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Today's Officer Corps

A Repository of Virtue in an Anarchic World?

Joel H. Rosenthal

ALL ARMIES ARE EXPRESSIONS of the societies from which they arise. The purposes for which armies fight and the ways in which they do so reflect the values of the societies which send them to war in the first place.

But among the many lessons one learns from the masterful work of the military historian John Keegan is that armies and warriors have never been passive recipients of social values.¹ Indeed, as a profession and a cultural force of its own, today's military establishment is an active force in shaping and sustaining a set of values that is central to our modern political and social life. As the journalist Robert D. Kaplan points out, "Soldiers are becoming like doctors and lawyers—another professional group we'd like to need less of but upon which we rely more. . . . [F]oreign policy will over the decades become increasingly influenced by the military, because war, peacekeeping, famine relief and the like are becoming too complex for civilian managers."²

How is today's officer corps handling this age-old and increasingly important responsibility for setting standards? This brief essay offers one civilian's perspective on the challenges for military leaders concerned with moral leadership.

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The Professional Military

In his definitive book *The Soldier and the State*, Samuel Huntington established that the modern officer corps is in fact a professional organization.³ Like the medical and legal professions, the military profession establishes, certifies, and maintains standards of competence and appropriate conduct for its members. These standards are not limited to technical matters: they must include ethical behavior as well. As Anthony Hartle and James Toner have pointed out in their excellent overviews of military ethics, one of the key characteristics of any profession—and especially the military profession—is that it “fosters a communal sense of shame and honor.”⁴ It is precisely this sense of duty and mission—providing guidance as to what is permissible and what is not, what is a heroic act and what is cowardly, foolish, or shameful—that elevates the military endeavor to the status of a profession.

The values that gain currency within the military are neither received like tablets of stone nor created out of thin air; rather, they are built on the wisdom of those who have preceded us and are forged out of the hard-won lessons of historical and personal experience. Truly professional military leaders engage in habitual and serious ethical reflection as a matter of course. To do one’s job well, it is unavoidable.

By ethical reflection, I mean the process of moral reasoning by which decisions are made on right and good conduct. Ethical reasoning is the attempt to grapple with Socrates’ question: how should one live? In the course of their careers, military leaders cannot avoid certain aspects of Socrates’ question in relation to their work. The manner in which they respond to it inevitably reinforces Samuel Huntington’s fundamental thesis regarding civil-military relations—that the military profession is, in essence, “a *moral* unit positing certain values and ideals which guide the members in their dealings with laymen.”⁵

In a profession where duty, obligation, and responsibility weigh so heavily—and where life and death are at the core of activity—the imperative to engage in ethical reflection is hard to overstate. And in a profession where norms become so thoroughly routine and internalized, the stakes are considerable. But military professionals are not alone or without guidance in developing their ethical judgment. Beyond their own personal resources of religious and moral beliefs, officers have other resources unique to their profession and calling. Two of them are readily apparent: first, the “just war” tradition, which has been thoroughly absorbed into military doctrine ranging from ordinary rules and regulations to grand strategy and tactics; and second, the American constitutional tradition of civil-military relations, which aims at insuring that military

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activity that is undertaken is commensurate with, and in the service of, democratic values.

The War Convention and Just War

Michael Walzer defines “the war convention” as “the set of norms, customs, professional codes, legal precepts, religious and philosophical principles, and reciprocal arrangements that shape our judgment of military conduct.” Walzer explains that “though chivalry is dead . . . , professional soldiers remain sensitive (or some of them do) to the limits and restraints that distinguish their life’s work from mere butchery.”⁶

I would argue, although Walzer does not go this far, that the war convention—as ambiguous and evolving as it may be—is held in trust by military professionals themselves. While this may not be an exclusive trust, professional military officers are the war convention’s guardians, consumers, and arbiters in the first instance. Because of this special standing in relation to the war convention, military officers have a duty to confront it head-on and to address it in a sustained and systematic way.

