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# THE NAVY'S MORAL COMPASS

## Commanding Officers and Personal Misconduct

*Captain Mark F. Light, U.S. Navy*

*The supreme quality for leadership is unquestionably integrity. Without it, no real success is possible.*

DWIGHT DAVID EISENHOWER

**T**he U.S. Navy has an integrity problem in the ranks of its commanding officers (COs). Consider these headlines: “Cruiser CO Relieved for ‘Cruelty.’”<sup>1</sup> “CO Fired, Charged with Solicitation.”<sup>2</sup> “CO of Attack Sub Fired for ‘Drunkenness.’”<sup>3</sup> These are just a few cases in a recent deluge of early reliefs of “skippers.” In 2010, twenty-three Navy COs were relieved of command and “detached for cause,” an enormous increase over previous years. The trend continues: twenty-one commanding officers were fired in 2011 as of the end of October.<sup>4</sup> Even more worrisome is the fact that a large and increasing percentage of those dismissals are due to personal misconduct, such as sexual harassment, drunkenness, and fraternization. Although (as far as we can tell) over 97 percent of the Navy’s commanding officers conduct themselves honorably, the increasing number of those who do not raises concerns that the Navy must address. Alarms should be

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sounding at the highest levels of Navy leadership, but a review of recent literature reveals only a trickle of discussion on the subject of personal misconduct by military commanders. Instead of calling the service to action, a Navy spokesman said in January 2011 that there was “no indication that the reliefs are the result of any systemic problem.”<sup>5</sup>

The premise of this article is that this *is* a systemic problem, that although the number of offenders is low, it is too high. The excessive (and increasing) number of COs fired for personal misconduct is symptomatic of cultural issues within the Navy and of a confusing

ethical context in society, combined with a failure to set effectively and uphold an ethical standard within the service. The Navy needs to make adjustments in priority, policy, training, and personnel processes in order to stem the tide of personal misconduct by leaders. As a new Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) ends the first year of his tour of command, this article opens the door for debate and reexamination of the Navy's policies, standards for command, and ethical foundations.

While the percentage of misconduct seems small, the impact is of such a magnitude that this issue absolutely must be addressed, and the Navy has demonstrated that it can remedy this type of problem. Consider that in 2003 the Navy's aviation mishap rate was 1.89 mishaps per hundred thousand hours flown and had hovered around that value for several years after decades of steady improvement. At that time the secretary of defense directed that we reduce the mishap rate by 50 percent, because even that small figure included numerous costly mishaps that could and should have been prevented.<sup>6</sup> At the secretary's direction, Navy leadership undertook a fundamental effort to improve aviation safety. By 2010 the priority and emphasis given by the leadership had dropped the rate to 0.94 mishaps per hundred thousand flight hours, saving millions of dollars and dozens of lives.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, today the number of COs fired for personal misconduct is too high, and we can and must do better—but doing so will require that Navy leadership makes it a priority.

#### THE DATA: BACKGROUND

This article is based on data provided to the author by the Career Progression Division of the Naval Personnel Command. The data included administrative information and causes for dismissal of all commanding officers who were relieved while in command from 1999 through 2010 and for whom "detachment for cause" (DFC) procedures had been initiated and approved. Because of the administrative burden of the DFC process, senior leaders may choose not to implement it after a CO has been fired, if the situation does not require the specific funding and personnel adjustments for which formal detachment for cause provides.<sup>8</sup> The actual number of COs fired, then, is significantly larger than the DFC numbers cited here, but no comprehensive records exist of firings for which DFCs are not processed. The data also listed several officers in command positions with ranks of lieutenant commander (O-4) and below, which are excluded from this analysis. This article is intended to address character failures in more senior leaders who have had sufficient time in service to understand clearly the standards of command and in whom the Navy had opportunity to identify the potential for these failures of character before their consideration for command.

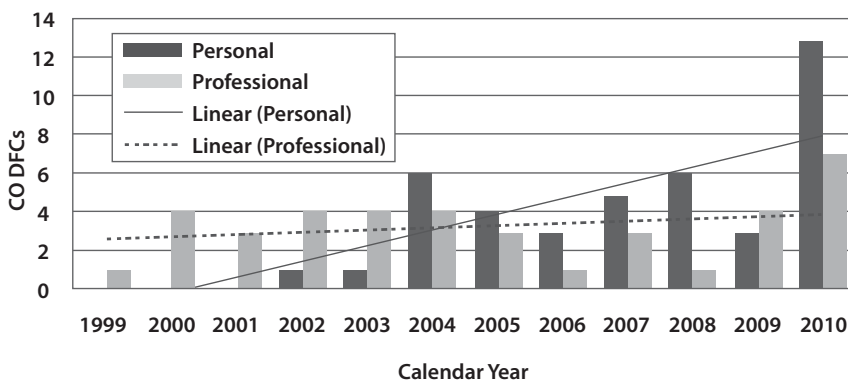
There exists a significant gap in the data concerning causes for dismissal. The summary information provided to the author indicated causes for dismissal by the categories used by the Navy's *Military Personnel Manual*: misconduct, a significant event, unsatisfactory performance over time, or loss of confidence in the officer's ability to command.<sup>9</sup> In the 101 DFCs evaluated, every submission cited either "loss of confidence" or a "significant event," with not one case citing misconduct or poor performance over time. In some cases an explanation amplified the category assignment; open-source information provided clarification in additional cases.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately the causes for approximately 20 percent of the dismissals for cause cannot be effectively determined from the data and are omitted from the analysis, but the trends are clear enough that valid conclusions may be drawn notwithstanding.

