

# THE MORAL DIMENSION OF WAR AND THE MILITARY ETHIC

by

DONALD ATWELL ZOLL

The history of the military art is, from one perspective, a narrative of an important aspect of social ethics. This is obvious enough: warfare has been a major social activity of man, and all social events are bound up with questions of value, with human choices regarding beliefs about "right" and "wrong" conduct. In contemporary terms, however, the moral or ethical component in the postulation of military theory is generally ignored, primarily because we live in an age in which moral restraint on warfare has been minimal, to say the least, and, perhaps ironically, because full-scale nuclear conflict appears so appalling that it is difficult to conceive of any exchange of present military power that would obey any moral restraint. Thus warfare itself has become a "moral" issue.

Historically, however, the conduct of war has generally reflected prevailing moral attitudes in a number of ways. The most apparent of these has certainly been a self-conscious limitation upon forms of combat and even upon specific types of weaponry. It may well be that eventually the lure of victory, real or imagined, will prompt mankind to jettison previous moral limitations, but, from a historical perspective, the march of rampant technology has not been all that uninterrupted. Much has been made of the "conservatism" of military establishments in the adoption of otherwise attractive weapons and techniques. No doubt tunnel-visioned habit may account for much of this, but, on the other hand, some of this disinclination to employ military novelties has had a social and possibly a moral base.

A brief review of the motivations behind the limitation of various forms of warfare may be instructive. Consider, for illustration, the vivid example provided by 13th-century Europe where a still "universal" church imposed a "Peace of God" as well as other strictures on the conduct of war by means of the still potent threat of excommunication.<sup>1</sup> Here, the regulation of conflict rested principally on the assumption that certain forms of behavior and certain tools of war were reprehensible for Christians to employ (at least on each other—the crossbow was so prohibited, but allowed against "infidels"). This theologically grounded form of restraint might be labeled as prohibitions against the violation of a *universal moral order*. Such interdicts were operative as long as the bulk of those determining the policy of states had any regard for the existence of a "universal moral order." In historical terms, the Reformation wrote *finis* to this—and the result was the Thirty Years War, notorious for barbarous excess. It is interesting to note, too, that this was hardly an exclusively Christian phenomenon. Certain Moslems, perhaps of a fundamentalist persuasion, long clung to the view that the sword was the only morally sanctioned instrument approved of by Mahomet and thus rejected the advent of artillery (to their grave misfortune in the wars with their coreligionists, the Ottoman Turks, who were less puristic in this matter).<sup>2</sup>

Not all restraints were encased in religious legalism by any means. From the traditions of chivalry arose a "class mystique" that distinctly shaped moral attitudes toward warfare. It may be remem-

bered that although the chivalric code per se hardly survived the 14th century in full array, most of the existing European aristocracies were still permeated by its spirit, tangible or otherwise, well into the period of the Industrial Revolution, and it was from such aristocracies that the officer cadres of the world's armies came. The code survived not as some quasi-Christian devotion to disembodied virtue, but rather as a *personal* standard of conduct rooted in self-esteem, in pride, both social and professional. It is well to remember that the "sportive" element in warfare, war as a gentlemen's game conducted by rules of deportment, was long-lived in Western tradition, still evident in those first bitter conflicts of the Industrial Age, the American Civil War and the Franco-Prussian War. Thus, one can speak quite literally about *class attitudes* being a limiting factor in the conduct of war.

The 18th century—the "Age of Reason," so called—illustrates another limiting phenomenon: a *philosophically derived social ethic*. Warfare, overall, in the 18th century was reflective of a pervasive revivification of humanitarian concerns, the limiting of conflict to avoid massive loss of life and despoilage of property. The dynastic and colonial struggles of this age were in part shaped by the impact of theories of "natural law" propounded especially by the French *philosophes*. It is provocative to point out that the greatest military engineer of that age, Vauban, was an intimate of the Parisian philosophers and defended his preoccupation with fortification on the grounds that defensive warfare was less costly and more humane.