Walzer argues that war is a social creation, that for all its brutality war is still “a rule-governed activity.” He calls war “a world of permissions and prohibitions—a moral world, therefore, in the midst of hell.” Not surprisingly, the key actors in inventing codes of behavior in war are soldiers themselves. Whether it is World War I pilots devising protocols for their dogfights, or naval commanders dealing with the consequences of unrestricted submarine warfare with the advent of the U-boat, or infantrymen making provisions for the treatment of prisoners and noncombatants, the war convention has been a palpable presence throughout history.

At the heart of the war convention is the “just war tradition,” which provides the essential organizing principles for military ethics. The tradition is divided into two discrete units: *jus ad bellum* (literally, the justice of war) and *jus in bello* (justice in war). While it is self-evident that military officers are most qualified to deal with *jus in bello* questions, I would argue that officers also have an important (although not determinant) role to play in addressing *jus ad bellum* issues.

Jus ad bellum issues center on “just cause”: When is it just to resort to the use of force? The usual checklist includes the criteria that the use of force must be motivated by a right intention (say, a response to aggression) and that it be authorized by a competent authority. The use of force must also pass four prudential tests: “that it be expected to produce a preponderance of good over evil, that it have a reasonable hope of success, that it be a last resort, and that its expected outcome be peace.”⁷ *Jus ad bellum* questions are generally thought

to be more political than *jus in bello* matters, and this is probably so. Yet a careful consideration of these questions should lead one to conclude that military officers would have much to say about the criteria as outlined above—particularly when applied to specific situations. In short, I would argue that the military should not rule itself out of bounds in discussing *jus ad bellum* questions.

The officer corps, as an integral part of a democratic society, has a unique role to play in the debate over the justice of any given conflict. While it is not the role of the military to pass definitive judgment or even to influence *political* debate, the military should advise the civilian government on issues as clear as the manner and cost of conducting this war, “probability of success,” “last resort,” and even perhaps “legitimate authority.” At a minimum, the officer corps, as a professional organization, should consider the issues to be now relevant.

For example, should the military, properly, take on unconventional new missions? James Toner mentions many that are now in play: “non-combatant evacuation, disaster relief, environmental clean-up, humanitarian intervention, education and training, infrastructure rebuilding, nation-building in the less-developed countries, medical relief, drug wars, border patrol, riot control, prison duty, arms control verification, and other such missions.”⁸ These are issues that can and should be discussed by the military establishment in light of the war convention and just war tradition. Are these just causes, and if so, is the military establishment as currently constituted the appropriate instrument to fulfill them?

The issue of competent authority, while primarily a political concern, is nevertheless an area that should receive explicit attention by the military. The trend in today’s political environment is to engage in multilateral actions rather than unilateral endeavors. Is the idea of “competent authority” being co-opted into a preference for multilateral over unilateral action? Does this trend have any meaning for the military profession? What are its long-term implications?

Most military professionals will feel more at ease in discussing *jus in bello* questions, and rightly so, given their presumed expertise in and firsthand knowledge of waging war. *Jus in bello* requirements are simple to state, although difficult to apply: to be considered just, a use of force must be discriminate and proportionate. Perhaps among the most significant ethical issues military officers face today must be those associated with making recommendations for the selection of targets, estimating the magnitude of force to be used in certain situations, and balancing the idea of proportionality with (for lack of a better phrase) what one might call a willingness (or unwillingness) to take casualties.

It seems to me, as a civilian observer, that General Colin Powell’s pronouncements while Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff emphasizing “overwhelming force” raise some fundamental questions that have yet to be fully addressed. Is

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there not some difficulty in reconciling this doctrine with the just war principle of proportionality? The purpose behind the Powell doctrine is clear and logical, but its adaptation and application to new and unpredictable kinds of conflicts are not self-evident.

Despite the stunning accuracy and firepower displayed in the 1991 Gulf war victory, targeting will continue to provide many ethical dilemmas for war planners and officers in the field. As the aftermath of the war illustrated, there are few if any "antiseptic" targets. Civilians—many of them a population's weakest members, its elderly and its very young—die when electric grids and other infrastructure targets are hit and a society is brought to its knees.

