs inside and outside the lifelines of the navy. The firings are cause for serious examination of the navy's leadership culture and that alterations need to be made in the way the navy trains its future COs, enforces ethical standards, and manages the selection process for command.<sup>1</sup> Current navy initiatives to reduce the number of commanding officer firings for personal misconduct incompletely address the underlying issues and will not entirely solve the problem.

## **Summary of Firing Statistics (Outlining the Problem)**

Based on research conducted by CAPT Light, CO firings for personal misconduct (13) in 2010 were more than double the number of dismissals for the same causes than any of the ten previous years.<sup>2</sup> The focus of this paper is to examine underlying causes of personal misconduct

and what should be done about it. As such, the methodology to compare data from 2011-2012 to Light's findings from 2010 was less exacting since evidence that the 2010 trend has continued unabated is sufficient for furthering the discussion here. CO firings were simply categorized as professional, personal, or undeterminable (due to a lack of amplifying information) based on descriptions of the circumstances for relief from open source periodicals using similar characterization methods as Light, disregarding rank or warfare community.<sup>3</sup> In 2011 there were a total of 22 firings with 7 categorized as professional, 12 as personal, and 3 as undeterminable based on the information reviewed.<sup>4</sup> In 2012, there were a total of 26 firings with 10 categorized as professional, 15 as personal, and 1 as undeterminable based on the information reviewed.<sup>5</sup> Although the categorizations could be adjusted up or down slightly based on interpretation of what exactly constitutes a professional versus a personal failing, for this paper the classifications serve to confirm the general findings that there is a problem with unethical behavior of COs in the Navy today. The trend observed in 2010 continued in 2011 and 2012.

The number of COs fired for personal misconduct in each of the years from 2010-2012 are less than 1% of the total number of operational and shore commands in the U.S. Navy. However, they represent over 50% of the total number of firings from those same years. The importance of studying this trend stems from the impact that the firings have on the Navy and what they say about the culture that produces today's COs. The negative media attention, erosion of trust in navy leadership, and victims produced by personal conduct transgressions amongst COs are unacceptable consequences resulting from unnecessary behavior that can be studied, understood, and mitigated.

### **Why are Firings for Personal Misconduct on the Rise?**

A complete determination as to why firings for personal conduct have risen so sharply is beyond the scope of this paper, but examining the question briefly provides ideas that may later reveal a better understanding and assists in furthering the discussion in the short-term. Norman Polmar's 2011 *Proceedings* article asks some of the basic questions that many reasonable people would ponder. Have the standards been articulated clearly? Have officers reaching command in the past three years been empowered to believe that their personal behavior is not important, because they were groomed by officers from an era that did not place a high value on correcting ethically questionable actions? Are the standards as they are applied today too stringent for a generation of officers who were raised in a society that does not expect the same ethical standards of itself?<sup>6</sup>

One argument to explain the trend is simply that firings are on the rise due to standards for CO personal conduct that have changed drastically since the 1980's. During that decade and the several preceding it, the focus on CO performance was squarely on mission accomplishment and not on personal behavior.<sup>7</sup> It is common knowledge that accepted traditional sailor behavior at that time included drinking, fighting, and relations with the opposite sex that are clearly unacceptable by today's standards.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, the aperture for what was deemed command failure opened dramatically beyond the rabble rousing activities mentioned above.<sup>9</sup> It was not just that the culture changed, it was that the scope of what was culturally unacceptable in the Navy grew significantly while the service was trying to distance itself from traditions that had been around practically since its inception.

During and certainly shortly after the shift that begin to occur within the Navy, societal exposure to the behavior of naval leaders began to change as well. The speed at which information traveled increased dramatically with the advent of the internet and expanded

communications suites aboard ships in the mid-to-late 1990's. Due to some of the same factors, the amount of information that flowed from deployed units grew drastically as well. Social media allowed people inside the lifelines to transmit stories of bad behavior to the outside world and also gave society a much more in depth view of what went on at almost all navy commands like never before. Regardless of whether that is viewed as good or bad, the resultant awareness of CO unethical behavior has caused the military, and especially the Navy, to be the subject of many more embarrassing headlines than they perhaps would have been prior to the internet and social media booms. Whether or not those headlines are or have begun to erode society's trust in its naval leaders is a legitimate concern,<sup>10</sup> but regardless of the short-term answer, the exposure is undeniable and will never be less than it is today. To compound the societal and social media challenges further, it can certainly be argued that the Navy receives very mixed messages back from both avenues as it attempts to navigate its ethical future. Stories of CO bad behavior receive a lot of exposure from all sorts of news outlets and at the same time many of them glamorize similar behaviors in society. Conversely, some of the high standards the military sets for its members are routinely criticized as being too strict or perhaps too closely rooted in religious tenets.<sup>11</sup>

Before shifting to a review of some of the possible psychological issues that underlie improper behavior amongst COs, it is useful here to examine what the fired COs themselves have to say about their improprieties. From interviews conducted with fired COs after they were relieved, it is clear that the officers knew their behavior was inappropriate and that there were rules prohibiting their actions. The COs also knew that those rules applied to them as they do to all sailors. Despite understanding the guidelines, the COs reported that they believed they would not get caught, would not be held accountable, were willing to risk their career for the benefits of

their misbehavior, or completely disregarded the consequences altogether.<sup>12</sup> In light of how many firings have occurred and the media exposure they have received, it is difficult to understand how the COs could believe such assertions.