Although published literature on the subject is scarce, as noted, this is not the first study. In 2004, the Naval Inspector General (IG) conducted an in-depth review of COs fired between 1999 and 2004. The IG team had access to and analyzed information concerning all COs fired in that period, whether DFCs had been processed or not, and so produced a more statistically complete picture of the situation over that period.<sup>11</sup> That study is valuable today as a source of amplifying information and is used below as a basis for comparison.

#### THE DATA: NUMERICAL ANALYSIS

Figure 1 presents the total number of DFCs from 1999 through 2010, "broken out" between professional causes (e.g., ship groundings or failed inspections) and personal misconduct (such as fraternization or alcohol incidents). For the purpose of this analysis, such ethical violations as cruelty and abusive leadership were grouped with the personal-misconduct causes, whereas more generalized

**FIGURE 1**  
**CO DFCs BY CAUSE: PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL**



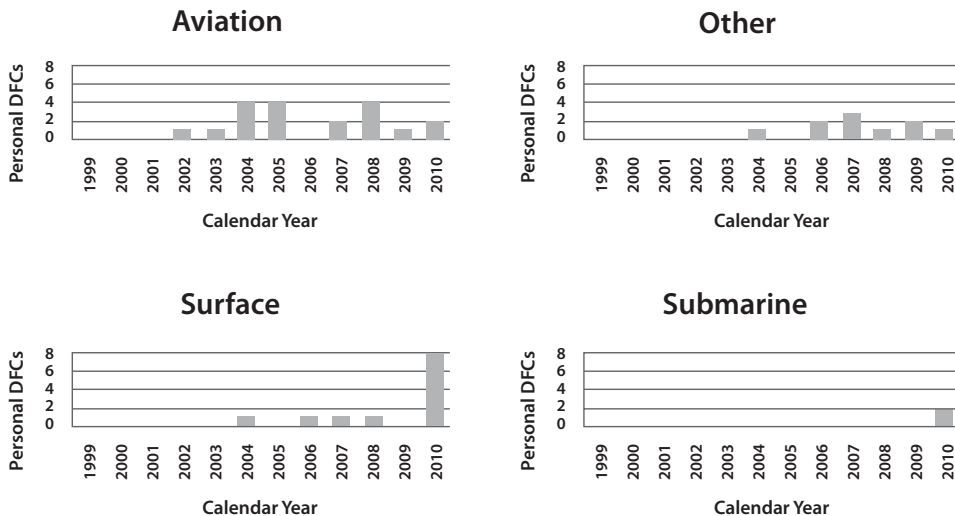
leadership failures, such as poor command climate or ineffective leadership, were classified as professional. The superimposed linear-regression trend lines make clear that while the rate of CO dismissals for cause for professional reasons is rising only slightly, there is a marked and increasing trend in the number of reliefs for personal and ethical causes.

Figure 2 breaks out dismissals for cause of commanding officers due to personal misconduct by community within the Navy: surface, aviation, submarine, and other (including special warfare, Medical or Supply Corps, human resources, etc.). Each case is categorized by the community of the officer, as opposed to that of the command from which he or she was fired. For instance, an aviator serving as CO of a ship when relieved was grouped with the aviation community.

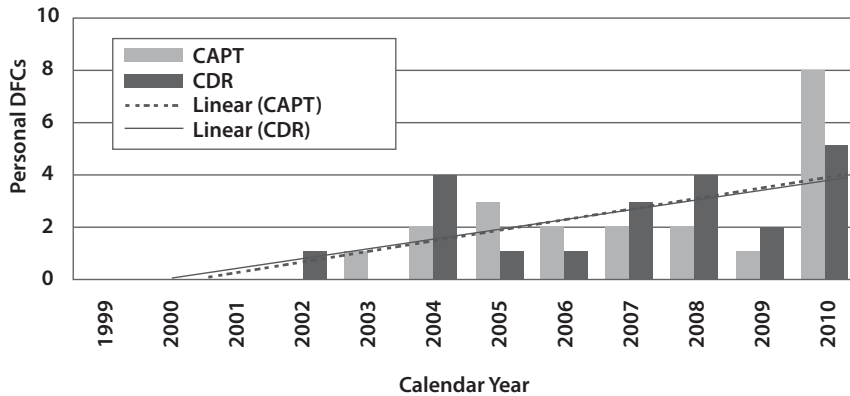
For context, officers from the aviation and surface communities each hold about 25 percent of the total number of O-5 and O-6 (commander and captain) commands in the Navy, submariners about half as many. The remaining 37 percent are held by officers of other communities. The data seem to indicate that the surface and submarine communities are largely responsible for the significant spike in 2010, when the number of surface DFCs for personal misconduct was nearly an order of magnitude above that for any previous year. As for the aviation community, although it does not show an obvious increasing trend, it is responsible for the largest total number of dismissals for cause and the largest percentage of commanding officers fired.

