

# The Army Ethic, Public Trust, and the Profession of Arms

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*Professions are not professions simply because they say they are. Their clients, society as a whole, have to accept their claims and trust the professions with jurisdiction over important areas of human endeavor.<sup>1</sup>*

— Colonel Matthew Moten

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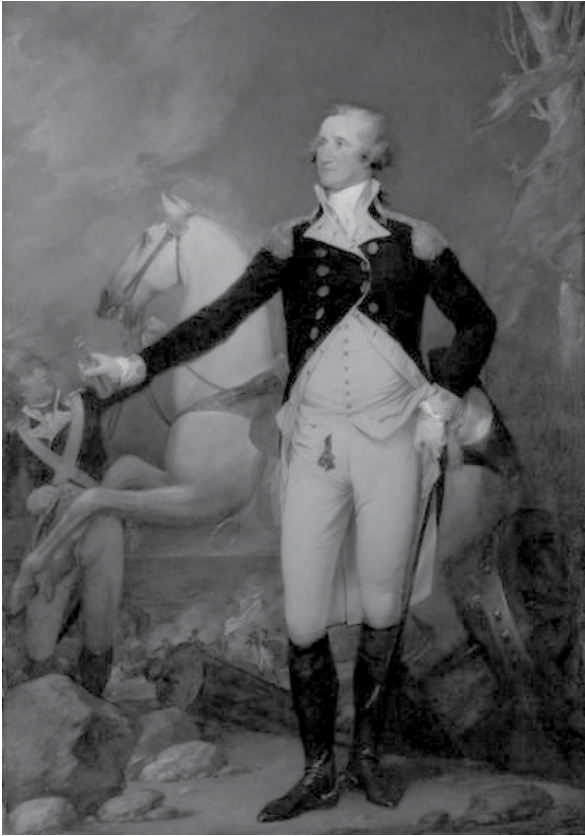
ART: *Cincinnatus leaves the plow for the Roman dictatorship.* c.1806 de Juan Antonio Ribera. Oil on Canvas, Royal Collection of Museo del Prado. George Washington is often compared with the Roman general and dictator Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus, famed because he relinquished the power of the dictatorship to return to private life. He is one of the “fathers” of the Roman Republic symbolizing selfless service to his country.

**I**N ADAPTING TO the demands of combat in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as to the new strategic realities of the 21st century, our Army has been so busy that we have not consistently thought through how those challenges, and our solutions to them, have affected the institution as a profession.<sup>2</sup> To address this issue, our Army’s senior leadership began a campaign of learning in order to understand what impact the last 10 years of war have had on the profession of arms. This campaign will identify where we need to bolster professional successes and where we need to address deficiencies evident from the last decade of war. This effort has only just begun, but what is clear is that the three key concepts tying all aspects of the Profession of Arms together are our professional ethic, our professional standards, and trust.

To be a professional is to understand, embrace, and competently practice the specific ethic and expertise of the profession and to abide by the profession’s standards.<sup>3</sup>

## The Professional Ethic

Like all professions, the military is an expert group, charged by its client to conduct work governed by a professional ethic. One finds an example of a professional ethic in the Hippocratic Oath (i.e., “Do no harm.”), the ethic of physicians around the globe. So one of our objectives in this campaign is to ensure we have the right definition for the ethic of our profession. Although difficult to define because of the type of work that soldiers conduct, as well



**General George Washington at Trenton, oil on canvas, by the American artist John Trumbull, 1792.**

as the conditions under which they work is so varied and complex, we believe, as a minimum, that the definition should involve three key concepts:

- The ethical application of land power.
- Willing subordination to civilian authority.
- Defending the Constitution and the rights and interests of the American people.

In his farewell address, President George Washington stated that “The Constitution . . . is sacredly obligatory upon all. The very idea of the power and right of the people to establish government presupposes the duty of every individual to obey the established government.” This is even truer for us as members of the Profession of Arms. When we take our oath of service, we do not swear allegiance to the commander in chief or the Army chief of staff but rather to our Constitution. And it is in the Constitution that we find the military in a relationship subordinate to our civil authorities who, incidentally, are elected by the American people. So ultimately, it is the American people who are our clients and to whom we are subservient. To truly be

professionals and discharge our duty to serve the American people, we must develop a relationship of trust with them.