One possible explanation is that COs suffer from ‘Bathsheba Syndrome.’ Bathsheba was the wife of one of King David’s soldiers. David desired to have her as his own so he sent the soldier into a battle that would certainly cause his death. The theory is that positions of power, which are earned from years of success, develop a sense of privilege in COs and predisposes them to believe that they have the power to cover their tracks.<sup>13</sup> These feelings are compounded by a tendency for successful people in general to have a strong internal locus of control. They feel that they can control events that will affect them in the future and that external factors are to some extent much less significant. That attribute is an important quality for COs to possess, because it helps them believe that they will be able to achieve the goals they set for themselves and their units.<sup>14</sup> However, it can also cause people to hold the less successful in low regard, believing that their own shortcomings kept them from being as successful as they could be or that they allow external factors or obstacles to preclude them from achieving more. In some studies, this lower view of others causes people to lose the ability to anticipate the reactions of others to their behaviors and can contribute to low emotional intelligence.<sup>15</sup>

The power and privilege of a CO can contribute in another, more concrete way. COs have a large degree of control over the resources and environment under their command.<sup>16</sup> That control is a necessary component of command, especially of command at sea, but it can also play a role in re-affirming the notion that COs can cover their tracks easily.

Another factor to consider is the isolation a CO can feel. While junior officers routinely have several peers to relate to in a typical command organization, COs do not have everyday access to

a professional or social equal. Their ability to unwind through social interaction, vent frustration with a friend, or simply throw around ideas with a peer is severely limited, especially while deployed.<sup>17</sup> This can cause COs to lose perspective over time. It is reasonable to assume that the loss of perspective could contribute to the enhanced feelings of power and belief that they can cover their own tracks.

The isolation of a CO also means that they are likely separated from their honor group, which is the collection of people they most strongly associate themselves with and take their external cue about honor from.<sup>18</sup> Although an honor group can consist of family, friends,<sup>19</sup> and certainly other sailors, in a professional environment that group is most likely other COs. The influence of the honor group is complicated in this paper for two reasons. First, it has already been suggested that COs would tend to downplay external factors when it comes to their own actions and accomplishments (and by extension their failures). Secondly, sources cited previously identified a possible cause for CO misbehavior stemming from the fact that today's COs were mentored and raised during a time when ethical personal behavior was much less important than it is today, which could mean that their perceived honor group doesn't even hold the values the navy feels that the COs should emulate. What is important to understand at this point is that theories suggest that when faced with ethical conflicts, members of an honor group will tend towards actions that are most highly valued by the group.<sup>20</sup> The key is that one's sense of honor and loyalty to certain virtues can be strongly associated with the honor group that is identified with.<sup>21</sup>

The current culture of the navy with regards to risk aversion provides another useful insight into the psychology behind personal misbehavior and the belief that it can be concealed. It is a commonly held belief in the navy that those aspiring to command must have a high degree of careerism and cannot afford any missteps on the path to earning the highest levels of

responsibility.<sup>22</sup> This conviction has been reinforced by years of perceived micro-management from higher levels in the chain of command and an often less than subtle zero-defect mentality. This can lead to high degrees of risk aversion, a tendency to avoid ownership of mistakes, and even fuel the notion that it is necessary to cover up missteps.<sup>23</sup> It is easy to see the adverse affects these beliefs could have in actual battle, but it may also help explain why COs, after years of having survived in that sort of culture and knowing that they were not perfect in every regard while climbing the ladder, might believe that they can hide further transgressions from the navy. When combined with the high degree of autonomy and control that COs have, they could feel more enabled to make morally questionable decisions, especially about their personal behavior, which is often far less visible than failings they may have in the performance of their core professional duties.

