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Lying to Ourselves: Dishonesty in the Army Profession

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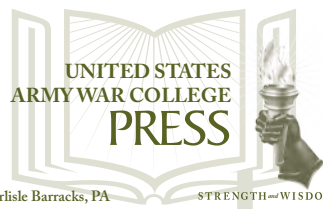
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LYING TO OURSELVES: DISHONESTY IN THE ARMY PROFESSION

Leonard Wong
Stephen J. Gerras



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**Strategic Studies Institute
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**Leonard Wong
Stephen J. Gerras**

February 2015

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FOREWORD

One of the hallmarks of a true profession is its ability to assess and regulate itself, especially with respect to adherence to its foundational ethos. Such self-examination is difficult and often causes discomfort within the profession. Nonetheless, it is absolutely necessary to enable members of the profession to render the service for which the profession exists. U.S. military professionals have never shied away from this responsibility, and they do not today, as evidenced by this riveting monograph. Discussing dishonesty in the Army profession is a topic that will undoubtedly make many readers uneasy. It is, however, a concern that must be addressed to better the Army profession. Through extensive discussions with officers and thorough and sound analysis, Drs. Leonard Wong and Stephen Gerras make a compelling argument for the Army to introspectively examine how it might be inadvertently encouraging the very behavior it deems unacceptable. The unvarnished treatment of this sensitive topic presented by the authors hopefully will be the start of a dialogue examining this crucial issue.



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SUMMARY

While it has been fairly well established that the Army is quick to pass down requirements to individuals and units regardless of their ability to actually comply with the totality of the requirements, there has been very little discussion about how the Army culture has accommodated the deluge of demands on the force. This study found that many Army officers, after repeated exposure to the overwhelming demands and the associated need to put their honor on the line to verify compliance, have become ethically numb. As a result, an officer's signature and word have become tools to maneuver through the Army bureaucracy rather than being symbols of integrity and honesty. Sadly, much of the deception that occurs in the profession of arms is encouraged and sanctioned by the military institution as subordinates are forced to prioritize which requirements will actually be done to standard and which will only be reported as done to standard. As a result, untruthfulness is surprisingly common in the U.S. military even though members of the profession are loath to admit it.

To address this problem, the authors point out that the first step toward changing this culture of dishonesty is acknowledging organizational and individual fallibilities. Until a candid exchange begins within the Army that includes recognition of the rampant duplicity, the current culture will not improve. The second recommendation calls for restraint in the propagation of requirements and compliance checks. Policies and directives from every level of headquarters should be analyzed in regard to their impact on the cumulative load on the force. Finally, the authors recommend that leaders at all levels must lead truthfully. At the

highest levels, leading truthfully includes convincing uniformed and civilian senior leadership of the need to accept a degree of political risk in reducing requirements. At other levels, leading truthfully may include striving for 100 percent compliance in all areas, but being satisfied when only 85 percent is reported in some. The Army profession rests upon a bedrock of trust. This monograph attempts to bolster that trust by calling attention to the deleterious culture the Army has inadvertently created.

ACRONYMS AND JARGON

AR 623-3 - U.S. Army Regulation 623-3, Evaluation Reporting System

AR 350-1 - U.S. Army Regulation 350-1, Army Training and Leader Development

ALARACT - All Army Activity Message

ARFORGEN - Army Force Generation

CASEVAC - Casualty Evacuation

CERP - Commander's Emergency Response Program

CG - Commanding General

CONEX - Intermodal shipping container

CO - Commanding Officer

COP - Combat Outpost

DA - Department of the Army

DFAC - Dining Facility

DoD - Department of Defense

Evac - Evacuation

Green 2 - Sensitive Item Report

IA - Information Assurance

IDF - Indirect Fire

IED - Improvised Explosive Device

IG - Inspector General

LPD - Leader Professional Development

MEDEVAC - Medical Evacuation

METL - Mission Essential Task List

MSAF - Multi-source Assessment and Feedback

NBC - Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical
NCO - Non-commissioned Officer
NCOER - Non-commissioned Officer Evaluation
Report
ND - Negligent Discharge
OCO - Overseas Contingency Operations
OER - Officer Evaluation Report
PCS - Permanent Change of Station
PT - Physical training
RIP - Relief In Place
SALTA - Enemy Situation (including size and equip-
ment), Enemy Activity, Location, Time,
Friendly Action report
SARC - Sexual Assault Response Coordinator
SHARP - Sexual Assault Prevention and Response
Program
TDY - Temporary Duty
TIC - Troops In Contact
TRiPS - Travel Risk Planning System

LYING TO OURSELVES: DISHONESTY IN THE ARMY PROFESSION

Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel recently stated that he was “deeply troubled” by the latest spate of ethical scandals across the military. His spokesman, Rear Admiral John Kirby, told a news conference, “I think he’s generally concerned that there could be, at least at some level, a breakdown in ethical behavior and in the demonstration of moral courage.” He added, “He’s concerned about the health of the force and the health of the strong culture of accountability and responsibility that Americans have come to expect from their military.”¹

Indeed, troubling indicators point to ethical and moral transgressions occurring across all levels of the military. In the Air Force, for example, nearly half of the nuclear missile launch officers at one base were involved with or knew about widespread cheating on an exam testing knowledge of the missile launch systems.² In the Navy, 30 senior enlisted instructors responsible for training sailors in the operation of nuclear reactors were suspended after a sailor alerted superiors that he had been offered answers to a written test.³ In the Army, a recent promotion board looking through the evaluations of senior noncommissioned officers (NCOs) found that raters were recording deceptively taller heights in order to keep any NCO weight gain within Army height/weight standards.⁴ Additionally, the constant drumbeat of senior officer misconduct and ethical failings have included violations ranging from lavish personal trips at government expense to hypocritical sexual transgressions.