Figure 3 presents commanding-officer DFCs for personal misconduct by rank. About 45 percent of Navy CO billets are for O-6s. Notably, the number of DFCs is

**FIGURE 2**  
CO CDFs: PERSONAL/ETHICAL CAUSES, BY COMMUNITY



**FIGURE 3**  
**CO DFCs: PERSONAL/ETHICAL CAUSES, BY RANK**

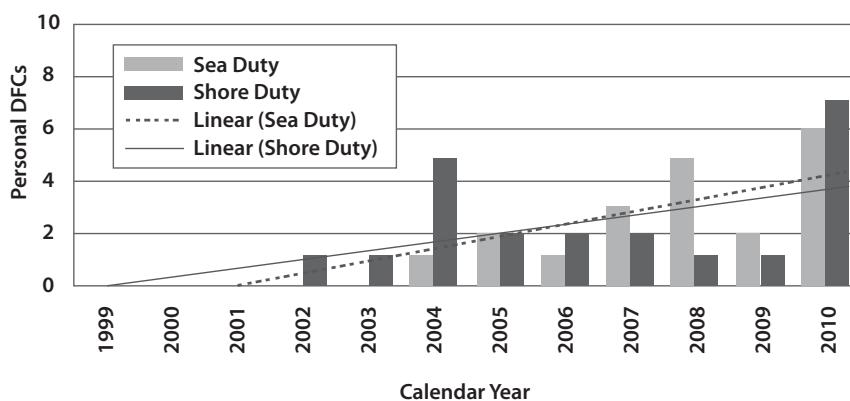


as great for captains, who are generally in their second or third command tours, as for commanders, even though there are fewer billets in the higher rank.

Figure 4 compares CO DFCs with respect to shore-duty and sea-duty billets. About 62 percent of Navy CO billets are shore duty, involving nondeploying commands based ashore. The sea commands are either deploying shore-based units or vessels. Both have similar trend lines and raw numbers. Since there are fewer sea-duty billets, the similar totals mean that the percentage of commanding officers fired from sea-duty billets for personal misconduct is higher than that for COs on shore duty.

We have noted that not all commanding officers fired are administratively “dismissed for cause.” Before proceeding, it is worth discussing the actual relationship between the two numbers. The 2004 Naval IG study listed seventy-eight COs fired between 1999 and 2004;<sup>12</sup> the DFC data used for this article include

**FIGURE 4**  
**CO DFCs: PERSONAL/ETHICAL CAUSES, BY DUTY TYPE**



only thirty-seven for that period. The difference is partly explained by the scopes of the studies—the IG study included O-3 (lieutenant) and O-4 commanding officers and officers in charge (typically of very small units), who were specifically excluded from this analysis. Beyond that, the difference between the study results reflects that between the number of fired COs and the number processed for DFC.

Despite the differences, this article points to trends that are consistent with the data from the earlier study. The Naval Inspector General reported that 36 percent of early reliefs occurred due to personal misconduct; this article records 42 percent of DFCs for the same reason, with an increase over the time span covered.<sup>13</sup> Further, the studies are consistent with regard to the contribution of the various communities to early reliefs due to misconduct, with aviation being the most prolific and the submarine force the least. So while the numbers differ, a consistent and logical argument emerges that a significant and increasing number of COs in the Navy are being fired for personal and ethical failures.

#### ACADEMIC ANALYSIS

It is fundamental to understand that the COs fired for misconduct knew their actions were out of line. The IG report states that in “nearly every case, the officers relieved for personal behavior clearly knew the rules.”<sup>14</sup> Interviews with active and retired flag officers reveal the same. Interviews likewise indicate that the COs who were fired did not feel that the rules did not apply to them. Instead, either they believed they would not be caught, that Navy leadership would not hold them accountable, or that their misconduct was worth risking their career, or they chose simply to ignore the consequences entirely. All of these logic trains are flawed, and that lack of judgment in our leaders is of concern in itself. But the basic issue is this: Why are detachments for cause due to misconduct by Navy leaders increasing, and how can we encourage future generations of leaders to reverse the unsettling trend?

One contributor to the barrage of incidents of CO misconduct is the fact that the personal and professional standards by which commanding officers are judged have become stricter in recent years. This fact was highlighted by Kevin Eyer, a retired Navy captain and former Surface Warfare Officer, who cites a litany of cases in the 1980s in which abusive use of power and even alcohol-related arrests were ignored as long as the officers involved were effective in terms of accomplishing the mission.<sup>15</sup> Few familiar with the Navy over the past twenty years are likely to dispute the point that actions once overlooked are today grounds for DFC.

Is it right that the standards have changed? Yes, because the mission of today’s Navy demands tighter standards. Captain Eyer notes that he drew his examples

from the years of the Cold War;<sup>16</sup> the mission of the Navy then was to be prepared to defeat the Soviets at sea and maintain freedom of navigation around the world. Today, the Navy's missions go far beyond those objectives in complexity, including engagement, partnership, security, and unprecedented levels of deterrence.<sup>17</sup> Modern technology, instant communications, and a twenty-four-hour news day are among the tools the Navy uses to leverage its global presence in support of those missions. But that same technology vastly increases the potential strategic impact of lapses in integrity by our ship captains and squadron commanders.

Our credibility as a Navy and a nation suffers when our military leaders behave in ways contrary to the nation's interests. One of the enduring U.S. national interests is "respect for universal values at home and around the world."<sup>18</sup> The most recent Barrett National Values Assessment for the United States identified honesty, compassion, respect, and responsibility/accountability as among the qualities most valued by Americans.<sup>19</sup> Drunk driving, adultery, fraud, and cruelty are not in line with these interests or values, and such behavior jeopardizes our legitimacy as we endeavor to promote our values around the world. Thus misconduct by a commanding officer is a mission failure, and offending individuals are rightfully being held accountable.