Furthermore, a profession requires the development and application of an expertise, one that is unique and that is used in service to the profession’s client. So what unique expertise does our client, the American people, expect of us? There are many thoughts on this topic, but I would maintain that our clients expect us to stand in the gap between the evil that is out there and our Nation’s values and our citizens themselves, and to do so with the ethical application of lethal force. What is further unique is that our client also expects us to be willing to sacrifice our lives in the application of this lethal force for their protection. This is a high expectation for sure.

So it is through this ethical application of lethal force that we enter into a relationship with the American people, our client. This relationship is one that can only be earned by trust. One need only to look back in history 40 years ago, when our military lost the trust relationship with the American people. I recall those days when I was a cadet and a new lieutenant, and whenever I would walk out in public, I would never even think of wearing my uniform. I would grow my hair as long as possible in order not to stand out, thereby avoiding the possibility of being ridiculed, criticized, or even spit upon. Thankfully, this is not the case today and regardless of how they feel about the on-going conflicts in the Middle East or Southwest Asia, the American people routinely go out of their way to thank American service members for their service.

So our relationship is strong, but, I would argue, it is also very fragile. Which leads to the question, what is different today from 40 years ago? What would it take to lose this trust and catapult us back into the doldrums we found ourselves in after the Vietnam War? The answers to both questions, we’ll find, bring us back to the three key concepts of our professional ethic.

It all begins with the oath of office. The ethical implications of the oath of office that the members of the Profession of Arms take overwhelm every other aspect of what it means to be a professional soldier. Although we talk of the “profession and ethic” as distinct, they are inseparable. The oath clearly brings this out. In swearing to defend the

Constitution, military professionals incur moral responsibilities, including adherence to treaties governing the ethical application of land power and respecting the rights of persons. When we take this oath we are making a public statement of personal commitment to abide by the values and interests of the American people. In truth, we are pledging ourselves to the ethical foundation of our profession and that of the Nation.

## Professional Standards

Discipline is the cornerstone of our Army and is best exemplified by the establishment and enforcement of personal and professional standards. However, our Army has not always displayed the discipline we see today. When I assumed responsibilities as an Infantry platoon leader 35 years ago, in a unit that had recently returned from Vietnam some 18 or so months earlier, it was clear my platoon experienced the degradation of a number of institutions, one of which was the Noncommissioned Officer (NCO) Corps itself. At the time, we had two of 13 authorized NCOs in the platoon: my Sergeant First Class platoon sergeant and an E-5 Sergeant squad leader. After leading the platoon for about six weeks, my platoon sergeant was arrested, leaving me with the only other recognized leader to depend upon, the other NCO, our Sergeant E-5. We temporarily promoted our E-4 Specialist squad leaders to Corporals in order to provide some positional legitimacy and authority as junior NCOs. While they all did the best they could, they possessed limited knowledge of appropriate standards, and even less experience with enforcing them. We all lacked the requisite expertise to meaningfully develop our subordinates.

This was the post-Vietnam army, an army that witnessed the degradation of many of its institutions as a result, as most historians would write, of a degradation and compromise of standards over time.

Thanks to our Army's senior leaders who recognized the condition our Army was in and committed to its rebuilding in the 1980s and 1990s, our NCO Corps is in much better shape today. The fact that our NCO Corps is as strong as it is today, despite 10 grueling years of protracted combat, is an indication of its strength.

But this strength is fragile, as is demonstrated in the challenges highlighted by the Vice Chief of Staff

of the Army's recent study on mental health.<sup>4</sup> This report provides early warning for the appearance of many of the same trends that emerged in the Vietnam era and immediately following, including the degradation of standards over time. Together with soldiers that are more used to combat deployments than life at home, the lack of understanding or willingness to enforce standards has led to a tremendous increase in high-risk behavior. Programs to keep our men and women, our professional soldiers, healthy in mind and body "were fragmented and unbalanced and leader accountability had atrophied. There were too many gaps and seams in programs and processes that allowed high risk behavior to continue undetected and seemingly unchecked."<sup>5</sup>

It will be hard to revert from an enemy-centric, mission-first focus to one that emphasizes the return to home life, to include the reduction of high-risk behaviors, training management, family events, and more limited resources. However, our leaders' stewardship of soldiers and their families is as much a necessity of our Profession of Arms as the operational leadership needed to defeat the enemy. The force cannot fight effectively without being a healthy organization.