On one hand, scandals such as these are beneficial in that they raise visibility of the critical necessity and

clear expectation of honesty and integrity in the military profession. On the other hand, such scandals are detrimental not only because they erode the internal and external trust critical to the institution of the military, but also because they encourage many in the profession to sit in judgment of a few bad apples, while firmly believing that they themselves would never lie, cheat, or steal. After all, as Secretary Hagel pointed out, “the overwhelming majority of our service members are brave, upright and honest people.”⁵ Dishonesty in the military, however, lies not just with the misdeeds of a few, but with the potential for deception throughout the entire military. This monograph examines how untruthfulness is surprisingly common in the military even though members of the profession are loath to admit it.

We begin by analyzing the flood of requirements experienced by military leaders and show that the military as an institution has created an environment where it is literally impossible to execute to standard all that is required. At the same time, reporting non-compliance with the requirements is seldom a viable option. As a result, the conditions are set where subordinates and units are often forced to determine which requirements will actually be done to standard and which will only be reported as done to standard. We continue by examining the effect on individuals and analyze how ethical fading and rationalizing allow individuals to convince themselves that their honor and integrity are intact despite ethical compromise. We conclude by recommending open professional dialogue on the phenomenon, institutional restraint in the proliferation of requirements, and the acceptance of risk in leading truthfully at all levels.

This monograph is not intended to be an indictment of the military profession. Instead, the subsequent pages merely argue that the military needs to introspectively examine how it might be inadvertently abetting the very behavior it deems unacceptable. We realize, though, that engaging in such a dialogue may be awkward and uncomfortable. Because the U.S. military is simultaneously a functioning organization and a practicing profession, it takes remarkable courage for a senior leader to acknowledge the gritty shortcomings and embarrassing frailties of the military as an organization in order to better the military as a profession. Such a discussion, however, is both essential and necessary for the health of the military profession.

While the phenomenon we are addressing afflicts the entire U.S. military, we focus on the U.S. Army because it is the institution with which we are most familiar. While the military profession can be broadly conceptualized to include anyone who serves in the Department of Defense (DoD), we give particular attention to the experiences of the Army officer corps. The officer corps is a bellwether for the military because, as the *Armed Forces Officer* points out:

The nation expects more from the military officer: It expects a living portrayal of the highest standards of moral and ethical behavior. The expectation is neither fair nor unfair; it is a simple fact of the profession. The future of the services and the well-being of its people depend on the public perception and fact of the honor, virtue and trustworthiness of the officer corps.⁶

THE DELUGE OF REQUIREMENTS

This analysis began with an exploration into the avalanche of mandatory training requirements levied throughout the Army. It has been fairly well established that the Army as an institution is quick to pass down requirements to individuals and units regardless of their ability to actually comply with the totality of the requirements. In 2001, the Army Training and Leader Development Panel noted this disturbing trend:

Much of the Army, from the most senior levels on down, no longer follows or cannot follow the Army's training management doctrine. The doctrine, when applied to support mission focus, prioritizes tasks and locks in training far enough out to provide predictability and allocate resources. It acknowledges that units cannot do everything because there are not enough resources, especially time. Today's Army ignores the training doctrine.⁷

In 2002, a U.S. Army War College study tallied all the training directed at company commanders and compared that total to the available number of training days. The analysis concluded that:

In the rush by higher headquarters to incorporate every good idea into training, the total number of training days required by all mandatory training directives literally exceeds the number of training days available to company commanders. Company commanders somehow have to fit 297 days of mandatory requirements into 256 available training days.⁸

More recently, in 2012 the Department of the Army Inspector General (IG) examined how units were cop-

ing with the deluge of mandatory requirements involved in the Army Force Generation (ARFORGEN) process. The IG report noted:

At none (0 of 16) of the locations inspected were companies in the ARFORGEN process able to complete all mandatory training and administrative tasks during ARFORGEN which impacts their ability to lead effectively and take care of Soldiers.⁹

Those three reports focus on the detrimental effects on training management due to the suffocating amount of mandatory requirements imposed upon units and commanders. Commanders were said to be harried and stifled as they were inundated by directives from above. Yet these reports only obliquely address a more pernicious phenomenon emerging from a culture that demands more from the profession's members than is possible. If units and individuals are literally unable to complete the tasks placed upon them, then reports submitted upward by leaders must be either admitting noncompliance, or they must be intentionally inaccurate. Units, however, rarely have the option to report that they have not completed the ARFORGEN pre-deployment checklist. Likewise, it is not an option for individuals to decide that they will forego sexual assault prevention training this quarter because they are too busy with other tasks. If reporting noncompliance is not an acceptable alternative because of the Army's tendency toward zero defects, then it is important to examine the resultant institutional implications.

To examine the intersection of the Army's unbending requirements with the force's widespread inability to comply with every directive, we looked into the experiences of officers (and some civilians) throughout the Army. We conducted discussions with scores

of officers, including captains (including some from the U.S. Marine Corps) at Fort Benning, GA, and Fort Lee, VA; staff officers on the Department of Army staff in the Pentagon, Washington, DC; majors at Fort Leavenworth, KS; and former battalion and brigade commanders at Carlisle Barracks, PA.

Discussions across the force confirm, as previous reports have noted, that the requirements passed down from above far exceed the ability of units and individuals to accomplish them. A former brigade commander bluntly described the annual training requirement situation: “It’s more than you can do in one year.”¹⁰ Another officer gave more detail: “The amount of requirements, if you laid [them] down on a calendar – all the external stuff you have to do – and then how much time you have to complete [them] – it’s physically impossible!” Another officer added his perspective:

It’s a systemic problem throughout the entire Army . . . We can probably do two or three things in a day, but if you give us 20, we’re gonna half-ass 15 and hope you ignore the other five.