Another limiting factor has been a *concern for the maintenance of professional self-interest*. I cite as the prime example of this the reactions among professional European soldiers to the post-Revolution *levee-en-masse* in France. The arguments against a "nation in arms" that called forth the mass of the populace for universal service were then couched in distinctly moralistic terms. The armies rallied by the embattled French Republic, brought to full development by Napoleon, were castigated as

"armed hordes" and "undisciplined mobs" capable of savage pillage and disregard for the "rules" of warfare. No doubt, much of this protest may be taken with a grain of salt, but the "democratization" of military establishments meant the final withering away of the monopoly upon military control by the traditional aristocracies. Yet in fairness, too, it is reasonable to suggest that mass "patriot" armies have generally been less inclined to limit the scope of conflict. In post-World War I Germany, von Seeckt sought to re-arm the *Wehrmacht* beyond the limits of Versailles Treaty, but to avoid, as well, a "popular" army of mass proportions.

The final abrogation of restraints of a moral character upon the conduct of warfare has been variously diagnosed. In the second half of the current century the only functional limitation on the scope of warfare has been a concept of *reciprocal advantage*, and yet this pragmatic dictum (as if lifted from Machiavelli's *The Prince*) is not wholly explainable in terms of the physical power of retaliation. Political factors obviously intrude, and politics is a realm in which action, if not instigated by moral concerns, is circumscribed by them very frequently.

It is not my purpose here to discuss the full-blown issue of inhibitions on the conduct of war that do or might arise from ostensibly moral sources. I wish, initially, only to make the point that a more or less formal concern for the impact of ethical considerations on military activity is hardly a vacuous academic pursuit. In this connection, one need only

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Donald Atwell Zoll is a former contributor to *Parameters*, as well as numerous other journals, including *Strategic Review*. He is the author of *Reason and Rebellion* (1962); *The Twentieth Century Mind* (1967); *The American Political Condition* (1973); *Twentieth Century Political Philosophy* (1974); and a collection of short stories, *Hoofmarks*, published this year by Regnery Gateway. Formerly Professor of Philosophy at the University of Saskatchewan and Professor of Political Science at Arizona State University, Mr. Zoll left academic work in 1974 to write and lecture. He is currently completing a book on the history of cavalry.



recall the strident and unhappy controversies that were spawned by the late war in Indo-China, issues that brought into question, among other things, the conduct of our troops there and the nature of what might loosely be referred to as the "professional ethics" of our career soldiery. Indeed, the discussion I am about to embark on must be undertaken with the realization that the American military establishment is still undergoing a "post-Vietnam" metamorphosis. I contended some years ago that many aspects of that conflict had done serious damage indeed to the internal élan of the professional officer class, but that much of this lamentable disarray was the result of a lack of *professional* indoctrination and self-awareness. Put another way, our soldiers in the field were often thrust into moral dilemmas that were, in substance, unnecessary (or wrongly resolved), because of the atrophy of a professional ethic. It is to this question, then, that I should like now to turn.

**T**here are two main questions to be confronted regarding the professional ethic of those whose career is military service: (1) the question of the source and grounding of this ethic and (2) that of its contents. But before turning to an analysis of these factors, I should like to make a preliminary comment or two. My purpose in doing so arises from a contention that, at present, much confusion exists regarding the specific ethical "code" that governs American military officers—confusion exacerbated, as I have indicated, by the pressures, professional and social, of the Vietnam War (the word "code" is employed metaphorically, as military ethics are essentially unwritten, in contrast to more explicit ethical canons found within the legal and medical professions). This current lack of definition regarding moral rules of conduct results from three principal causes: the absence of an undergirding "class ethic" for the military profession, the present volatility of ethical belief within the national culture overall, and the pervasive "civilianization" of the military profession. Permit me to comment briefly on these influences.