As standards of behavior for COs have been raised, so has the likelihood of violators being caught. In years past, allegations of wrongdoing often remained mere allegations, because words alone are generally not sufficient to indict anyone, let alone a commanding officer. However, e-mails, security cameras, cell-phone cameras, electronic records of calls and texts, and "smart phones" with web access have changed the landscape dramatically. As Eyer points out, subordinates have a plethora of means to document and report perceived offenses of their skippers.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, that same technology has made it increasingly difficult to deal with such transgressions quietly and privately; it is just as easy to post incriminating evidence on YouTube as to send it to the officer's superior. Commanding officers who violate the trust bestowed on them can expect technology to allow them to be caught and held accountable, often in the public eye. So why do some take the risk?

Some psychologists contend that people's actions may be products of their environment, and their research focuses on the extent an individual's behavior can be linked to outside situations.<sup>21</sup> Philip Zimbardo is among the camp that believes the environment can cause otherwise good people to become evil; he claims that the model explains the abuses of Abu Ghraib prisoners at the hands of American soldiers.<sup>22</sup> Others cite the "Bathsheba Syndrome" (named for the object of biblical king David's affection whose husband David sent to the front lines to be killed so the king could have her as his own), which is receiving attention



in academic and Navy circles for its lesson that many can be susceptible to the temptations that accompany power and authority.<sup>23</sup> Is there a link between the culture and environment of command in the Navy and undesirable behavior?

There are clearly cultural factors that work against the service's efforts to improve behavior, to raise and enforce standards of commanding-officer conduct. Historically, the captain of a Navy ship had to be strong and independent to maintain order among the crew in hostile environments and to execute missions far from home with only tenuous communications with superiors. Navy regulations state that "the responsibility of the commanding officer for his or her command is absolute" and that "the authority of the commanding officer is commensurate with his or her responsibility."<sup>24</sup> As Lord Acton said in the late nineteenth century, "All power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely."<sup>25</sup> The absolute authority bestowed on commanding officers by regulation could conceivably breed toxic leadership traits and cruelty. The data indicate signs of abusive leadership—three DFCs between 1999 and 2010 were due to cruelty or abusive leadership by the commanding officer—but abuse of power falls well short of fully explaining the broader trend of increasing misconduct.

Tradition suggests other possible explanations. The culture of the Navy is steeped in tales of behavior that does not fit the model to which we aspire today: drunkenness, bar fights, gender biases, womanizing—the list goes on. Sailors were *expected* to "let off steam" when their ships came into port, and they did. If this article were being written in the 1980s, there would be a fair argument that our culture promotes the behavior for which skippers today are being fired. But in the decades that followed, standards of acceptable behavior Navy-wide changed, along with standards for COs. Alcohol was deglamorized, and alcohol-related incidents became career ending for officers. Hazing ceased to be acceptable; ceremonies that had involved humiliation, degradation, and discomfort (chief petty officer initiations, "Crossing the Line" ceremonies) were transformed into events that built esprit de corps without hurting bodies, emotions, or spirits. Aviation stunts and joyriding ("flat-hatting") were no longer acceptable. Commanding officers were held accountable for violations of the new standards in their units. But the behavioral standards now in place are in competition with long-standing cultural norms; they increase personal accountability without addressing the cultural or character deficiencies that underlie unacceptable behavior. Former Secretary of the Navy John Lehman exemplified this smoldering cultural legacy in his lament over the death of naval aviation culture.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, the extensive social media feedback in support of his position from current naval officers demonstrates the power underlying his traditional sentiments. The result is a small but steady tradition-fed stream of misconduct at all levels—misconduct

that is more likely than it once was to be detected, more harmful to the Navy's mission, and more likely to make headlines when it involves a CO.

Another relevant aspect of Navy culture is intolerance for mistakes. A recent article, noting that as a junior officer the celebrated Chester Nimitz ran a ship aground, postulated that the future fleet admiral would not have gone far in today's Navy, with its risk aversion and intolerance for errors.<sup>27</sup> That writer obviously believes Navy leadership has gone too far recently in punishing errors, both professional and personal. Intolerance for professional mistakes is beyond the scope of this project, and we have already stated that personal misconduct on the part of Navy leaders must not be accepted. But the zero-defect mentality may cause behavioral problems in junior officers to be hidden or covered up, reducing the opportunity for correction, mentoring, development, and instruction in ethical standards.

In addition to the culture of the service as a whole, each community within the Navy has its own convictions and subculture. Aviators are perceived by others as cowboys, rule breakers, "Top Gun" officers' club partiers, and flirts. The aviation community, as noted, has the highest number of CO DFCs for personal misconduct, on average 50 percent higher than for surface warriors. The averages fit the stereotype and culture of traditional naval aviation (as cited by former secretary Lehman and discussed above), but questions arise when the trends are examined. The aviation DFC rate has a virtually horizontal trend line, while the surface and submarine communities show recent spikes. One explanation is that the 1991 Tailhook debacle hit the aviation community much harder and closer to home than it did the others, meaning that "airdale" misconduct peaked years ago, before the period encompassed by our data. If this is true, then the very policies that Mr. Lehman rejected as stifling appear to have had a positive effect on aviation command. The ultimate cause of the absence of a significant increasing trend in the aviation community is not obvious in the present data, and further study is in order. However, the naval aviation culture, as glamorized in movies and naval history (and echoed by the former Secretary of the Navy) may continue to be attractive to people with adverse behavioral tendencies and may be conducive to unacceptable actions, despite the increased professionalism seen in the community in recent years.