To this point the examination of underlying causes for unethical behavior in COs has focused mostly on how the CO view their actions in terms of their own identities, the navy in general, and their honor group. Do COs think about the sailors involved when their personal misconduct directly (adultery, harassment, abuse) or indirectly (negative press, disruption to command functioning) harms those they serve? If the COs know that their behavior is wrong and can reasonably be expected to hurt others involved, why do they still choose an unethical path? Although some fired COs mentioned that they did not even consider the consequences of their actions, it is likely that most mature adults who have worked for years in tightly knit social structures such as those found on ships, are capable of recognizing and do at least consider that their misconduct has the potential to hurt others. Believing that assertion, it is then logical to assume that prior to the decision to behave incorrectly, there is some tension within the leader with regards to what he is considering doing. Even if they believe they will never be caught, they

can still recognize that those directly affected by their improprieties will probably be hurt in some way. How people deal with that tension plays a role in their moral development. “Moral agency can be defined as people’s understanding and experience of themselves (and others) as agents whose morally relevant actions are based in goals and beliefs.”<sup>24</sup> Since personal misconduct by COs often violates ideals about service to others and caring that the COs know and admit are wrong, they challenge their feelings of moral agency. Research suggests that most adults are capable of making sense of their harmful behaviors as stemming from their own beliefs and what they feel are competing goals. That sense often comes from constructed narratives about the harmful act or situation. The narratives are important, because they help people to make decisions about trade-offs between their desires and others’, amid obligations to themselves and to other individuals or groups, and can help them recognize imperfections in their perception of their own beliefs and how they understand others’.<sup>25</sup> Better understanding of how these decisions work helps people see themselves as moral agents. It could be that some of the COs have not been exposed to or forced to consider the necessary narratives that develop and maintain that sense of moral agency to a point that could help them avoid misbehavior. It is difficult to know if that lack of exposure is directly attributable to the culture they have been raised in or just a failing of a small group of COs, but it suggests an avenue to address better ethical development of the next generation of leaders.

Some people in and retired from the navy believe that complex ideas about prospective causes for rises in CO personal misconduct are merely conjecture that mask the real reason that the firings are occurring at such an increased rate. They suggest that the standards are unreasonably high, the speed of information and media coverage have made the problem look worse than it is, or that the navy is overreacting by firing so many COs, because it is worried about its image

more than combat effectiveness.<sup>26</sup> Those assertions are extraneous in this analysis, because they fail to appreciate the reality of the situation faced by today's navy. As stated previously, the information and media issues are only going to be exacerbated moving forward. Nothing is going to change that without adversely affecting the quality of life of deployed sailors, which is unlikely to garner much support. In regards to the Navy's decision to fire so many COs and be very transparent about the situation, it demonstrates an understanding that in a fiscally austere environment, with no existential threat to the U.S., and during missions that are more often than not going to be counter-insurgency or humanitarian related, public perception and support are key elements to winning that have to be sustained by complete trust between the military and the people it serves. Finally, the standards have changed, and for good reason. Due to the very factors mentioned above, the potential strategic impacts that can result from integrity lapses and a heightened sensitivity to ethical transgressions are just too important<sup>27</sup> not to demand that COs toe the line to the highest standard as they are expected to do in areas of professional competence.

### **What is the Navy doing about the Problem?**

The Navy is well aware that CO personal misconduct is a problem and has already taken steps to address the issue. The current Chief of Naval Operations and his predecessor have tightened standards and there are ongoing pilot studies to investigate what else needs to be done.<sup>28</sup> The first step was taken by Admiral Gary Roughead who sent a memo to all prospective commanding officers titled "The Charge of Command," which outlined his expectations with regards to both the professional and personal conduct of all COs.<sup>29</sup> The memo is required to be read by COs prior to taking command with their boss. It certainly leaves no doubt as to the honorable manner with which a CO should conduct himself and is tied effectively to historically relevant thoughts

about the naval service, but it is formed from parts of U.S. Code Title 10, Navy Regulations, and the Navy Standard Organization and Regulations Manual (SORM) that most officers who aspire to command are already familiar with.<sup>30,31,32</sup> It could be argued that it aids the CO honor group members in understanding what their ideals should be, but since most of the fired COs reported knowing the rules and expectations fully and well, and many of the fired in the last three years were part of the group required to read the memo, there is little evidence to support that the document itself will cause the downturn in misconducts the navy is seeking.

Supporting instructions aligned with the CNO's new standards added more wickets for officers with command aspirations to pass through before even going up to a board for consideration for command. Prospective COs must take a test that covers basic professional topics as well as command management. Additionally they must complete a very specific set of professional tasks during their department head tours on top of having their CO sign their Command Qualification Record, which double checks to make sure that the officer has completed all the pre-requisite qualifications for command of a ship and has the CO's personal recommendation for command at sea. Furthermore, Officers must pass a Command Qualification Oral Board consisting of current COs who assess the candidate on professional and ethical issues through the use of complicated scenarios "to evaluate the candidate's maturity, judgment, attitude, motivation, and awareness,"<sup>33</sup> and that often do not have a single correct answer. Prior to the newest instruction, officers in some communities were not required to pass an oral board with current COs. Under the CNO's new guidance, all officers from all communities screening for command, will have to pass an oral board prior to screening and attend Command Leadership School (CLS) after screening. While at CLS, there is another written exam that must be passed, which covers "command leadership tenets, commanding officer/officer-in-charge authorities,