Regarding the first, it is no longer a fact, for good or ill, that military professionals in the United States are recruited from a homogeneous social class which possesses, in turn, a functional ethic that converts readily into a professional ethic (containing notions of service, responsibility, courage, honor, and so on). The most appropriate illustration of this situation is provided by the relationship between British military officers prior to World War I and the "public" schools in which they were educated. The discipline and ethical instruction received in those rather restricted and avowedly elitist educational institutions served most functionally as a "service" ethic without extensive need for much formal military indoctrination.<sup>3</sup> Such a condition prevailed well into World War I until the need arose to recruit officers without a public school background.<sup>4</sup> It is pertinent to point out, in this connection, that since virtually all pre-World War I officers received broadly similar moral training, such common experience governed their relationships with one another, both as equals and in subordinate-dominant relationships. Such a situation accounts, too, for the generally successful manner in which some European armies (especially the British and the German) have, in the past, dealt with the problem of individuality within the confines of required professional conformity, such individuality being a characteristic of the "class ethic" that underpinned their military establishments. It also provided for a distinctly cosmopolitan tenor in the military profession, as there were evident similarities in the ethos of the European landed classes, regardless of nationality.

With regard to the volatility of ethical belief within our national culture, the United States has undergone massive ethical upheavals in the current century—indeed, as have all Western democracies. Such a condition is attributable to both the general drift of axiological philosophy itself and the increasingly pluralistic character of the culture. In the first instance, formal ethical theory has become markedly relativistic and voluntaristic. I shall not dwell on the contemporary history of such value theory, but, in substance, the climate evoked has strongly

tended to reduce the conforming power of certain social institutions to imbue their members with more or less explicit moral codes, and, correspondingly, there has been an increase in the scope of individual decision-making in the realm of moral choice. Secondly, the pluralistic nature of evolving democratic societies has weakened the potency of a "civic" ethic, an overriding cultural consensus on matters of moral rectitude. A "balancing of interests" tends to replace a core ethic as the fundamental crux of social life.<sup>5</sup>

Then there is the "civilianization" of the military to consider. Since World War II (and in part because of it), the profession of arms in the United States has tended to take on an increasingly civilian ambience. The technological nature of current military science, the increased involvement of the military in political affairs, the problems of officer recruitment and retention, and the ambivalent feelings of the population toward the professional military establishment have all contributed to this condition. I shall not here weigh the merits of this change of atmosphere and practice, but it has had a very considerable impact on the character of military ethics, if only to impair a specifically and discretely conceived body of professional principles, tending to inundate the military profession with prevailing, if fragmented, ethical ideas derivable from political and even commercial sources.

One other caveat is in order before we can come to grips with the express problem of professional military ethics, and that is the task of definition. I shall use the term "professional" to refer to career officers, those of commissioned rank who pursue active military service as a vocation. Some believe that such a cadre is responsible for providing professional role models (to include axioms of moral behavior) to both nonprofessional officers (reservists and officers commissioned in national emergencies) and the enlisted soldiery; however, I have concluded that the explicit responsibilities of command impose on commissioned ranks the need for only a self-generated professional ethic.

**W**hat is the source and grounding of a military ethic? It is curious, perhaps, that those influences which have been earlier described as moral regulators upon the ferocity of conflict are also factors in the evolution of professional military ethics. The source of professional ethics lies ultimately in the social fabric of the cultures that support military establishments, but social ethics per se and professional ethics are neither precisely identical nor similar in scope. A professional ethic arises in situations where a vocation introduces the need for obligations and restraints not commonly applicable to the culture at large.