Given that it is impossible to comply with every requirement, how do units and individuals reconcile the impossible task of accomplishing all directed training with a bureaucracy that demands confirmation that every requirement was accomplished? Do they admit noncompliance? Do they submit false reports?

Before addressing these questions, it should be noted that U.S. Army officers, and members of the military profession in general, tend to have a self-image that bristles at any hint of dishonesty. Consider that according to a recent survey completed by over 20,000 members of the Army, 93 percent of respon-

dents believed that the Army values of loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage line up well with their own personal values.¹¹ This apparent self-confidence in the trustworthiness of America's warriors is also mirrored externally by American society. Each year, the Harris Poll assesses the confidence that the U.S. public has in the leaders of major American institutions. For the past decade, military leaders have been at the top of the list, with 55 percent of Americans reporting that they have a great deal of confidence in the leaders of the military. For comparison, leaders in Congress and Wall Street garnered societal confidence of only 6 percent and 7 percent, respectively, and thus occupied positions at the other end of the spectrum.¹²

With such a strong self-image and the reinforcing perspective of a mostly adoring American society, it is not surprising that leaders in the military profession respond with indignation at any whiff of deceit concerning directed training compliance. So, it was not unexpected for discussions with officers to begin with bold declarations such as the colonel who pointed out, "Nobody was ever asked to report something as true that was not," or the captain who emphatically stated, "I have never given a false report. Never intentionally have I said, 'Yes, we're 100% on this,' when I knew we weren't."

After a few minutes into the discussion (usually about 20), however, hints would inevitably emerge that there was something deeper involved in the situation. For example, one senior officer reflected upon the pressures of complying with every training directive and stated, "You find ways to qualify your answer. It's not quibbling – it's assuming risk." When pressed for specifics on how they managed, officers tended to

dodge the issue with statements such as, “You gotta make priorities, we met the intent, or we got creative.” Eventually words and phrases such as “hand waving, fudging, massaging, or checking the box” would surface to sugarcoat the hard reality that, in order to satisfy compliance with the surfeit of directed requirements from above, officers resort to evasion and deception. In other words, in the routine performance of their duties as leaders and commanders, U.S. Army officers lie.

Once officers conceded that they did, indeed, occasionally misrepresent the truth concerning compliance with directives, admissions tended to flow more freely. One former battalion commander commented, “We’ve always pencil-whipped training.” A captain recalled a specific example of dealing with the overwhelming requirements:

For us, it was those little tasks that had to get done when we got returned from predeployment block leave—the number of taskings went through the roof. None [by] themselves were extremely extensive—like a 15-minute online course. The problem was getting your formation to do it with the availability of computers and then the ability to print and prove that you had taken it. So I think that some of the training got lost in translation. For a nine-man squad, they would pick the smartest dude, and he would go and take it nine times for the other members of his squad and then that way they had a certificate to prove that they had completed it.

Another captain had a similar experience:

I had a platoon sergeant when I first became a platoon leader, and I walked into the office and he was printing out certificates with people’s names on them.

I was like, "What are you doing?" He says, "Mandatory training!" It was so accepted. It's almost like corruption.

HONESTLY CONFRONTING DISHONESTY

Dishonesty, however, is not restricted just to reports of mandatory training. While the truth is often sidestepped in reporting compliance with directed requirements, dishonesty and deception are also prevalent in many other realms of the Army. Deceit can also appear in maintenance, supply, or other official reporting. For example, one captain spoke of the deception in vehicle readiness reporting:

I sat in a log synch and they're like, "What's your vehicle percentage?" I said, "I'm at 90%." [But] if [anyone] told me to move them tomorrow, [I knew] they would all break. For months and months and months we reported up "90%, Good-to-go on vehicles!"-knowing that it didn't matter because it carried no weight. It literally was just filling a box on a slide.

Another captain gave an example of the half-truths commonly found in property accountability:

We had this antenna and it had a serial number, but it was a component of the antenna. . . . We would always joke that if the Army were ever audited, and you looked at everything the Army was supposed to have, it would likely have most of it. However, would it really be of value or use or would you have a piece of plastic with a serial number that counted as an antenna? . . . We weren't lying. We met the requirement at its minimum and that's what we sent up. We gave them what they wanted.

Examples of deceit also emerged in a wide variety of other areas concerning compliance with directed actions. According to a senior officer, “A command inspection is required within 90 days of company command. People don’t do it. They make it up.” One colonel spoke of inaccurate reporting following an undesirable directive: “We were asked to go to off-post housing to check on soldier quality of life. Folks were uncomfortable going so they pencil-whipped it.” In the words of another senior officer, “We have levied [on us] so many information demands that we infer that if I’m not asked specifics, they really don’t care. So I’ll just report ambiguous info.”

An officer related his experience with the Travel Risk Planning System (TRiPS) form required for soldiers going on leave or pass:

A soldier dying on vacation because of sleep deprivation is a horrible loss. So it is absolutely something we need to mitigate. However the focus for pretty much damn [near] every soldier is, ‘Hey, I just need to get this done so I can get my leave form in and get it approved.’ So what do you do? You know what answers the survey wants. You click those answers. And it’s sad, but it’s the way it works.

Another common (and innocuous) form of deceit in the U.S. Army officer corps concerns the evaluation reporting system. The dishonesty occurs not in the actual prose of the Officer Evaluation Report (OER)/NCO Evaluation Report (NCOER) (although an analysis of the over-the-top hyperbole in evaluations would make an interesting study), but rather with the associated OER/NCOER Support Form. *Army Regulation 623-3, Evaluation Reporting System*, states that a rater must conduct an initial counseling with the rated of-

ficer/NCO within the first 30 days of the rating period, followed by additional counseling sessions every quarter. To verify compliance with this directive, the rated officer/NCO, the rater, and the senior rater must initial—or on the newest version, digitally sign—the support form.