On the other hand, surface officers are considered stoic and businesslike. Nonetheless, they are seen (at least by members of other communities) as high-strung and competitive—it is often said that the surface subculture "eats its young." Cultural traits in the surface community include public degradation and bullying.<sup>28</sup> These factors could both reflect and produce abusive leadership, and such a stressful work environment might lead to alcohol abuse. But of the twelve

surface CO dismissals for cause for personal or ethical reasons, only one was due to abusive leadership, and none cited alcohol-related incidents. Yet in 2010 the surface community exhibited the greatest increase in DFCs in the Navy. (The increase was largely in the category of sexual misconduct, which will be addressed shortly.) The argument that rising misconduct in the surface community is due to organizational culture or environment does not seem to hold much water.

The submarine community, finally, is quiet, intelligent, and secretive, and its officers mirror the platforms they operate. It is not surprising that little information can be gleaned from the data in this study. It may be a testimony to the submariner culture that the causes of nearly half of the CO DFCs in the undersea community could not be determined.

Organizational culture notwithstanding, the most prevalent cause of DFCs of commanding officers in every community has been sexual misconduct, including inappropriate relationships, fraternization, and sexual harassment. Some have written that this phenomenon is a product of the Navy's environment, that such failures are to be expected in the seagoing community, where men and women are now confined in close quarters for months at a time.<sup>29</sup> Mixed-gender crews certainly present significant leadership challenges. Consider the commanding officer fired after nine chief petty officers aboard his ship were found to be having sexual relationships with junior sailors under their charge, although that CO did not know about the relationships.<sup>30</sup> But though fired for ineffective leadership, he personally maintained the higher moral ground and did not fall to the temptation of an inappropriate relationship of his own, which is why he is not numbered with the personal DFCs.

The problem is *not* mixed-gender crews. Of the forty-two personal CO DFCs in this study, twenty (48 percent) involved sexual misconduct. Fewer than half involved COs of shipboard commands. Of those, one involved a relationship between a submarine CO and an officer in the Army—clearly not a product of integrated crews. The propensity for sexual misconduct is obviously widespread, but not because men and women deploy together. Whether on a ship with a mixed crew or ashore, commanding officers must keep their relationships in line with the provisions of the Uniform Code of Military Justice and the *Manual for Courts-Martial* prohibiting adultery and fraternization.<sup>31</sup> Failure to do so (like any other misconduct) is a violation not only of the law but of the character that each commanding officer is entrusted with maintaining.

We should explore the concept of character further. General H. Norman Schwarzkopf highlighted the importance of character (but fell short of defining it) when he said, "Leadership is a potent combination of strategy and character. But if you must be without one, be without strategy."<sup>32</sup> The Josephson Institute lists as "the six pillars of character" trustworthiness, respect, responsibility,

fairness, caring, and citizenship.<sup>33</sup> Closely related to character is ethics, the set of “standards of behavior that tell us how human beings ought to act in the many situations in which they find themselves.”<sup>34</sup> Intuitively, one who exemplifies the pillars of character is likely to act in conformance with how a person “ought to act”—in other words, ethically. Ethics is not religion, nor is it adherence to law or cultural norms.<sup>35</sup> It is about doing the right thing.

Ethical decisions must be based on a standard of right and wrong, and finding consensus for such a standard is especially difficult in today's society.<sup>36</sup> A high-ranking officer in the Navy's chaplain community notes that while Navy standards have always been high, today's social ethical context is confusing. For example, the media glamorize wealth, fame, sexual promiscuity, and self-satisfaction, while the Navy is attempting to promote better behavior. News agencies jump on any hint of misconduct in leadership but just as fervently scream foul when an institution's standards seem too conservative or when they echo too closely religious tenets, of whatever faith. But in the midst of this confusion, the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics offers a simple question to test whether a given decision is ethical: “If I told someone I respect—or told a television audience—which option I have chosen, what would they say?”<sup>37</sup> The will to ask such a question, to embody the pillars of character even (especially?) when nobody is watching, and to allow one's conduct to be driven by such ethical analysis is the foundation on which we want our leaders to be developed.

### ELEVATING THE CHARACTER OF NAVAL LEADERSHIP

The Navy is holding commanding officers to a special behavioral standard, as well it should, but that alone will not solve the problem. Beyond merely holding COs accountable for misconduct, leadership needs, in order to improve the quality of our commanding officer corps and our service, to take positive action to develop each officer's moral compass and establish an ethical standard.

*Step One: Establish a Sense of Urgency.* Generating urgency has been called the first task in achieving transformational change in a large, complex organization.<sup>38</sup> In my view, it requires acknowledgment of the problem, identification of the impacts, and elevation of the priority of the issue on the basis of a full understanding of those impacts. On the first point, the Navy has made an effort to be transparent and open, but it has fallen short of fully acknowledging the problem. Personal misconduct by COs exists in all branches of the military, but the headlines seem to be predominantly Navy. Clearly, Navy leaders have committed themselves to holding commanding officers publicly accountable for their actions, which is vastly preferable to hiding them until a disgruntled subordinate posts a video online for the world to see. Unfortunately, beyond public firings, there has been no fundamental effort on the part of senior leadership to elevate

the issue to a level that will produce meaningful change. This article, appearing as it does in the first year of the tenure of a new Chief of Naval Operations, is an effort to try to spark that sense of urgency.

