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Guest Editorial

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...guest editorial

LYING IN THE MILITARY: AN EXAMINATION OF ROOT CAUSES

– Paul S. Grossgold, Captain, U.S Navy (retired)

“A Cadet will not lie, cheat, or steal, or tolerate those who do.”

The words of this simple honor code are emblazoned on walls and outside buildings at the United States Military Academy at West Point. Similar codes or honor concepts that concisely capture the essence of the core value of personal character exist at each of the nation’s service academies. This code is as old as the academies themselves. For well over two hundred years, America’s professional military officer corps, including prominent leaders like Grant, Pershing, MacArthur, Nimitz, LeMay, Swarzkopf and Petraeus, have all operated under this code or one like it. Given the undeniable fact that many who have sworn to uphold the code have also broken it, it is perhaps time to examine its value and usefulness within the context of the exploration of the root causes of code violations.

In *Lying to Ourselves: Dishonesty in the Army Profession* (February, 2015) (“The Report”), authors Leonard Wong and Stephen J. Gerras suggest that while there have been displays of dishonesty in the military in the past, there is something different about today’s situation. This difference, they submit, is rooted in “ethical numbness” brought on by overwhelming and growing demands that are levied upon operational units by higher headquarters. In the face of ever-growing demands imposed by higher authority—which in combination are impossible to comply with—soldiers will simply fabricate responses to avoid negative repercussions. The authors also mention other factors, such as increased competition among officers vying for dwindling advancement and retention opportunities in a downsizing environment.

The Report’s premise that the problem is worse today, primarily due to chronic overtasking, warrants examination. A March 23, 2015 article in *Navy Times* revealed that boot camp recruits are taught to “fudge” physical readiness test scores. According to two junior sailors who were caught doing this at a Navy career development school, they said simply that they had learned to do it in boot camp. The article later suggested that the Recruit Division Commanders had incentive to encourage cheating, as they were evaluated on recruits’ test scores. There is no evidence that this blatant honors violation was the result of overtasking.

In the shocking, cheating scandal involving dozens of Air Force nuclear officers in 2014, the systemic dishonesty appeared unrelated to burdensome tasking. The core

issue appeared, instead, to be a derivative of a declining sense of mission in the post-Cold War period, during which conventional Air Force programs gained in prestige and budget support at the expense of nuclear programs.

These sad episodes suggest that the issue of lapses in character is more pervasive in the military than many people think. And, it is far more complicated than simply accepting that it derives primarily from a need for expediency in the face of chronic and often perfunctory overtasking. It may well be fair to say, however, that the response to overtasking outlined in the Report is a symptom of the larger problem.

This is not a mere exercise in semantics. If the root cause of rampant dishonesty is, as the Report suggests, primarily a result of too much tasking from upper echelons, then by implication, a dedicated effort on the part of the military services to reduce overtasking will likewise diminish the dishonesty. To say the least, I'm skeptical. While few in uniform would suggest that honesty is not a core value of military service, the more plausible root cause is the painful but obvious truth that for many (but hopefully not most) in uniform, deceit in some circumstances is simply not seen as a breach of personal character.

If that is so, then it is the development of personal character, and not a reduction in tasking, that must be the primary focus. To successfully address such an issue requires immediate, strong, clear, and consistent leadership. In 1991 when the huge financial firm Salomon Brothers was nearly brought down by a bond cheating scandal, Warren Buffett was brought in to right the ship. He went to work immediately to restore the firm's integrity. While testifying at a Congressional hearing, he sent a clear message to Salomon employees: ***"Lose money for the firm and I will be understanding; lose a shred of reputation for the firm and I will be ruthless."***

Translated into military speak, Soldiers, Sailors Airmen, and Marines must understand that failure for the right reasons is acceptable, but violations of trust are unacceptable. That message must not only be clear and consistent, it must also be specific. Personnel must be reminded that as members of the world's finest military, they are expected to uphold values commensurate with their status. Every service does this, but the Marines seem to do it best. The other services would do well to examine why the Marines are so successful.

In addition to ensuring that every person serving understands the core values of his or her service, he/she must also grasp actions that are not permitted. For example, fudging readiness reports for the sake of expediency or because in the judgment of the submitter the reports aren't that important anyway, is a violation of trust and must not be tolerated. Grade inflation on personnel evaluations may keep someone's feelings from being hurt, but the practice undermines the integrity of the system and does a disservice to those who truly deserve the higher grades. These are the types of specific constraints and restraints that must be ingrained and demanded at every level.

The messaging is necessary but not sufficient. It must be reinforced with corrective action that is timely, appropriate to the offense, and transparent, so that everyone may bear witness to the consequences of failures of character. Conversely, individuals who demonstrate the inner courage to bring bad news to light should be

thanked and appreciated – publically - for their honesty. Attack the issue, not the messenger.

Each service is dealing with this issue. The Navy, for example, has established the Naval Leadership and Ethics Center, a senior level command dedicated to “*...instill fundamental tenets of ethical leadership throughout the Navy; develop and guide leaders with a strong abiding sense of responsibility, authority, and accountability; and impart commitment of Navy core values and ethos to sailors.*” Such initiatives are appropriate, but only time will tell whether they are successful at altering the culture at the leadership levels.

In summary, issues of personal character gone amok seem to be pervasive in the military for a wide variety of reasons, only one of which may include chronic overtaking of units by higher authority. While structured training and written policies are important, the primary antidote for this serious problem is bold leadership. While leadership at every level is called for, it is particularly vital for it to start at the top. Senior officer and enlisted leaders must be exemplars of the kind of integrity and personal character demanded of all. Transgressions at those levels must be dealt with immediately and publically.

To conclude, have the honor codes outlived their usefulness? No. They are important and valuable statements of expectations. But they can only be meaningful if they truly guide the actions and behavior of everyone in uniform.

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