It is the exception, not the rule, that the face-to-face counseling mandated by the regulation and verified by three members of the chain of command ever occurs. While initial counseling sessions may have a chance of being accomplished, compliance with the quarterly counseling requirement is extremely rare. Yet each year, tens of thousands of support forms are submitted with untruthful information. Interestingly, fabricating dates that the directed counseling supposedly took place is both expected and unremarkable (as long as the contrived dates do not fall on a weekend). To the average officer, it is the way business is done in the Army. Admitting that the counseling did not take place is very seldom an option. In the words of a major, “The Army would rather us make up dates saying, ‘Yes, we did it’ as opposed to saying, ‘Hey, I messed up.’”

With such widespread evidence that Army individuals and units are surrounded by a culture where deceptive information is both accepted and commonplace, we sought to examine the situation from the perspective of those who receive the flawed information. Are the recipients of the data and reports aware that the information provided to them may not be accurate? We looked to the views of civilians and officers serving on the Department of the Army staff in the Pentagon for some insights. Discussions revealed that most Army staff officers recognize that much of the data provided to them is imprecise.

When asked if units are submitting inaccurate data, one staff officer bluntly replied, "Sure, I used to do it when I was down there." Another staff officer added, "Nobody believes the data; [senior leaders] take it with a grain of salt . . . The data isn't valued, probably because they know the data isn't accurate." Another clarified, "Everyone does the best they can, but we know the data is wrong." One officer summed up the situation, "We don't trust our compliance data. There's no system to track it. If we frame something as compliance, people 'check the block.' They will quibble and the Army staff knows it."

Likewise, most former battalion commanders admitted that, in their roles as data receivers, many of the slides briefed to them showing 100 percent compliance or the responses given them for information requests were probably too optimistic or inaccurate. For example, one colonel described how his brigade commander needed to turn in his situation report on Friday, forcing the battalions to do theirs on Thursday, and therefore the companies submitted their data on Wednesday – necessitating the companies to describe events that had not even occurred yet. The end result was that, while the companies gave it their best shot, everyone including the battalion commander knew that the company reports were not accurate.

Meanwhile, officers at all levels admit to occasionally feeding the Army institution information that – although it is "what they want to hear" – is not totally honest. As a result, it appears that a peculiar situation emerges where both those requesting information and those supplying it know that the information is questionable. Despite the existence of this mutually agreed deception, all concerned are content to sanction and support the illusion that all is well. In the words of one Department of the Army staff officer, "The façade

goes all the way up.” The façade allows the Army to continue functioning—slides are briefed as green, compliance is shown to be almost always 100 percent, and queries from Congress, DoD, or higher headquarters are answered on time.

DOWNRANGE

One might expect that ethical boundaries are more plainly delineated in a combat environment—the stakes are higher, and the mission is more clearly focused. Discussions with officers, however, revealed that many of the same issues in the garrison environment also emerge in combat. For example, a senior officer described how the combat mission can lead to putting the right “spin” on reports: “We got so focused on getting bodies to combat that we overlooked a lot of issues like weight control, alcohol, or PT.” Not surprisingly, directed training is also often sidestepped in theater. One captain spoke of trying to complete mandatory Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Program (SHARP) training:

We needed to get SHARP training done and reported to higher headquarters, so we called the platoons and told them to gather the boys around the radio and we said, ‘Don’t touch girls.’ That was our quarterly SHARP training.

But stretching the truth downrange often extends beyond compliance with mandatory training. A major described how Green 2 sensitive item reports were submitted early every morning. Despite the usual 100 percent accountability, however, it was obvious that it could not have been conducted to standard since nobody ever knocked on their doors to check weapon

serial numbers. Another officer related how supply accountability in a combat zone could be manipulated by misrepresenting the truth:

We found ways to beat the system. You show up in country and you get a layout and immediately what do you do? You do a shortage annex for everything. So that way the Army – with an infinite budget in country – would replenish your product [even though] the unit never really lost the equipment in the beginning.

Discussions with senior officers revealed other examples of bending the truth. One colonel stated that, “The cost of investigating a lost widget isn’t worth the cost of the item; they write it off and later say it was lost to the Pakistanis.” Another colonel stated:

We were required to inspect 150 polling sites in Iraq (which nobody could possibly ever do) and fill out an elaborate spreadsheet. The spreadsheet was to get validation for higher that you did what they told you to. We gave them what they wanted.

One frequently provided example of deception at the senior level concerned readiness assessments of partner forces. It was not uncommon for readiness ratings to vary in conjunction with deployment cycles. In other words, the commander’s assessments were not based so much on the counterpart unit capabilities as they were on the American unit stage of deployment. As one colonel explained:

I show up and [the readiness assessments] go yellow or green to red. I’m ready to leave – they go from yellow to green. We went through the reports with the CG every ninety days. Everyone wanted to believe what they wanted to believe.

One widespread recurring requirement for junior leaders in Afghanistan and Iraq was the storyboard—a PowerPoint narrative describing unit events and occurrences. One senior officer pointed out, however, that:

Every contact with the enemy required a storyboard. People did not report enemy contact because they knew the storyboard was useless and they didn't want to go through the hassle.