duties, rights and responsibilities under U.S. Navy Regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice.”<sup>34</sup> Also while at CLS, the officer reviews the results of a 360 degree feedback report that rates the officer’s performance across a multitude of professional and personal behavior statements.<sup>35</sup> The inputs to the reports come from superiors, peers, and subordinates with whom the officer has served and are compared to the answers that the officer himself has provided to the same questions so that the officer can see if there is a disconnect between his own opinion of his performance and the opinions of those who have served with him before. Officers in the Surface Warfare Community also receive 360 degree feedback reports while serving as division officers and prior to becoming department heads. Finally, while the prospective CO is serving in his executive officer billet, the current CO must evaluate the XO one more time to “decide if the member has the professional competence, intelligence, moral courage, and personal honor needed for Command.”<sup>36</sup> The CO must submit a formal positive endorsement of the XO and the Immediate Superior in Command (ISIC) must endorse the letter for the member’s record.

One of the steps under consideration for the future is including the 360 feedback reports in officers’ Fitness Reports (FITREP) and/or possibly including them in the administrative screening board for Command.<sup>37</sup> Right now the 360 Feedback reports are used like counseling tools, purely as a means to make an officer aware of how others view him/her. If the reports were approved for formal inclusion in permanent records and during boards, it would mean that everyone submitting inputs to the reports would have a direct influence on whether or not a particular officer was chosen for command. The usefulness and/or fairness of including the reports formally is subject to debate, but as they are used today, they are valuable tools in the shaping of officers if for no other reason than they help officers understand how others view them, which could alert the officers to flaws in their behavior that they were unaware of, or more

importantly help them to understand that their flaws, both professional and ethical, are easily detectable by everyone they work with in their chain of command. In the hands of a trained debriefer, they could also be used as a tool to create or reinforce the narratives previously discussed as important contributors to the officer's moral agency.

Will the initiatives actually lead to a decrease in CO firings for personal misconduct? The Navy took an important first step when it decided to be fairly transparent about what was going on and why they were holding the COs to high standards. Despite the reports from the fired COs themselves that they already knew the expectations, there can be little doubt that if the navy did not take their own standards seriously enough to enforce them vigorously, there would be little chance of influencing the behavior of the COs. The navy's openness has also served a useful purpose with regards to communicating with both sailors and civilians. The navy has done a good job of connecting expectations to consequences across the range of interested parties. It has certainly dispelled the notions of the COs who reported that they thought the navy would not do anything about personal misconduct infractions.

Most of the other requirements are focused on officers' professional conduct like their ability to drive a ship, fly a plane, be prepared for combat, or maintain their platforms to the appropriate levels of material readiness. Those requirements, while certainly helpful in making sure that the Navy is continuously checking officers' ability to be combat effective, cannot be expected to do much in the way of teaching or reinforcing personal ethics. The CLS exam, which appears from the planned design to focus more on issues relevant to an officer's current moral development, definitely provides the Navy with an affirmation that the future CO understands expected personal behaviors and is aware of the rules that govern a CO's actions. However, it has already been shown that has not been an underlying cause to the problem.

The new requirement for the sitting XO to be evaluated for fitness for command one more time before becoming the CO has merit. At the very minimum, it allows the Navy the opportunity to do one last sanity check on officers while they are performing their duties in as close to a command type atmosphere as possible. At that point in an officer's career it is probably too late to actually change them, but at least an ethically faulty XO could be prevented from taking command and adding to the alarming statistics.

Although current initiatives and those known to be under consideration may be expected to produce somewhat positive short-term effects in relation to the CO firings for personal misconduct, given even the cursory review of possible underlying causes for why people act unethically in this paper, there is little reason to believe that any of the latest screening tools will solve this problem long-term. To accomplish that goal, the Navy culture has to be changed to some extent. Officers have to be taught, and have it consistently reinforced throughout their careers, that ethical behavior is a requirement of command. They must understand that they will be caught no matter how much control they think they have over resources and communications avenues at their commands. Additionally, they have to be given tools to create a method of thinking and self-evaluation that enables them to resist moral temptations while in command.

### **What Should the Navy be doing about the Problem?**

What follows are recommended actions that could be instituted by Navy leadership to curtail the number of CO firings for personal misconduct based on research conducted as to the underlying causes and information gathered from social science literature, the writings of other officers on the subject, and ideas from the author's personal observations of Commanding

Officers who were combat effective and conducted themselves in accordance with the high ethical standards the Navy demands from current and future COs.

*Teach ethics to officers throughout their development continuum:* The first suggested course of action is for the Navy to make it a larger priority to teach ethics to officers beginning at all accession sources and to develop a standardized methodology to continue ethical education throughout officers' careers as they progress towards command.<sup>38</sup> It is good that the Navy conducts ethical checks on officers in the last years leading up to Command, but if it hopes to solve the problem long-term there has to be a systematic approach to moral development throughout the officer career path.