We also need to acknowledge that even when *direct* military force is not used, ethical issues remain. For example, as many analysts are now demonstrating, it is often the noncombatants who suffer most when sanctions (requiring, usually, military enforcement) are applied against an adversary, even when the noncombatants are not directly targeted.⁹ Military officers, who will perform key roles in such manifestations of conflict or international intervention, also should be able to appraise, from a moral perspective, the consequences of their efforts.

A professional officers corps is concerned not only about completing missions but also about fighting well—fighting in conformance with standards that bring honor rather than shame. One challenge that has recently emerged on this front in the international political arena is the use of land mines. It seems to me that the United States military establishment ought not to continue to insist on the utility of these weapons, particularly in light of their indiscriminate use by others over the past thirty years. While American forces may have used these weapons strictly in accordance with international conventions, the unfortunate reality is that most other belligerents have not, and land mines continue to injure and kill countless civilians the world over, some times years after a local war has ended. This appears to be a situation where military professionals have to weigh specific weapons capabilities in the full context of general principles and overall consequences; this is what an officer's moral reasoning, at its best, is all about.

In addition to proper targeting of the enemy and using force with appropriate restraint, military planners must also constantly bear in mind the protection of their own forces. It is hard to argue with what a military officer corps does, with unmitigated zeal and pride, to protect its men and women. But as Thomas Friedman has noted in the *New York Times*, not every nation shares the current American view on casualties. Friedman contrasts the very different responses of the French and the Americans to losses of recent years.¹⁰ The French press and public reacted rather calmly and matter-of-factly to the tragic loss of French peacekeepers to snipers in Bosnia; the story was buried in the back pages of the newspapers and did not create much of a political storm, thereby allowing that

peacekeeping mission to continue. American experience has been quite different. Losses in Somalia and the celebration of the return of a downed American pilot after his escape from Bosnia highlight the different operating principles of the French and American publics, as well as of their presses and political establishments. How does one calculate “acceptable” losses for a professional army?¹¹ What is the duty, especially of senior uniformed leaders, to articulate, to their own troops and to the public they serve, a morally responsible view of risk and costs?

Also, a new set of issues for the twenty-first century and beyond is now beginning to face strategists and planners—the so-called Revolution in Military Affairs, or RMA. While not yet reduced to a set of concrete developments, the RMA is symbolic of a radically different era in military affairs. It is an era in which battlefield boundaries will become increasingly blurred, real-time intelligence will become more important, and improvements in target acquisition will be accompanied by deeper ambiguity in target selection. Threats are changing as well. The specter of terrorists with nuclear weapons, computer hackers with access to sensitive financial markets, and well armed drug traffickers with multinational bases is not far-fetched. How will these new technological developments and these new threats be handled in terms of *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*? It is probably not too early to start thinking about these issues in a serious, sustained, and philosophically sophisticated way.

American Values

In his book on military leadership, *Mask of Command*, John Keegan argues that it is now time for “post-heroic” leadership. By this he does not mean to attack the virtue of courage. Rather, Keegan believes that what is needed today is military leaders who act only after clear, analytical thought. The romance of Alexander the Great, the nobility of Wellington, and the populism of U.S. Grant were all reflective of their times. Today the premium is on rational reflection, ability to correlate ends and means, and on willingness to make decisions that are commensurate with the values being defended. The conversation over ethics and warfare in the twenty-first century should be led by the military establishment itself. The American officer corps is the trustee of its own high standards of expertise and honor, and it should actively work toward adapting those standards to new threats and challenges. As John Keegan himself attests, no one can match the experience, authority, and authenticity that the officer corps brings to the task.