A captain gave his perspective and his eventual approach to providing incomplete and inaccurate storyboards to higher headquarters:

I understand there is a higher reporting requirement of which I reported verbally, and I did a proper debrief—I wrote it down and then I sent it to them. [But now] I have to combine a bunch of pictures onto a PowerPoint slide. Now I'm doing this storyboard because there's an IED, because a donkey fell off the mountain, because some dude's dog came in and I had to shoot it on the COP and now this dude is mad. It became an absolute burden. So what ended up happening was [that] after about the first couple of months, you're saving your storyboards, and as soon as you had an incident that [was] somewhat similar to what you already had, it became a cut and paste gig. And the quality of the information that you are giving them wasn't painting the picture for higher as to what was going on. And you can say, "Yes, Lieutenant, you should have done better." You're absolutely right. But when I only had 4 hours between this mission and the next, what's better - spending 15 minutes to make this beautiful storyboard or planning my next operation?

The attitude of “I don’t need to tell anyone what happened” was also found in other areas where it was perceived that the reporting requirements were too onerous. For example, one officer discussed his unit’s failure to ask permission to respond to indirect fire (IDF):

Counterfire became a big issue in terms of [the] ability to counterfire when you were receiving IDF. Some companies in our battalion were returning fire without an accurate grid. They got shot at so they shot back. Of course, they were out in the middle of nowhere with a low chance of collateral damage. [But] people in our battalion knew, and just didn’t say anything. I’m not sure how high up people knew, but it was accepted. That was the norm. We’ll just not say anything about it.

Another area that reflected the malleability of ethical standards was the distribution of cash through the Commander’s Emergency Response Program (CERP). As one senior officer noted, “CERP is not tracked in detail and everyone knows it.” Another colonel observed:

CERP money is an area where we probably fudge. We gave company commanders a lot of money that we powered down to people who weren’t trained. We probably submitted reports that weren’t accurate.

ETHICAL FADING

At the outset of this monograph, it was brashly declared that most U.S. Army officers routinely lie. It would not be surprising if many uniformed readers raised a skeptical eyebrow at that claim. Indeed, it would not be unusual for nearly all military readers to

maintain a self-identity that takes offense with notions of dishonesty or deception. Ironically, though, many of the same people who flinched at that initial accusation of deceit probably yawned with each new example of untruthfulness offered in the preceding pages. “White” lies and “innocent” mistruths have become so commonplace in the U.S. Army that there is often no ethical angst, no deep soul-searching, and no righteous outrage when examples of routine dishonesty are encountered. Mutually agreed deception exists in the Army because many decisions to lie, cheat, or steal are simply no longer viewed as ethical choices.

Behavioral ethics experts point out that people often fail to recognize the moral components of an ethical decision because of **ethical fading**. Ethical fading occurs when the “moral colors of an ethical decision fade into bleached hues that are void of moral implications.”¹³ Ethical fading allows us to convince ourselves that considerations of right or wrong are not applicable to decisions that in any other circumstances would be ethical dilemmas. This is not so much because we lack a moral foundation or adequate ethics training, but because psychological processes and influencing factors subtly neutralize the “ethics” from an ethical dilemma. Ethical fading allows Army officers to transform morally wrong behavior into socially acceptable conduct by dimming the glare and guilt of the ethical spotlight.

One factor that encourages ethical fading in the Army is the use of euphemisms and obscure phrases to disguise the ethical principles involved in decisions.¹⁴ Phrases such as **checking the box** and **giving them what they want** abound and focus attention on the Army’s annoying administrative demands rather than dwelling on the implications of dishonesty in official

reports. Indeed, many officers even go as far as to insist that lying to the system can better be described as **prioritizing, accepting prudent risk, or simply good leadership.**

A more recent and significant development concerning ethical fading is the exponential growth in the number of occasions that an officer is obliged to confirm or verify compliance with requirements. When it comes to requirements for units and individuals, the Army resembles a compulsive hoarder. It is excessively permissive in allowing the creation of new requirements, but it is also amazingly reluctant to discard old demands. The result is a rapid accumulation of directives passed down, data calls sent out, and new requirements generated by the Army. Importantly, the Army relies on leaders to enforce compliance of the increasing amount of requirements and to certify the accuracy of the expanding number of reports sent upward.

The first time that officers sign an OER support form authenticating a counseling session that never happened or check a box saying, "I have read the above requirements" when they really only glanced at the 1,800-word IA acceptable use policy, they might feel a tinge of ethical concern. After repeated exposure to the burgeoning demands and the associated need to put their honor on the line, however, officers become ethically numb. Eventually, their signature and word become tools to maneuver through the Army bureaucracy rather than symbols of integrity and honesty.¹⁵ This desensitization dilutes the seriousness of an officer's word and allows what should be an ethical decision to fade into just another way the Army does business. To make matters worse, technological advances and the cumulative effects of

time have led to today's officers facing a much larger amount of information to corroborate than their predecessors.

Ethical fading is also influenced by the psychological distance from an individual to the actual point of dishonesty or deception. Lying, cheating, and stealing become easier to choose when there are more steps between an officer and the dishonest act—the greater the distance, the greater the chance for ethical fading.¹⁶ Thus, most officers would be extremely uncomfortable telling their rater face-to-face that their unit completed ARFORGEN pre-deployment NBC training when they, in fact, did not. Those same officers, however, would probably be more comfortable conveying the same mistruth via a block checked on the ARFORGEN checklist. Likewise, a digital, instead of handwritten, signature on a sponsorship form attesting that an officer was briefed on the sponsorship program prior to PCSing—when they were not—broadens the separation between the officer and the dishonest act. Even the Army's ubiquitous PowerPoint charts provide briefers the ability to focus on intricate color coded metrics and thus distance themselves from the inaccurate or ambiguous information the metrics may be conveying.