**Step Two: Set the Standard.** The Deputy Secretary of Defense recently released a memo emphasizing the need for all Department of Defense personnel to act ethically. “Fundamental values like integrity, impartiality, fairness, and respect must drive our actions, and these values must be reinforced by holding ourselves and each other accountable.”<sup>39</sup> In the same vein, the Army has published a pamphlet, *Army: Profession of Arms 2011*, that explicitly stresses the need for adherence to an unflinching service ethical standard. It argues the necessity for all officers, especially leaders, to take the high moral ground in their discretionary judgments. Furthermore, the *Army Operating Concept* of 2010 includes three pages of ethical and behavioral discussion and draws attention to the Army’s core values: loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage.<sup>40</sup>

There is no similar proclamation of ethical standards in Navy policy literature, and there is no parallel discussion in the *Naval Operating Concept* of 2010. The Navy’s core values—honor, courage, and commitment—are concise and easy to remember but make only implicit reference to ethical standards. If the Navy is to improve conduct from the top down, it must *explicitly* focus on the fundamental ethical standards that underlie the behaviors it wants to promote. Unless we stress ethical standards, our efforts to change behavior will always fall short.

A retired four-star admiral, noting the reluctance of leaders to implement ethical standards specifically, suggested that there was concern that such efforts would be construed as religious. But ethics are not religion. Another camp argues that the fact that character and ethics are “implicit” in the stated core values of the Navy is enough; one admiral observes, “You can’t have honor without integrity.” But if they make only implicit reference to character, we can expect only implicit compliance. A treatise on ethics in the *Naval Operating Concept* is unlikely to change a given officer’s behavior. But as one element of a Navy-wide campaign to emphasize character and set ethical standards for the officer corps, it might help create a shift in the mind-set and the culture as a whole, precisely what our service requires. Such a change will not occur unless the top level of Navy leadership makes ethical behavior a clear priority.

**Step Three: Improve the Metrics.** The Bureau of Personnel’s Fitness Report and Counseling Record (NAVPERS 1610/2) is the Navy’s basic periodic evaluation—that is, the metric—for all officers in the grade of captain (O-6) and below. The effectiveness of the promotion and screening process is determined by whether the system correctly identifies officers worthy of selection—and perhaps more importantly, of nonselection. Our system needs improvement. Many of the COs

fired for personal misconduct should never have been selected for command. Nine of the dismissals for cause cited in this study were due to alcohol-related incidents, and it is likely that previous supervisors of these officers were aware of their propensity to drink. At least sixteen DFCs were for inappropriate relationships, and while some of them may have been difficult to foresee, in many cases signs were likely present that should have been addressed. Behaviors such as cruelty, abuse of position for personal gain, solicitation of prostitution, and indecent exposure typically do not suddenly or without warning appear in an otherwise upstanding officer. Somebody knew, or should have known, but did not document the behavior adequately to prevent selection for command.

Part of the problem is the previously noted dearth of published policy on character and behavior in this era of ethical confusion. Further, there is almost a complete lack of focus on ethical training for naval officers. In twenty-two years of active Navy service, the only Navy training on ethics the author received was on fraud and financial abuse, and that used a very legalistic approach, with little actual discussion of ethics. The “standards of conduct” training for COs recently mandated by the CNO (in the wake of the firing of those involved in the “XO Movie Night” episode) is merely Scotch tape on the problem—a robust, durable, career-long emphasis is still not in place.<sup>41</sup> Once an officer has been selected for command, it is too late to try to develop integrity and character. This absence of training for all officers to a set standard has led to a failure of leadership. Many commanding officers have shown misguided support to junior officers who display character flaws such as alcohol abuse or infidelity. “I did that when I was younger, so why should I punish them for doing the same thing?” seems to be the theme.

Ultimately, COs are charged with developing future COs. When character flaws become evident in the actions of their subordinates, commanding officers must actively engage the offenders. One of two responses is likely. If the junior officer admits fault, accepts responsibility, receives counseling, and makes corrections, the “teaching moment” will have been achieved. If, however, the officer disputes the details, argues, and deflects blame, there may be an intrinsic ethical void that must be documented. Rather than being friends or drinking buddies of the officers under their charge, COs must explicitly demand integrity from them—and mentor or document shortcomings appropriately. Otherwise they encourage the behavior we want to eliminate in those chosen for command, which ensures the cycle will continue.

Before throwing former supervisors under the bus for failing to document moral shortcomings that are doing such damage today, note that the fitness report does not facilitate such openness. The fitness-report system needs to be modified to measure explicitly what we want to see in future commanding

officers. Some believe the system is completely broken and should be rebuilt from scratch. Some have recommended incorporating elements of a “360 degree” evaluation into the fitness report process—that is, feedback from the officer’s peers and subordinates in addition to evaluation by supervisors.<sup>42</sup> Mending all of the report’s faults is beyond the scope of this article, but some discussion on the evaluation process is worthwhile.