In 2009, the Naval Academy had more integrity violations than it did in any of the previous twenty-five years.<sup>39</sup> While at first glance it may appear encouraging that perhaps the Naval Academy was ahead of the rest of the navy leadership in cracking down on personal misconduct, the data could also portend trouble ahead. The midshipmen at the Academy were not raised in the permissive naval culture that was offered as a possible source of the firings earlier in this paper. Perhaps the numbers indicate that even after the Navy's culture began to change in the 90's, society's standards did not go up. Military and civilian culture often run in near parallel, with each taking the lead at certain points in history and on different issues, but they are not exactly in step all the time. The trend at the Academy may signal that rather than hoping that the firing tide will turn as the current crop of command eligible officers move up or out of the Navy, there could be reason to believe that officers with low ability to think and act ethically will be a significant problem for the next 15-20 years.

It is essential then that the Navy believes it can teach ethics to its officers and builds a plan to do it. While the behavior of some in Command may belie the notion, the culture to build a

continuum of ethical training exists and there are leaders ready to make it happen. In a 2010 article, Kilcline reports that 80 % of the O-5 aviation COs at a leadership symposium believed they had a role in teaching integrity at their commands, but were struggling with how to “operationalize” the concept.<sup>40</sup> At a 2010 symposium 90% of aviation O-6 COs agreed with the ideas that sailors are bound to exhibit the highest examples of moral conduct in their personal and professional lives, navy leaders should be more active in developing and encouraging that idea, the navy can influence young adults positively when it comes to values and ethics, and that the navy should be concerned about what sailors do in their personal lives.<sup>41</sup> It is clear that the messages from senior leadership were getting through to those COs, they believed that ethics could be taught, and that they saw a role in the process for themselves even if they were not quite sure how to do it.

The Navy has done a good job outlining the standards and enforcing them. The next step is to use ethical education to assist officers in maturing their notions about ethics so that they can develop a better understanding about the ethical temptations they will face before they reach command.<sup>42</sup> Last November, Secretary of Defense Panetta directed CJCS to look for ways to cultivate value-based decision making among leaders.<sup>43</sup> The navy is working on leadership initiatives to address the issue as well with the idea that reinforcing ethics and leadership throughout an officer’s development continuum is a much better approach than reliance in an on-the-job training type approach that has been the predominant tool of the past.<sup>44</sup>

The examination of case studies that demonstrate good and bad examples of ethical leadership is one avenue that is and should be examined.<sup>45</sup> Case studies allow officers to examine ethical issues from the point of view of the decision maker and the audiences of the decision. They also allow discussions to explore the feelings of all involved. That helps enable a narrative to

develop, which aids in the maintenance of the moral agency discussed earlier. To be really effective an individual has to develop narratives about their own harmful actions,<sup>46</sup> but a good place to start is to get them thinking about other examples of harmful actions in a way that develops the deep examination required to assess their own behaviors. If the skill is developed, there is better reason to believe that the practice will be applied than if it is left to a chance that one officer or another possesses the ability or does not.

Further support for development of the narrative and teaching ethics to our officers comes from social science research which reveals that ethical acts originate in significant part from deep-rooted instincts within us and patterns of behavior that are habitual.<sup>47</sup> Although culture does play a role by providing individuals with different self-images, people often do not make ethical decisions consciously.<sup>48</sup> More reason to put additional tools in officers' kits when it comes to value-based leadership. The navy could just trust that it will choose officers for command that have the correct instincts, but if the statistics from the last three years are an indication, then that is a poor course of action. A better approach would be to surround officers with a culture that supports the production of more ethical self-images, develops the skills to strengthen the narratives that maintain deeper moral agency, and capitalizes on its leaders' beliefs that they can and should contribute to the moral development of those they serve. Instincts can be trained out of or dampened in people. There is proof enough of that in the countless heroic actions the U.S. military has produced on the battlefield for centuries. There is no reason to believe that ethical training could not accomplish the same sort of results.

A systematic plan involving case studies is not the only answer. There are plenty of teachable moments for leaders to capitalize on everyday in the Navy. Most COs wouldn't hesitate to use one in the name of better ship handling or flying, why should there be any hesitation to do so

when it comes to ethics? At the very minimum COs will have had the opportunity to practice some forethought about real situations to help them avoid succumbing negatively to moral temptations.<sup>49</sup>

*Provide COs with post-command mentors:* Another suggestion for addressing the problem long-term is to provide COs mentoring support during command. As mentioned previously, there is a very natural tendency for COs to feel isolated socially and professionally while in command. To some extent that comes with the job and the Navy needs commanders who can handle it. However, it seems incongruous to invest the time and energy to train an officer's moral compass and then leave them on an ethical island while in command. Much of the necessary reporting that goes from COs up the Chain of Command surrounds important issues of readiness, sailor care, and reports on mission-related matters. Mentoring can allow COs an outlet for the examination of ethical issues.