The psychological distance between a person and the **consequences** of a dishonest act can also influence ethical fading. A moral decision can lose its ethical overtones if the eventual repercussions of such a choice are either unknown or minimized. For example, the explanation of an officer concerning inaccurate storyboards is illustrative of the common perception that much of the information submitted upward disappears into the ether of the Army bureaucracy:

Where do the story boards go? They're going to [a] magic storyboard heaven somewhere where there are billions of storyboards that are collected or logged somehow? After doing hundreds of storyboards, I honestly can't tell you where any of them go. I send them to my battalion level element who does something with them who then sends them to some other element who eventually puts them on a screen in front of somebody who then prints them out and shreds them? I don't know.

Dismissing any potential damage that may result from a misleading or incomplete storyboard allows leaders to view the requirement as yet another petty bureaucratic obligation void of any ethical considerations.

MAKING EXCUSES

With ethical fading serving to bolster the self-deception that problematic moral decisions are ethics-neutral, any remaining ethical doubts can be overcome by justifications and rationalizations. While discussions with officers revealed a wide assortment of justifications for unethical behavior, one rationalization appears to underlie all other rationalizations — that dishonesty is often necessary because the directed task, the data requested, or the reporting requirement is unreasonable or “dumb.” When a demand is perceived as an irritation or annoyance, a person's less than honest response almost becomes a compensatory act against the injustice.¹⁷ Officers convince themselves that instead of being unethical, they are really restoring a sense of balance and sanity to the Army. For example, one officer spoke of the distinction he made between useful and useless required reports:

You can [ask] anybody in this room—the purpose of sending a SALTA or declaring a TIC, CASEVAC—not a MEDEVAC nine lines—we definitely know why we do that stuff and why we’re reporting. And people jump. They’re timely. They’re accurate . . . But some of this stuff is: You need this for why? Show me in the reports guide that we use or wherever [that] this is actually a required report. Because right now it seems like you’re just wasting a unit leader’s time.

Another officer rationalized how ethical standards should be loosened for requirements perceived as unimportant:

If it’s a green tab leader that’s asking me for information—the battalion commander, brigade commander, or something the division commander is going to see—then I would sit down and do it. That would be accurate reporting. If it was something that was going into a staff and wasn’t going to drive a critical decision the battalion made in terms of training or something I need to accomplish for a METL task . . . what goes up, goes up. Is it probably a little off? Yeah, there’s a margin of error.

Finally, one officer, in euphemistic terms, summarized the Army’s tolerance for deception on seemingly meaningless requirements:

I don’t think it’s that anyone expects you to lie. But I think there is an expectation of—I think the word is—equivocation . . . I don’t want to say it’s accepted, because that doesn’t sound good or it doesn’t sound right. But I think some expectation of equivocation is accepted on dumb things.

Two other rationalizations are often used as justifications for dishonesty – mission accomplishment and supporting the troops. With these rationalizations, the use of deceit or submitting inaccurate information is viewed as an altruistic gesture carried out to benefit a unit or its soldiers. Officers reported that they sometimes needed to act as Robin Hood – going outside the ethical boundaries to assist others. As one officer nobly put it:

I'm just going to "check this box" . . . and if I'm 70% accurate – that's good enough to 1) keep my guys out of trouble and 2) keep my boss out of trouble so we can keep doing good things for the country.

One captain recalled an instance where an IED injured a platoon leader and his replacement during a relief in place. The incident required an assessment of possible traumatic brain injury for both lieutenants. The captain explained:

I falsified the [traumatic brain injury] report that changed a distance from the IED strike [to where] one person was standing. So that way someone didn't come back down and stick a finger in my CO's chest and say, "You need to evac that lieutenant right now!" Because in the middle of [a] RIP, that's not going to happen. If I do that, I'm going to put my boys in bags because they don't have any leadership. That ain't happening. I owe the parents of this country more than that.

Another officer rationalized how funds were deceptively obtained in theater on behalf of the troops:

It's odd that in situations that I've been in, it's never been blatant self-interest. It's never been, "I'm going to get this money so I can buy myself two couches for my office while I'm in Afghanistan." [Instead], it's always like—for us, it was hard as hell to get water heaters. For some reason we could not get hot showers for our soldiers. It wasn't CERP money, but we had to finagle God-knows-how-many organizations to finally get these things and we had to say we're using this for this, when in fact it was so our guys could have hot showers when they get back off patrol. The truth of the matter is that, at the level that we're at, a lot of times we gotta get it done and we're going to find a way to do it.

Another officer accurately described how the rationalization process softens the sting of dishonesty:

You feel more comfortable if it's not for us—if it's for what we think is the greater good. Like [lying about] all the 350-1 requirements prior to going on block leave. I want my soldiers to go on leave . . . It's not for me. It's for the greater good. [But] that doesn't mean it's right.

Rationalizing allows officers to maintain their self-image as a person of integrity despite acts of dishonesty.

LYING TO OURSELVES

It may be that this monograph has merely identified a phenomenon that has existed quietly in the Army (and in most large bureaucracies) since time immemorial. It may be that lying to the "little old lady in tennis shoes" in order to clear post, fudging a trusted NCO's weight on an NCOER, or writing off a

CONEX of surplus Oakleys is emblematic of actions that the Army will seldom discuss, but will always tolerate. Perhaps the stereotypical supply sergeant's response of "You don't want to know" will always be the proper response to the question of "Where did this stuff come from?" It could be that as long as dishonesty and deceit are restricted to the trivial and bothersome aspects of the Army, the status quo represents the best way to deal with an out of control, overbearing Army bureaucracy. After all, dishonesty in the Army is not new. For example, in the summer of 1970, researchers at the U.S. Army War College published the *Study on Military Professionalism* which found that, "Inaccurate reporting—rampant throughout the Army and perceived by every grade level sampled from O-2 through O-7—is significant."¹⁸ The report quoted a captain who, at the height of the Vietnam War, stated that, "It's necessary today, to lie, cheat, and steal to meet the impossible demands of higher officers or continue to meet the statistical requirements."¹⁹