## Trust in the Profession

To understand and represent the people of the United States with dignity and honor, we must earn their trust. This concept of trust is both the



Tech. Sgt. Cherie A. Thurlby, US Air Force

A Vietnam veteran holds a flag near the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, DC, 29 May 2005.

fuel that drives the Army and the glue that holds it together, the first of the three building blocks the 37th Chief of Staff of the Army, General Martin Dempsey, articulated in his “Thoughts on the Future of the Army.” This vision statement from the most senior leader in our Army sets the bar high, stating that, “Every day we should ask ourselves if we are doing enough to contribute to a climate of trust.”<sup>6</sup> We must always remember that, as Colonel Moten observed in this article’s epigraph, it is our client, the American people, as represented by their elected representatives who determine our status as a profession. In this way “The people will determine the course that the military steers, the skills we perfect, the wars that we fight. The people reign supreme. We answer to *them*. We are therefore—and must remain—a neutral instrument of the state, accountable to our civilian leaders.”<sup>7</sup>

In order to develop the trust integral to the health of this relationship, we must always uphold the values and principles of our Nation, our Constitution, and the American people. Through our

actions we will earn and communicate this trust. This relationship begins when we take the oath of office and must continue to be drilled into the minds of Army leaders at every stage of their education.

We have not always done a great job maintaining and nurturing this trust relationship. Take for example the abuse of detainees by a small number of our soldiers at Abu Ghraib back in 2003 and 2004 or the young soldiers from the 101st Airborne that raped, killed, and burned an Iraqi family in Yusufiya, a village outside Baghdad, in 2006. Because this behavior is outside our Nation’s and Army’s values, both of these examples have been viewed as a failure of our leaders, our institutions, *our profession*. While despicable in their own right, they inherently corrode the trust relationship between our profession and the American people. The cumulative effects of these actions over time will, if unchecked, threaten to eclipse the good work our soldiers do every day.

Equally important in this trust relationship is the incredible performance of our most junior



Rob McElvaine

Chief of Staff of the Army GEN Martin E. Dempsey outlines his nine focus areas for the Army of 2020 at the Association of the U.S. Army Institute of Land Warfare breakfast, 5 May 2011.



U.S. Army, PVT Jared N. Gehmann

**SSG Richard Grimsley greets a young Iraqi girl during a checkpoint patrol in the Ma'dain region, located outside eastern Baghdad, 19 August 2009.**

soldiers in the most remote locations, operating in decentralized operations at the tactical edge. Today's hybrid threats seek complex environments, where the actions of leaders at all levels could and do have strategic consequences. These men and women are the "strategic corporals," making life or death decisions every day that, if done wrongly, will not only affect our relationship with the indigenous population, but also the trust and confidence our client holds in each of us.

Out in the middle of some barren valley on a distant combat outpost, where the closest adjacent unit is an hour's helicopter flight away, what is it that guides a leader to make the right decision? What helps the young leader to define and understand the parameters of acceptable behavior, or not? I submit that these young leaders are guided by the values of our Army, which are themselves derived from the values of our Nation, imbued through the leadership of great officers and NCOs to create a culture of dignity and respect among those they interact with every day.

Any profession worthy of the name espouses an ethic of accountability and self-regulation, so that when an infraction like Abu Ghraib occurs, the profession takes it upon itself to conduct an investigation and hold appropriate soldiers and leaders accountable. If we fail to meet this expectation of our clients, we can be assured our clients themselves will intervene and take charge of our discipline and accountability—something I would argue would be an indictment of us as professionals.

### **Subordinate Relationship with our Civil Authorities**

As stated above, our oath of office that swears allegiance to the Constitution places us in a subordinate relationship with our elected officials who are our civil authorities. And it is in this relationship that our responsibility is to provide military advice to our elected officials. There has been much written over the years about how to

apply this military advice and how well, or poorly, our most senior military leaders have done over the years. Since this relationship is one of the hallmarks of the Profession of Arms, it is worth examining what has worked well in the past and what has not.

Bob Woodward, in his recent book, *Obama's Wars*, describes discussions at the most senior levels in our government concerning the strategy to surge American troops into Afghanistan. An interesting observation Woodward made concerned the Obama Administration's perception that the Department of Defense boxed them into a corner, pushing them toward supporting a certain strategy:

[President Obama's] assessment of the choices was not reassuring. "We don't have two options yet," he said directly. "We have 40,000 and nothing." . . . "This is not what I'm looking for," the president said. "I'm not doing 10 years. I'm not doing a long-term nation-building effort. I'm not spending a trillion dollars. I've been pressing you guys on this."<sup>8</sup>

Woodward notes the administration felt they were being led to the military's preferred decision, causing the president and senior civilian leaders to lose confidence and trust in the military advice they were receiving.