Respondents in the civilian and military workforce to a survey about mentoring listed promoting good values and ethics as one of the most positive things a mentor can do. Setting the example, listening, challenging, and providing feed back were also listed as things mentees needed from their mentors.<sup>50</sup> Why does the military in general treat COs as if they are finished products? The message seems to be that once an officer reaches command, he does not need any more support or development. He has been groomed for this tour for years; he must be ready for whatever may come. However, this perceived attitude seems to be divergent from the notion that there are certain things that just cannot be experienced or understood until an officer is actually in command. If that is true, then regardless of the time spent developing future commanders, it seems that they all should require mentoring during their tour. It will help them avoid their feelings of isolation, provide them with an outlet to share concerns, and could be used to talk

about and reinforce ethics. The mentor could simply ask them if they are facing any ethical dilemmas or temptation and actively listen to the responses. If the CO reports none, then the mentor could talk about some ethical issue he faced in command as a means to possibly aid the CO in the future or to just get the CO talking about ethics so his training and narratives don't atrophy.

Mentoring could also be a good way to combat the low emotional intelligence COs may be susceptible to developing from their feelings of power or privilege. Emotional intelligence "has been described as a form of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one's own thinking and action."<sup>51</sup> Since the mentor would be a former CO, he would be able to anticipate challenges that one would potentially face in command. He would understand the possible traps that can result from the power, large degree of control, and isolation, and recognize if the CO was stuck in one of them. The mentor would have insight as to how to force the CO out of that pattern and aid him in performing the kind of self-evaluation and critical introspection necessary to keep emotional intelligence high.<sup>52</sup> In essence, a post-Command mentor can help a CO maintain a healthy ethical perspective like no one at the CO's unit possibly could.

*Amend officer FITREPs to place a stronger emphasis on ethical behavior:* To reinforce the training that officers receive involving ethical personal conduct, the Navy should demonstrate the importance it places on those traits that characterize ethical conduct in practice. There is allowance for such evaluation in the current FITREP format, but it is buried under the Military Bearing/Character block alongside traits that speak to an officer's physical fitness and appearance in uniform.<sup>53</sup> If ethical conduct is truly an essential part of effective leadership, it

deserves to be treated separately so that COs can evaluate their junior officers' ethical behavior in terms of concrete behaviors and provide feedback to them along with the other categories on the FITREP. Some prospective traits that could be used are honor, courage, commitment, selflessness, and integrity. There a host of others that bear consideration. At a minimum they could be used to force dialogue between COs and their officers during mid-term and end of reporting period counseling that would lead to better self-awareness for the officer being rated, but the potential also exists for the new evaluation criteria to be used in support of the training initiatives proposed in this paper and by others. It would also create a larger volume of data pertaining to the ethical qualities of a potential CO before the final endorsement for command that is required while the officer is still a sitting XO.

*Institute a Personnel Reliability Program style plan for ethical behavior at commands:* The Nuclear Weapons Personnel Reliability Program (PRP) is a tool that is used to ensure that each person performing duties pertaining to nuclear weapons or command is emotionally and physically capable, and has demonstrated the reliability and competence to do so.<sup>54</sup> Personnel in the program are subject to evaluation under its regulations throughout the time that their assigned duties contain such responsibilities. A complete review of all the program aspects is beyond the scope of this paper, but its general tenets could have merit to serve as the basis for a similar program that evaluates officers' suitability for command throughout their career. Individuals in the program are required to monitor their own reliability to stay in the program as well as the other individuals so assigned. Failure to do so is viewed as a failure of the individual's responsibility.<sup>55</sup> Some of the standards in the PRP would be easily transferable to a similar construct for ethical practices in a command, but there would also have to be significant modifications made to make this suggestion relevant to the purpose proposed here. One of the

most useful aspects of the PRP is that it is not just the CO who is being evaluated or who is involved as a steward of the program. In addition to the people enrolled in the program, there are assigned evaluators in and out of the command who perform vital functions to ensure the integrity of the process.

Other current initiatives (final endorsement of fitness for command), prospective initiatives (360 degree feedback reports), and suggestions for consideration (modified FITREPs, completion of ethics training, active participation in a mentoring process) included in this paper could be incorporated into such a program to aid in its development and maintenance. Officers could be entered into the program when they report for Department Head duty and for all higher assignments afterward in units where they are eligible for command. There is even merit to the idea of including the Command Master Chief, unit Medical Representative, Command Career Counselor, unit Master-at-Arms, and other personnel holding billets with command-wide impact as either participants or evaluators.