Acquiescence to the status quo because the Army has been dogged by the same problems in the past, however, ignores several potentially destructive implications of the current culture. First, while discussions revealed that nearly all officers were confident in their ability to correctly determine which requirements were trivial or nonsensical, those judgments can vary widely across individuals and groups. For example, some officers offered that not reporting a negligent discharge (ND) was a common example of acceptable lying, especially when it was a simple mistake and easily remedied without getting higher headquarters involved. Other officers, particularly those in

the combat arms, insisted that an ND was a serious breach of discipline and leaders were duty bound to send a report upward. Similarly, some officers were aghast that anyone would submit inaccurate or incomplete storyboards, while others were much more accepting of less than precise submissions. Confusion and inconsistency across the force result from allowing individual interpretations to determine where to delineate the bounds of acceptable dishonesty. As one captain astutely noted:

I think a real danger — since it's unsaid and it's not out there — is [that] we're requiring every single person at every single level to make their own determination on what they want to lie about. Because we're all setting a different standard and because we can't talk about it, we're obviously going to have the potential for the guys who take it too far.

Tolerating a level of dishonesty in areas deemed trivial or unimportant also results in the degradation of the trust that is vital to the military profession. Once the bar of ethical standards is lowered, the malleability of those standards becomes a rationale for other unethical decisions. For example, one officer explained why CERP money was easily misused:

I think the reason why we have an easier time accepting that CERP money might be used by people falsely is because you look at the institutional Army and see all the fraud, waste, and abuse that happens at every level.

The slippery slope of ethical compromise is a real and legitimate danger to the assumption of truth in the profession. Noted ethicist Sissella Bok explains this threat in more detail:

Of course, we know that many lies are trivial. But since we, when lied to, have no way to judge which lies are the trivial ones, and since we have no confidence that liars will restrict themselves to just such trivial lies, the perspective of the deceived leads us to be wary of **all** deception.²⁰

Just as it is imprudent to expect absolute impeccability from the officer corps, it is also foolhardy to condone a casual view of deceit and duplicity in the ranks. Disregarding the pervasive dishonesty throughout the Army leads to the eventual conclusion that nothing and no one can be trusted. As Saint Augustine wisely noted, “When regard for truth has been broken down or even slightly weakened, all things remain doubtful.”²¹

Making excuses for an acceptable level of dishonesty also provides cover for deception that is less nobly motivated. While difficult to admit, many officers acutely feel the pressure of peer competition influencing their ethical decisions. As one officer pointed out:

You’re a bad leader and you failed if you didn’t get everyone through the hour-long human trafficking thing. All the other company commanders in the United States Army somehow managed to do it and you’re gonna be the only guy that didn’t do it because you [truthfully] reported 85%.

Careerism is a potent force that serves as a catalyst for dishonesty. The current downsizing intensifies the competition in the ranks with very few officers desiring to be “alone on the island.” In the words of one candid officer:

We're all kind of vultures. The one guy [who told the truth] - get him. He exposed himself. And no one wants to stand out. We all see reductions are being made. If you're looking to do this [stay in the Army] for a long period of time, your intent is to appease the person above you. Just like the person you're appeasing made that decision a long time ago.

Convincing ourselves that deceitfulness in the Army is mostly well-intentioned altruism serves to mask the caustic effects of lying, cheating, or stealing for self-advancement. As a very perceptive captain observed:

In our own eyes and our perspective, we do things for the right reasons. When you really come down to it [though], the big question is that while you may be saying you did it for the good of your men, or you did it for the right reasons, how is that different at the end of the day from someone who didn't?

The gravest peril of the tacit acceptance of dishonesty, however, is the facilitation of hypocrisy in Army leaders. The Army as a profession speaks of values, integrity, and honor. The Army as an organization practices zero defects, pencil-whipping, and checking the box. Army leaders are situated between the two identities—parroting the talking points of the latest Army Profession Campaign while placating the Army bureaucracy or civilian overseers by telling them what they want to hear. As a result, Army leaders learn to talk of one world while living in another. A major described the current trend:

It's getting to the point where you're almost rewarded for being somebody you're not. That's a dangerous situation especially now as we downsize. We're creating

an environment where everything is too rosy because everyone is afraid to paint the true picture. You just wonder where it will break, when it will fall apart.

At the strategic level, it is this hypocrisy that allows senior Army leaders to unconcernedly shift a billion dollars to overseas contingency operations funding to minimize the base budget or to brief as fact the number of sexual assault response coordinators when the data are obviously suspect. At the operational level, it is this self-deception that makes it easy for leaders to dismiss equivocation and false reports to “bad” units and attribute pencil-whipping and fudging to “weak” leaders. At the tactical level, it is this duplicity that allows leaders to “feed the beast” bogus information while maintaining a self-identity of someone who does not lie, cheat, or steal.

CONFRONTING THE TRUTH

While the preceding pages paint a somewhat dire picture, there is still much to be celebrated in the military profession. The military remains a noble profession filled with competent and committed servants of the nation. And yet the profession’s foundation of trust is slowly being eroded by the corrupting influence of duplicity and deceit. Ignoring dishonesty as a minor shortcoming or writing it off as an inevitable aspect of bureaucracy accomplishes nothing. Instead, the Army must take some rather drastic measures in order to correct the current deleterious culture. Three broad recommendations are offered here. Each will be difficult to implement because of the entrenched culture, but each is critical to restoring trust in the Army profession.

Acknowledge the Problem.