It goes without saying that our most senior military leaders have a huge responsibility when providing advice to our civilian leadership. While this advice may or may not be accepted, it is through providing unvarnished and viable alternatives that the military builds trust with our civilian leaders. This said, the responsibility of the decision and its consequences is certainly born by our civilian leaders. Our job is to provide advice; our civilian leadership's job is to weigh it with all other factors and make a decision.

I would maintain that for us to be effective, regardless of the advice provided, our advice must be based on an established relationship built on trust. If there is no trust in the relationship, then it will not matter how accurate or effective is our advice. If we cannot establish a trust relationship first, we risk our civilian leaders disregarding our advice, throwing the baby out with the bath water as it were, simply because of who is carrying the message.

## Education in Support of Our Ethic, Standards, and Trust

Professions also invest in the development of their future, and do not contract it out to someone else. In the Profession of Arms, we develop our future leaders through training, experience, and our Professional Military Education system. From Initial Military Training through the Warrior Leader Course, the Warrant Officer Basic Course to the Officer Basic Courses, and even our Army Management Staff College for our civilians, the Army refines the soldiers' embrace of the professional ethic through education, training, and development.

As retired General Fred Franks, a cherished exemplar of the Profession of Arms, said in a keynote address to senior leaders of the Army:

There is abundant evidence that right from our very beginnings as a Nation fighting for our independence, General George Washington as well as his Chief of Artillery, Henry Knox, recognized the need for a school or schools to educate soldiers in the Profession of Arms to serve the Nation. Indeed, Washington's continuing insistence [up through] his eighth address to Congress on 7 December 1796 led to the eventual opening of the United States Military Academy in 1802.<sup>9</sup>

Education, training, and development are affected by, and affect, our professional ethic. To understand and acquire the skills to be recognized as a member of the Profession of Arms requires years of study and practice. As General Dempsey has repeatedly stated, our Army, our profession, is made up of people. Even if we get the equipment and force structure a little wrong, we cannot afford failure when developing our people. "People are our competitive edge. That's only true if we continue to invest in them and to challenge them."<sup>10</sup>

***Even if we get the equipment and force structure a little wrong, we cannot afford failure when developing our people.***

Since the Army profession is principally made up of practitioners—soldiers, NCOs, warrant officers, civilians, and commissioned officers—these men and women execute the art and science of land warfare to accomplish missions consistent with who we are as a people, and they are faithful to the Constitution.

## The Army Values

To reenergize our professional ethic after a decade of war, we must inculcate a deep appreciation for and understanding of the moral expectations embodied in the Army Values. The positive news is that a decade of war, and all of the positive and negative consequences that have come with it, have not degraded our institution's adherence to, and our soldiers' belief in, our Army Values. In fact, interim results from the Profession of Arms Campaign have validated across all cohorts (from our junior enlisted all the way up to our senior leaders) that the Army is a values-based profession and that Army Values are central to that profession.<sup>11</sup>

Additionally, the vast majority of our soldiers and leaders (93 percent) feel there is a strong alignment between their personal values and the Army Values.<sup>12</sup> The majority of all cohorts believe the Army Values are demonstrated in overall performance and conduct by their peer group.<sup>13</sup> Most important to the continuation of the Army as an institution of the Profession of Arms, focus groups across the cohorts agree that the Army Values have sustained our institution through some of our most difficult years and will continue to be the foundation of our profession.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, enough evidence surfaced in the survey and focus groups to consider the addition of an eighth Army Value—*candor*. At the unit level, survey data confirms the importance of candor in terms of its contribution to a unit/organization climate of trust. A large majority of all cohorts agreed that their units are truthful and do not hide bad news and instead view honesty and forthrightness as extremely important attributes to our profession.<sup>15</sup>

Candor applies inside and outside the Army, up and down the chain of command. A climate of trust between subordinates and superiors is required for us as soldiers, legally and ethically beholden to the officers appointed over us, and to our clients the

***“Candor is an important value that is not captured well enough in our current formulation of the Army Values...”***

American people, to create a culture where frank, informed discussion is expected and encouraged.