Part of the fitness report’s problem is rooted in the zero-defect culture discussed earlier. Even a slightly less than glowing fitness-report narrative can be career ending. It is very difficult for reporting seniors to make the best stand out without killing the runners-up, and it is extremely difficult for selection boards to determine who is best. The 360-degree evaluation, however, is not the answer. Its value is in the self-awareness it provides to officers, allowing them to compare their own views of themselves to those of seniors, peers, and subordinates; in the context of this article, there is no indication that a 360-degree format would more effectively identify officers predisposed toward personal conduct prejudicial to command. None of the flag officers interviewed for this study supported wholesale changes to the fitness report system, and all believed that the reporting senior is the correct person—not peers or subordinates—to evaluate the suitability of officers for promotion and selection. However, something must be done in order to improve the fitness report’s utility in screening out adverse behavioral tendencies.

Fundamental problems with today’s fitness report system in identifying behavioral shortcomings are its lack of explicit evaluation with respect to ethical standards, the tendency of senior officers to reward mission accomplishment and performance regardless of personal failures, and the fact that all officers from ensign to captain are evaluated on the same criteria. The fitness report grades seven quantitative performance traits: “Professional Expertise,” “Command or Organizational Climate/Equal Opportunity,” “Military Bearing/Character,” “Teamwork,” “Mission Accomplishment and Initiative,” “Leadership,” and “Tactical Performance.” Military bearing is the trait widely considered to be the category for documenting issues concerning physical fitness and body composition (i.e., body-mass index), although by regulation (and as indicated on the form itself) it also includes character, appearance, demeanor, conduct, physical standards, and adherence to Navy core values.<sup>43</sup> The core values include honor, and honor (as the admiral quoted above noted) implies integrity. But should we have to dig three levels to evaluate integrity, and should it be masked in the block regarded as concerning physical fitness? Not if we think it is important. In comparison, the Army’s Officer Evaluation Report requires input on all seven of the service’s core values as part of the character evaluation of the officer, including integrity and selfless service. Such specific evaluation of character is required to emphasize the priorities we desire in commanding officers.

Only a small percentage of commanding officers are being fired for personal misconduct, but the number is too high, and it continues to grow. Like the aviation mishap rate in the early 2000s, the magnitude of this problem can be significantly reduced, but only through elevation of this issue as a standing concern by the highest levels of leadership. While every flag officer interviewed for this article sees CO misconduct as an issue requiring attention, there does not seem to be consensus that it urgently demands transformational change. I think it does.

As noted, the Navy has taken some steps. Behavioral standards for COs are tighter than ever. The Chief of Naval Operations has issued a personal message to all commanding officers outlining standards of conduct.<sup>44</sup> A 360-degree evaluation has been included as part of the training process prior to assuming a command billet, as recommended by the 2004 Naval IG study.<sup>45</sup> Unit command-climate evaluation results are visible at higher echelons of leadership. Finally, each session of the Navy Command Leadership School, attended by officers ordered to command billets, is addressed by senior flag officers on ethical behavior. But instead of waiting for officers to be screened for command before setting and enforcing standards, we need a fundamental, enduring shift and meaningful, career-long training on integrity and character.

Several changes are recommended. First of all, leadership must elevate the priority of ethical behavior and emphasize the need for change—including the creation of a central database of every CO relieved of command owing to personal or professional failures (recording the specific cause for the dismissal as well as demographic data), to facilitate future tracking and analysis. Second, the Navy must undertake an explicit campaign to set standards of integrity and honorable behavior. Personal integrity should be at the forefront of the service's human-capital strategy and must be reflected in policy at the highest levels. Consideration should be given to expanding the Navy's core values to include explicit mention of character, or at least to a redoubling of efforts to develop the concept of honor in our service. "Honor, courage, commitment, and character" has a nice ring to it (though "integrity," "humility," "trustworthiness," and numerous other, similar terms could work in the place of "character"). This campaign should include regular, lively, and meaningful emphasis on ethical behavior for all Navy personnel.

Finally, the officer fitness report, a powerful tool for embedding an organizational culture, should be modified in format and in concept to measure explicitly what leaders want to see, specifically addressing character and integrity.<sup>46</sup> This change should be accompanied by training for reporting seniors on ethical expectations and on the need to include every aspect of individuals, including personal integrity, when determining who is qualified for command. With this proposal, let the debate begin on the merits of this study, on its conclusions and



recommendations, and on alternative methods of raising the bar of commanding officer behavior, integrity, and moral character.