A military officer, as case in point, exists in two moral realms at once: within the ethos that permeates the culture of which he is a part and also within the quite specialized ethical situation that surrounds his occupation. These "realms" are different and have not always been compatible. Moreover, the "code" of ethics of the soldier can be (like numerous moral codes) either an express, coherent, and self-conscious enumeration of ethical strictures or a less tangible "tradition" that molds behavior and outlook. It can be a more or less direct outgrowth of an extant general cultural system (even a narrowly national one), or it can be an autonomous set of principles derived from sources quite removed from contemporary civic morality. It is certainly an oversimplification to say that a good professional ethic is always a harmonious outgrowth of existing cultural norms. Let me cite an obvious example: the collision between the professional ethics of the traditional German officer class (at least very substantial parts of it) and the morality of the Nazi Party under Hitler. This was a complex confrontation. On balance, judged by traditional standards of civilized behavior, it would appear that the moral outlook of the *Wehrmacht* officers was distinctly preferable to the neo-barbarisms of the Nazi leadership. Yet one of the prominent features of the officers' "code" was strict noninterference in political affairs. Such a postulate stayed the hand of many whose personal abhorrence of the Nazi regime might otherwise have

resulted in their aiding in the attempt to eliminate it (von Rundstedt, for illustration). Did such an attitude prevent von Seeckt from nipping the Nazi menace in the bud in 1925? The ultimate obligation of the soldier to preserve the state is clear enough, perhaps, but to what ends? Was von Rundstedt then correct in refusing to participate in a coup against a detestable regime (agreeing, perhaps, with Kant's "moral imperative" that declares that any moral act should constitute a universal moral rule), or did virtue lie with those who plotted and acted, people such as von Stauffenberg, von Stulpnagel, and Admiral Canaris?<sup>6</sup>

There are factors, historically identifiable, that throw some light on the relationship between cultural ethics and ostensibly professional ones. In general, close-knit, unified societies with strong and stable civic ethics, particularly those rooted largely in traditional institutionalized religions, suggest professional military ethics less explicit and jurisprudential in character. Here, the military is a consistent outgrowth of existing cultural affinities and, indeed, is controlled by them. This was true of numerous European states prior to the social upheavals of this century. Such an arrangement does not necessarily imply that the military occupation enjoys a unique and prestigious social esteem. Indeed, the very solidity of the military establishment may rest upon its relatively minor social role, comfortably constrained by a ubiquitous social ethic. In old Japan, such a tight social fabric (in terms of a broad moral outlook) elevated the soldier to the social pinnacle, while in traditional China it relegated him to a low position in the hierarchy.

Conversely, internally diverse or unstable societies may imply the need for a military ethic more elaborate in delineation and independently constituted. There can be little doubt that under certain conditions the prevailing military ethic may well be markedly superior to the moral tenor of the culture as a whole. Specialized as it may be in occupational terms, the central theme of a military ethic is, understandably, *duty*. Duty, in the abstract, is the antithesis of licen-

tiousness, a condition promoted, in many instances, by the questionable supposition that freedom (variously defined) enjoys a prior mandate to social duty. The temptations to adopt, within the profession, essentially egocentric attitudes, reflecting popular moral attitudes abroad in the culture, can be very strong, especially since the subject of ethics itself has been frequently reduced to psychologistic terms. There remains a distinct danger that military ethics might succumb to the entreaties of this psychologism and mitigate its compelling authority thereby. But, in the larger and more social sense, the existence of a moral climate in which human volition and self-interest alone are the standard leads invariably to the need to impose external systems of order to prevent the society from descending into internecine strife. It is interesting to note that the seminal champion of psychologistic ethics, David Hume, counterbalances their social effects by proposing a political theory quite remarkable for its almost Draconian emphasis on order. I have no doubt at all that in many instances there has existed a strong impetus toward imposing, by force if needed, the stricter canons of a military ethic on the population as a whole. It would be reckless to suggest that this inclination is never justifiable, but, on balance, military ethics must exist within a framework or order not of its own design and serve as a model, perhaps, of the merits of social service and self-discipline.