This is particularly important with regard to the relationship at the civilian-military level between our senior leaders and the civilians appointed over them. Only through candor can we build the trust with our civilian leaders and through them the American people. However, at the present time “Candor is an important value that is not captured well enough in our current formulation of the Army Values and is important to this relationship.”<sup>16</sup>

As the Profession of Arms Campaign continues, we will refine our professional ethic, the attributes that define the ethic, and the Army Values that define our profession and its professionals. All of these elements must be tied to building trust with the American people and continuing to improve and develop our Army as a profession.

## Professional Philosophy

Right from the beginning, our Nation saw the need for the Army to be composed of experts in the art and science of war, leaders possessing both character and professional expertise. This is why the profession devotes itself to education, training, and development. Such investment in our profession cannot be contracted out. By definition, the contractor is a “businessman,” with all that name entails. Even when directed toward the benefit of all, business does not suggest sacrifice, and professional soldiers—by definition—are bound to sacrifice. As aforementioned, soldiers have to give their lives in defense of our Nation's freedoms. This fact is what makes the profession unique.

The Nation has an “Army of young men and women . . . who signed up willingly to face danger and to risk their lives for something greater than those lives.”<sup>17</sup> Regardless of other reasons one embraces a military profession, this reality is always in mind. I am inspired every day by the current generation of

young leaders in the Army, a group of young men and women I refer to as the 9/11 generation. They represent the very best of America. They saw our Nation brutally attacked, yet volunteered to serve, knowing full well that they would confront the enemies of our Nation on battlefields across the world. They have never wavered or questioned their duty to the Nation. They are a generation that reflects our profession's client, the people of the Republic. They are an all-volunteer force, comprised of citizens and people seeking citizenship from all walks of life throughout the Nation, a microcosm of our society where all our country's races, religions, and creeds equally share in the task of defending our Nation and its Constitution.

As this generation turns its focus away from a decade of war and toward reshaping and developing the Army, their sacrifice for the Profession of Arms will be no less. To rebuild the Army, as it draws down from Operations New Dawn and Enduring Freedom, and reorient it on mastery of its core competencies—combined arms maneuver and wide area security—will be just as challenging as the last decade of effort. This will not only require difficult work and long hours from us all, but also it will require intense analysis, a clear vision, and a unified effort to posture our profession for future contingencies.

I am confident we can and will meet the needs of our profession. I have never seen our Army more focused or well led. Our senior leaders truly do get it. They understand what we must do. They have recognized that what the profession requires now, more than anything, is a frank discussion of where we are today and where we need to go. They know that, as professionals, we must recommit ourselves to

a culture of service to the American people, refine our understanding of our professional ethic, and focus our forces on recapturing our core competencies as experts in the Profession of Arms.

## Remaining Relevant

This year marks our service's 236th birthday. The Army birthday usually passes without much public notice, and such is the nature of service. Largely unknown and far from public view, the Army Profession has executed its duties well and faithfully and at great sacrifice to its members, as well as their families. That selflessness, adherence to duty, and pride in serving the Nation comes from the professional ethic created in our educational institutions, imbued by our individual and collective training, and codified by our professional development. This ethic has been etched in our consciousness by the heroic deeds and selfless actions of those who have gone before us and by those soldiers who inspire us daily with their courage, skill, and commitment to duty.

If we, as a force, intend to remain relevant in the second decade of the 21st century as the dominant land power, we must reconnect with our roots through a reemphasis on and internalization of the Army's ethic. Our aim will be to retain our professional character, improve our ethically based decision making among our leaders, and maintain legitimacy and trust in the eyes of the society we serve. This is what true professions do if they are to self-regulate and continuously improve. Doing so ensures we will remain a professional military force striving for unmatched capability and unbounded connection to the American people in the years ahead. **MR**

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## NOTES

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4. Department of the Army, "Army Health Promotion, Risk Reduction, and Suicide Prevention Report 2010," 29 July 2010.

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6. GEN Martin Dempsey, "37th CSA's Thoughts on the Future of the Army," open letter to the U.S. Army, 14 June 2011, 2.

7. ADM Michael Mullen, speech at the 2011 graduation of West Point, 21 May 2011.

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9. GEN Frederick Franks, speech at *Unified Quest*, 12 January 2011.

10. GEN Martin E. Dempsey, "Win, Learn, Focus, Adapt, Win Again," Association of the United States Army, 21.

11. TRADOC, "US Army Profession of Arms Campaign 2011 Interim Report," June 2011, 67-72.

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13. *Ibid.*, 68.

14. *Ibid.*, 19.

15. *Ibid.*, 27.

16. *Ibid.*, 244.

17. Mullen.