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NOTES

1. Philip Ewing, "Cruiser CO Relieved for 'Cruelty,'" *Navy Times*, 15 January 2010.
2. Andrew Tilghman, "SC CO Fired, Charged with Solicitation," *Navy Times*, 28 January 2010.
3. Philip Ewing, "CO of Attack Sub Fired for 'Drunkness,'" *Navy Times*, 16 March 2010.
4. "MCM Crew's CO Is 21st Fired This Year," *Navy Times*, 28 October 2011.
5. Justin Cole [Lt., USN], Navy spokesman, quoted in Sam Fellman, "High-Profile Firings in the Navy on the Rise," *Navy Times*, 3 January 2011.
6. "History of the School of Aviation Safety," *Naval Aviation Schools Command*, [www.netc.navy.mil/](http://www.netc.navy.mil/).
7. "How Goes It FY 10," *Naval Safety Center*, [www.public.navy.mil/](http://www.public.navy.mil/).
8. DFC (detachment for cause—not to be confused, of course, with the Distinguished Flying Cross) is an administrative procedure that releases funding to move personnel subsequent to the removal of naval officers from their current duty assignments for cause; it may not be required if suitable officers are available to relieve the officers who have been fired. See U.S. Navy Dept., *Military Personnel Manual* (Washington, D.C.: updated December 2010), chap. 1611-020, sec. 1, para. a.
9. *Ibid.*, sec. 3.
10. The author found news releases clarifying the causes of DFCs at the following news websites: *Navy Times* ([www.navytimes.com](http://www.navytimes.com)), *Stars and Stripes* ([www.stripes.com](http://www.stripes.com)), *Virginian-Pilot* ([www.pilotonline.com](http://www.pilotonline.com)), and *San Diego Union Tribune* ([www.signonsandiego.com](http://www.signonsandiego.com)).
11. U.S. Navy Dept., *Report on Commanding Officers Detached for Cause* (Washington, D.C.: Naval Inspector General, 15 November 2004) [hereafter Naval IG study], executive summary.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 9–10.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
15. Kevin Eyer, "How Are the Mighty Fallen?" U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings* 137/1/1,295 (January 2011), p. 21.
16. *Ibid.*
17. U.S. Navy Dept., *Naval Operating Concept 2010* (Washington, D.C.: 2010), p. 9.
18. U.S. Defense Dept., *National Military Strategy of the United States 2011* (Washington, D.C.: Joint Staff, 2011), p. 4.
19. Barrett Values Centre, *America's Values: Results from the Barrett US National Values Assessment 2009 2010*, available at [www.slideshare.net/](http://www.slideshare.net/).
20. Eyer, "How Are the Mighty Fallen?," p. 22.
21. Philip Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil* (New York: Random House, 2007), pp. 7–8.
22. *Ibid.*, p. ix.
23. Dean C. Ludwig and Clinton O. Longenecker, "The Bathsheba Effect: The Ethical Failure of Successful Leaders," *Journal of Business Ethics* 12, no. 6 (1993), p. 265.
24. U.S. Navy Dept., *U.S. Navy Regulations* (Washington, D.C.: 1990), sec. 802, para. 1.
25. John Dalberg-Acton, 1st Baron Acton, *Essays on Freedom and Power* (Boston: Beacon, 1949), p. 364.
26. John Lehman, "Is Naval Aviation Culture Dead?" U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings* 137/9/1,303 (September 2011), pp. 40–46.
27. Erik Slavin, "How Would Admiral Nimitz Have Been Dealt with in Today's Navy?" *Stars and Stripes*, 16 May 2010.
28. Donnie Horner, "A Failure of Leadership: Broken, Bullying Command Structure May Be behind Surface Fleet's Many Problems," *Navy Times*, 23 March 2009, pp. 38–39.
29. Eyer, "How Are the Mighty Fallen?," p. 24.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

31. Uniform Code of Military Justice, 64 Stat. 109, U.S. Code, Title 10, chap. 47, art. 134; *Manual for Courts-Martial, United States* (Washington, D.C.: 2008, as amended through 2011), para. 62, p. IV-114 (adultery), and para. 83, p. IV-127 (fraternization).
32. H. Norman Schwarzkopf, in *Quotes for the Air Force Logistician*, ed. James C. Rainey et al. (Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala.: Air Force Logistic Management Agency, December 2006), vol. 1, p. 48, available at [www.afma.hq.af.mil/](http://www.afma.hq.af.mil/).
33. Michael Josephson, "The Six Pillars of Character," in *Making Ethical Decisions* (Los Angeles: Josephson Institute of Ethics, 2001), available at [josephsoninstitute.org/](http://josephsoninstitute.org/).
34. Manuel Velasquez et al., *A Framework for Thinking Ethically* (Santa Clara, Calif.: Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, 2009), available at [www.scu.edu/](http://www.scu.edu/).
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid.
38. John P. Kotter, *Leading Change* (Boston: Harvard Business, 1996), p. 21.
39. William J. Lynn III, Deputy Secretary of Defense, memorandum, "Ethics, Integrity and Accountability," 21 December 2010, Washington, D.C.
40. U.S. Army Dept., *Army Operating Concept 2010* (Leavenworth, Kans.: 2010), pp. 34–37.
41. In 2006 and 2007, the executive officer (XO) of USS *Enterprise* (CVN 65) produced and broadcast over the ship's closed-circuit television videos with sexual and homophobic content and innuendo that many of the crew found offensive. These videos became the focus of a media uproar, by which time the officer had assumed command of *Enterprise*. He was relieved in January 2011 after a Navy investigation and board of inquiry.
42. Richard H. Rosene, "Naval Leadership Assessment and Development" (Strategy Research Project, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle, Pa., 2005), p. 12.
43. U.S. Navy Dept., NAVPERS [Naval Personnel Command] Form 1610/2 (Rev. 8-10), "Fitness Report & Counseling Record (W2-O6)," available at [www.public.navy.mil/](http://www.public.navy.mil/). See block 35.
44. Sam Feldman, "CNO, Other Leaders Underline Command Conduct Standards," *Navy Times*, 18 July 2011.
45. Naval IG study, p. 18.
46. For discussion on embedding mechanisms and organizational culture, see Craig Bullis, "Self-awareness: Enhancing Strategic Leader Development," in *Strategic Leadership: The General's Art*, ed. Mark R. Grandstaff and Georgia Sorenson (Vienna, Va.: Management Concepts, 2009), p. 30.