Robert W. McElroy, in his thought-provoking book *Morality and U.S. Foreign Policy*, speculates on the ways in which moral norms make their way from ideas to actual foreign policy decisions.¹² McElroy posits three paths. First,

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conscience plays a self-evident and fundamental role in the decision-making process, whether the question is one of relief assistance for famine victims or the use of force to repel aggression. Second, the influence of domestic political pressure is also considerable; in some cases (for instance, banning gas or chemical weapons) it can make a moral difference. Third, the realities of reciprocity (such as diplomatic immunity) in the international system dictate, or at least strongly influence, decisions to recognize certain restraints. Reciprocity is an essential element of the war convention, and it is an operative influence in maintaining compliance to such agreements as the Geneva Protocols.

I am convinced that the officer corps is itself a vehicle for the movement of moral norms into the policy-making process. Because of its essential role in transforming ideas into action, and because of its history, expertise, and stature in public service, the officer corps must consider some of the questions raised above, and do so in a sustained fashion within the professional military educational establishment. This is not to suggest a usurpation of civilian authority but rather an enhancement of it, by engendering a vigorous military voice—as one among the many existing within a democratic society that seeks peace with justice.

As in other professions, ethical reflection within the military is not done in solitude; it is institutionalized within the guild. To its credit, the American military establishment has made some provision for this kind of work within the professional military education system. Aspects of the war-ethics-leadership relation are raised in such venues as the war colleges and service academies, often with great success.

If there is any danger in the way ethical reflection is institutionalized within the guild, I believe that it lies in the lack of a systematic, coherent, and coordinated structure to support that effort over time and across services. Moral and ethical education cannot be reduced to single courses of study given here or there. Rather it must comprise a program of life-long learning, beginning in the training of officer-candidates and in the service academies and continuing according to a logical plan through mid and upper-level ranks at the war colleges and command-training schools.

Perhaps there should even be a formal role for retired officers in this process. It is no coincidence that in recent months two of the most controversial and compelling cases of ethical reasoning about difficult issues have originated from retired officers. Who better to raise these issues than those who have borne the responsibility of command? The proposal to end the use of land mines (advocated by General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, among others) and the call to eliminate the nation's dependence on nuclear weaponry (by Generals George Lee Butler, Andrew Goodpaster, and many other high-ranking officers) raise cutting-edge issues—each cries out for even further professional discussion

combining ethical reflection with firsthand military experience. While any proposal must be debated on its own merits, it is hard to question the qualifications or patriotism of the officers who have put forward these proposals.

I would not go so far as James Toner, who sees the military "code and spirit" as "a well from which our ethically beleaguered country may draw moral refreshment."¹³ I think this asks too much of a single profession—and one with a special mission at that. But I do agree to a certain extent with the man he quotes, Sir John Hackett, who argues that "military institutions form a repository of moral resource that should always be a strength within a state."¹⁴ That repository needs to address the pressing moral questions facing the military itself today. In so doing, the military establishment will fulfill its role as a unique and noble public institution, helping to make life better for the people its members serve.

Notes

1. John Keegan, *The Mask of Command* (New York: Penguin, 1987).
2. Robert D. Kaplan, "Fort Leavenworth and the Eclipse of Sovereignty," *The Atlantic Monthly*, September 1996, pp. 75–90.
3. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1957).
4. James H. Toner, *True Faith and Allegiance: The Burden of Military Ethics* (Lexington, Ky.: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1995), pp. 120–1.
5. Huntington, pp. 9–10.
6. Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), pp. 44–5.
7. James Turner Johnson, "The Concept of Just Cause," unpublished manuscript, January 1996.
8. Toner, p. 126.
9. See for example, Albert C. Pierce, "Just War Principles and Economic Sanctions," *Ethics & International Affairs*, vol. 10, 1996, pp. 99–113.
10. Thomas Friedman, "The No Dead War," *New York Times*, 23 August 1995, p. A21.
11. See Ralph Peters et al., "Values, Assumptions, and Policies," *Parameters*, Summer 1996.
12. Robert W. McElroy, *Morality and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1992).
13. Toner, p. 3.
14. Quoted in Toner, p. 20.