A program of this type would drastically reduce the perception of COs that they could cover their tracks when it comes to personal conduct. It could also aid the Navy in maintaining not only the focus, but the transparency it has sought to establish with regards to ethical conduct both with service members at commands and the civilians whom the military serves. Although more research is required, it may also aid assigned personnel in developing and maintaining the capacity for self-control and self-regulation by providing long-term feedback processes supported by external stimuli (the other members of the program and evaluators) that aid individuals in delaying gratification and ignoring alternative behavior possibilities.<sup>56</sup> This could serve to fight potentially destructive instincts that were not already muted through the narratives discussed earlier and increase self-control strength which is made up of internal resources each

individual has to inhibit or alter responses that would normally come from habit, learning, physiological routes, or stressful situations.<sup>57</sup> It is understood that adding another program for commands to implement and maintain is a less than desirable solution for units that are already heavily tasked with administrative responsibilities, but if designed correctly, such a program could serve to organize the other initiatives in a more orderly and manageable fashion and aid in the creation of a long-term solution to the problem that naturally becomes part of the culture of the Navy over time. Similar umbrella programs have been used in recent years to effectively rein in administratively taxing maintenance and operational readiness reporting systems.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

The number of COs fired over the last three years for personal misconduct is alarming. The trend began in 2010 and has remained steady through 2012. All CO firings are disruptive to commands, but reliefs for personal misconduct are especially problematic, because they create a large amount of negative media attention, erode the trust of sailors and civilians in navy leadership, and often leave a trail of victims in their wake.

A full understanding of the reasons why COs may make poor ethical decisions while in command requires a deeper examination than outlined in this paper, but there are specific drivers that appear to be fairly certain and others that deserve more research. It is clear that the standards for ethical conduct are more stringent than ever before. Additionally, the aperture for what constitutes unethical behavior has increased while the internet and social media have made everything that goes on in commands more accessible to sailors and civilians. Concurrently, today's leaders were raised in a society and navy culture that communicated mixed signals in

terms of what used to be acceptable, what is acceptable in civilian life, and what is acceptable in uniform.

It is clear that COs who have been fired for personal misconduct knew the rules they were supposed to follow, knew that the rules applied to them, but believed that they would either not get caught or failed to even consider the consequences. The very nature of COs, who are expected to be self-reliant and exercise a large degree of control over themselves and all the responsibilities of their commands, could be part of the problem. Large degrees of autonomy, concentrated power, a high amount of resource control, and a sense of isolation from peers who understand the burdens of command are also likely contributors. These factors can reduce moral agency, lower emotional intelligence, and reinforce instincts that lead to unethical behavior.

Current and prospective navy initiatives to address the problem are good first steps in creating a lasting solution, but they will not generate a long-term resolution as currently constructed. The Charge of Command requirement, increased number of wickets to pass through prior to screening for and taking command, and the 360 feedback process has served to increase the transparency of the problem, clearly identified the increased standards, could help develop better ethical narratives for leaders to follow, and have helped to stop the erosion of trust that has resulted from some of the more egregious incidents. However, they are also focused more on professional skill development than they should be, do not create a long-term ethical development continuum for future COs to follow, and are too attentive to the current status of ethical maturity in leaders while largely ignoring concrete measurements of past ethical performance in realistic settings that the COs will face while in command.

To tackle this issue long-term, the navy needs to consider additional measurements. Teaching ethics to officers must become an organized and structured construct that begins at accession

sources and continues through command. Protracted ethical development will give leaders a better understanding of the ethical temptations and dilemmas they will face by forcing them to consider the missteps of others from multiple points of view. It could help them grow useful narratives to stymie unethical instincts in the future while creating a culture of ethical teaching at the deck plate level that should be as much a part of the navy way of life as tactical acumen and good management skills.

COs should have post-command mentors during their tours. Mentors who have been there before could reduce feelings of isolation, provide an outlet to discuss ethical dilemmas, and reinforce the training that the COs should receive prior to taking command. Mentors may also be useful allies in combating the low emotional intelligence that is damaging to good ethical decision making by helping COs to keep a healthy perspective about the power and control that are necessary components of command.

The FITREP system for officers should be amended to include a more detailed examination of ethical attributes during all the tours leading up to command. Including ethical traits in FITREPs would give the navy a much larger data set to examine with respect to ethical behavior during the screening process and could serve as an additional training tool for COs to use with their junior officers. Counseling sessions between COs and their officers could also be used to create more narratives for both parties to utilize in their ethical development. At the very minimum, amending the FITREPs would be another clear signal to the officer corps that the navy takes ethical behavior seriously and in fact, values it as part of their assessment for who is fit to command.

Instituting a PRP style program for ethical improvement and monitoring is a tool that should be considered by the navy. Such a plan would definitely help to shatter the illusion that CO

personal misconduct can escape the attention of those in their commands. It would get multiple leaders in a command involved in the ethical decision making process and would also let an outside set of eyes check the ethical temperature of entire commands. It would be another useful step in increasing the transparency that the navy has already done a good job at establishing and could aid in keeping ethical standards in the forefront of all leaders' minds. It is also possible that an ethical PRP could aid in developing self-regulation and self-control instincts in individuals. Perhaps the most useful benefit would be that a PRP could be used as an umbrella management tool for initiatives already begun by the navy, those proposed in this paper, and those that may be proposed in the future.