Dishonesty is a topic that many in the Army are extremely uncomfortable discussing openly. While junior officers tend to freely describe their struggles in maintaining their integrity in a culture that breeds dishonesty, senior officers are often reluctant to admit their personal failings in front of subordinates (or in the case of very senior officers, their peers). The need to preserve a “professional” appearance is just too strong for many senior officers to personalize their dealings with the Army culture. They can easily lecture about the ideals of integrity and honor, but many find it extremely difficult to admit that they too have encountered (and currently live with) a culture that condones dishonesty. The result is that dishonesty in the Army can be a topic for DFAC lunch table gripe sessions, but seldom for LPDs or addresses by senior leaders. In the meantime, the requirements passed down from higher become more numerous and the slow slide down the ethical slope continues. Until a candid exchange concerning dishonesty begins, the current culture will not improve.

Openly dealing with deception in the Army formation also serves to prevent a subtle hazard of the current situation – hubris. In the past 2 decades, the Army has dramatically revitalized its status as a profession. There has been a resurgence in analyzing the Army as a profession and examining all the attendant implications. Additionally, polls show that public confidence in the military remains the highest of all American institutions, and it is still common for those in uniform to hear, “Thank you for your service” from complete strangers. Indeed, the professional all-volunteer force has served the nation well in a difficult time of war and conflict.

The effusive public adulation and constant professional self-talk, however, can also lead to excessive pride and self-exaltation. Overconfidence can leave officers – especially those at the senior level – vulnerable to the belief that they are unimperiled by the temptations and snares found at the common level of life. The ease of fudging on a TDY voucher, the enticement of improper gifts, and the allure of an illicit relationship are minimized and discounted as concerns faced by lesser mortals.

Tradition has it that in ancient Rome, a triumphant general would ride in a celebratory procession through the city after a key battlefield victory. Always standing in the chariot behind the general, however, was a slave who whispered into the ear of the general, “*Respice post te! Hominem te memento!*” meaning “Look behind you! Remember that you are but a man!”²² Acknowledging organizational and individual fallibilities is the first step toward changing the culture of dishonesty plaguing the Army.

Exercise Restraint.

It is no secret that units and individuals are overwhelmed by the amount of requirements and directives placed upon them. Therefore, restraint must be established in the amount of mandatory training passed down to the force. Instead of making lower level leaders decide which mandatory training or directive they will ignore (but still report 100 percent compliance), leaders at the strategic level must shoulder the burden of prioritizing which directives are truly required. Abdicating that responsibility at the senior level understandably avoids the unpleasant task of informing a proponent, stakeholder, or constituent that his or her particular concern is not a top priority in the

Army. Additionally, it gives the Army plausible deniability if something does go wrong. But it also leaves leaders at the lowest levels with no choice but to sacrifice their integrity in order to prop up the façade that all is well.

Of course, exercising restraint is difficult in an organization as large as the Army. Each staff, each level of headquarters, and each senior leader that adds a requirement earnestly believes in the importance and necessity of that requirement. Therefore restraint cannot be achieved merely by announcing it and expecting everyone to curb their propensity for new ideas. Instead, restraint will be exercised when a central authority, armed with a clear understanding of the time and resource constrained environment of the Army, examines and vets the entirety of requirements. While *AR 350-1, Army Training and Leader Development*, is the obvious candidate for this added scrutiny, ALARACTS, policies from major commands, and directives from all headquarters should also be analyzed in regard to their impact on the cumulative load.

Restraint also needs to be introduced into the rampant use of an officer's integrity for frivolous purposes. Too often, the Army turns to an officer's integrity to verify compliance of minor concerns instead of other means such as sampling or auditing. For example, requiring all officers to attest on their OERs that they have initiated a multi-source assessment and feedback (MSAF) in the last 3 years probably has the well-intended purpose of socializing the force to 360° feedback. But the unanticipated outcome has been the diminution of the gravitas of an officer's signature as rated officers, raters, and senior raters dismiss the requirement as an administrative nuisance rather than an ethical choice. (That the MSAF requirement could

be easily verified through automation compounds the problem). The Army must restore the dignity and seriousness of an officer's word by requiring it for consequential issues rather than incidental administrative requirements.

Lead Truthfully.

As the institution acknowledges the current situation and begins exercising restraint, leaders at all levels must focus on leading truthfully. Leading truthfully dismantles the façade of mutually agreed deception by putting considerations of the integrity of the profession back into the decisionmaking process. Thus, at the senior level, leading truthfully may include informing a political appointee that while bath salts are a scourge to American teens, the problem may not merit Army-wide mandatory training until some other topic is removed. Leading truthfully may also include tolerating risk by striving for 100 percent compliance in all areas, but being satisfied when only 85 percent is reported in some. Leading truthfully may also involve brutally honest reporting from subordinates who risk being labeled malcontents or slackers because of their candor.

A focused emphasis on leading truthfully goes beyond inserting an online block of instruction on ethics, scheduling an ethics stand down, or creating an ethics center of excellence. Instead, leading truthfully attempts to preempt ethical fading by examining the moral implications of a leader's decision first instead of rationalizing them away after the fact. Finally, leading truthfully changes the culture gradually and will only be effective if embraced by all leaders, not just a token few.

The Army profession rests upon a bedrock of trust. That trust continues to be treasured and guarded, but an alternative ethical reality has emerged where junior officers are socialized into believing that pencil-whipping the stats and feeding the beast are not only routine, but expected. This alternative reality is a place where senior officers romanticize the past and convince themselves that they somehow managed to achieve their station in life without tarnishing their own integrity.

Unfortunately, the boundaries of this parallel ethical universe are slowly expanding into more and more of the profession. Ethical fading and rampant rationalizations have allowed leaders to espouse lofty professional values while slogging through the mire of dishonesty and deceit. The end result is a corrosive ethical culture that few acknowledge and even fewer discuss or work to correct. The Army urgently needs to address the corrupting influence of dishonesty in the Army profession. This monograph is but one small step toward initiating that conversation and perhaps stimulating a modicum of action.

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