The problem of CO personal misconduct in the navy did not develop overnight. It is a complex confluence of changing boundaries driven by societal influences and developing mission requirements that require levels of ethical leadership that were never emphasized with the intensity they are today. The Navy has done a good job of increasing awareness of the issue and being forthright about the extent of the problem. High standards have been set and communicated clearly. However, there is more to be done moving forward if the navy hopes to curtail the evident trends of the last three years. A lasting solution to the difficulty must address the cultures of the navy and society that help produced it, increase the tools available to COs to make good ethical decisions, and create a long-term process for ethical development and emphasis that is practical, sustainable, and based on an understanding of the root causes behind the ethical misconduct of leaders in a naval setting.

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<sup>2</sup>Light, 138.

<sup>3</sup>Light, 138-139.

<sup>4</sup> Staff Reports, Navy, "Navy Commanders Relieved of Command in 2011," *Stars and Stripes*, August 26, 2011, <http://www.stripes.com/news/navy-commanders-relieved-of-command-in-2011-1.153395>.

<sup>5</sup>Cid Standifer, "Navy CO Firings," *U.S. Naval Institute News*, December 20, 2012, <http://news.usni.org/news-analysis/news/navy-co-firings>.

<sup>6</sup>Norman Polmar, "A Crisis of Leadership," *Proceedings*, January 2011, 84-85.

<sup>7</sup>Kevin Eyer, "How are the Mighty Fallen," *Proceedings*, January 2011, 20-25.

<sup>8</sup>Light, 143.

<sup>9</sup>Eyer, 20-25.

<sup>10</sup>James Drennan, "Cause for Alarm," *Proceedings*, December 2012, 52-58.

<sup>11</sup>Light, 146.

<sup>12</sup>Light, 141.

<sup>13</sup>Wyatt Olson, "Do fired Navy COs suffer from 'Bathsheba Syndrome'?", *Stars and Stripes*, March 14, 2012, <http://www.stripes.com/news/navy/do-fired-navy-cos-suffer-from-bathsheba-syndrome-1.171525>.

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<sup>16</sup>Hugh Lessig, "Teaching Military Ethics: More to be Done," *Stars and Stripes*, November 17, 2012, <http://www.stripes.com/news/navy/teaching-military-ethics-more-to-be-done-1.197500>.

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<sup>19</sup>Robinson, 264.

<sup>20</sup>Robinson, 265.

<sup>21</sup>Robinson, 266.

<sup>22</sup>Anecdotal footnote based on twelve years of personal observations in author's warfare community.

<sup>23</sup>Edward Major, Lee DeRemer, and David Bolgiano, "Ethics Can be Taught," *Proceedings*, December 2012, 58-63.

<sup>24</sup>Monisha Pasupathi and Cecilia Wainryb, "Developing Moral Agency through Narrative," *Human Development* 53, no. 2 (2010): 55. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/224006772?accountid=14746>.

<sup>25</sup>Pasupathi and Wainryb, 56.

<sup>26</sup>Polmar, Eyer, and anecdotal footnote based on exchanges between officers on social media websites observed by or relayed to this author.

<sup>27</sup>Light, 142.

<sup>28</sup>Sam Fellman, "CNO's tough new rules for screening commanders," *Navy Times*, June 18, 2012, <http://www.navytimes.com/news/2012/06/navy-commander-fired-screening-360-reviews-061812/>.

<sup>29</sup>Admiral Gary Roughead, Chief of Naval Operations, U.S. Navy, to All Prospective Commanding Officers, Memorandum, 09 June 2011.

<sup>30</sup>*Title 10*. U.S. Code, Subtitle C, Part II, Ch. 551, sec 5947 (2012), <http://uscode.house.gov/download/pls/10C551.txt>.

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<sup>37</sup>Fellman.

<sup>38</sup>Drennan, 52-58.

<sup>39</sup>Drennan, 52-58.

<sup>40</sup>Thomas J Kilcline, "Developing the Whole Sailor," *Proceedings*, July 2010, 52-59.

<sup>41</sup>Kilcline, 52-59.

<sup>42</sup>Major, DeRemer, and Bolgiano.

<sup>43</sup>Lessig.

<sup>44</sup>Lessig.

<sup>45</sup>Lessig.

<sup>46</sup>Pasupathi and Wainryb, 56.

<sup>47</sup>Kristen R Monroe, "The Ethical Perspective: An Identity Theory of the Psychological Influences on Moral Choice., *Political Psychology* 30, No. 3 (June 2009), pp. 435, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25655406>.

<sup>48</sup>Monroe, 435.

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<sup>50</sup>Frank C Budd, "Mentoring in the U.S. Air Force: A Cornerstone for Success through Organizational Transformation," *Performance Improvement* 46, no. 3 (2007): 16-22, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/237241541?accountid=14746>.

<sup>51</sup>Anthony G Wallace, "Future directions in leadership : implications for the selection and development of senior leaders," (master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2003), 23, <http://stinet.dtic.mil/>.

<sup>52</sup>Wallace, 24.

<sup>53</sup>Light, 149.

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