Much of the American attitude toward military professionals is traceable, of course, to a lively dislike of the traditional European interrelationships between the profession of arms and an existing aristocracy. Yet the history of the American military profession features, in large part, the adoption of these very same imported ethical ideas. America, born as a state in the passions of a semi-popular revolution, has consistently overestimated the reality of what might be called the "Cincinnatus Myth"—the vision of the civilian turned warrior in moments of crisis who smites the enemy and returns to his pastoral employments. American military successes—from the Revolutionary War forward—have been largely accomplished by

professional soldiers, formally trained or at least educated in a more or less classical fashion.<sup>7</sup> The major departure from European practice has been the occasional elevation of these military commanders into high political office (Washington, Jackson, Taylor, Grant, and Eisenhower, to name only a partial list), and this helps to account for the continuously uneasy relationship between the professional military establishment and the civilian apparatus to this day.

This especial problem for the moment aside, the American military tradition has been a frequently curious narrative of the absorption of unwritten codes of conduct largely appropriated from societies whose social organization was markedly different from that of the nation as a whole. In this connection, Robert E. Lee looms as a paramount example, even, perhaps, as a symbol—the most moralistically oriented of our military heroes and yet one whose moral convictions were in large measure the product of self-delusion or at least a romantic nostalgia, if evaluated in terms of the prevailing ethos of the second half of the 19th century.

The fact of the matter is that the growth of American military ethics had a peculiar isolation from the realities of the national life, producing, in turn, a sort of “in-group” consciousness, intensified by periodic spasms of antimilitary feeling generated in the country. This somewhat precarious arrangement functioned adequately so long as the military profession was a reasonably cosmopolitan enterprise. World War I was the first major blow at this military cosmopolitanism, the first instance in which the sheer dimensions of the conflict took the conduct of warfare beyond the abilities of the professional to control. World War II decimated the vestiges of cosmopolitan self-confidence and thus the ability of the American military establishment to function on the basis of its traditional internal ethos.

The result was a hiatus in which thoughtful military professionals sought to reconstitute the professional ethic upon what they concluded were more realistic foundations. The war that ended in 1945 had

shattered beyond recovery any remains of identification of the officer corps with either a social class or a geographic region. Efforts were made, then, to come to terms with the prevailing national moral outlook (with, indeed, the fashionable relativisms and a morally pragmatic world view). The military profession was substantially “civilianized”—the symbol of the profession was no longer the sword but, quite literally, the briefcase. Beyond this, for reasons at once practical and theoretical, attempts were made to “democratize” the services, to abolish presumably archaic and nonfunctional customs and procedures that were thought to be not in keeping with the professed social ideals of the society as a whole. Even such traditional bastions as the service academies were “reformed” in part, with some pressure being exerted to eliminate within them the codes and mores which had sought to perpetuate the old ethic.

These modifications, whatever their other merits might have been, succeeded only in reducing the influence of a traditional military ethic without replacing it with a viable substitute. The reforms were hardly able to shape, even abortively, current ethical ideas of egocentrism, self-interest, and situational elasticity to the needs of the military profession, unique in its goals and responsibilities. The military professional is entrusted with a primary social mission: the survival of the political community by the exercise of physical force. He deals in life and death on a mass scale, and no military body can consist of a million or so individuals all of whom are students of ethics weighing their choices in the manner of some detached academician. The Vietnam War, then, while hardly in any sense a disgrace to American arms, did reveal insecurities and anxieties that grew out of confusion over the military ethic, to say nothing of the root concepts of professionalism.

**W**hat must a professional military ethic be? Conceived of at its most rudimentary level, a professional military ethic must be built upon two basic considerations: first, the maximum at-

tainment of objectives for which the profession itself exists and, second, a reconciliation with the precepts of humane values that have been manifested in the course of human history.

These otherwise simple premises raise problems at once. Are the two always compatible? Would not the survival of the society, in extremis, justify any and all means, including those not condoned by the second premise? I do not think that this is quite the problem it might appear, since a professional ethic is, fundamentally, a code for individual behavior, and the choice of saving the society by ostensibly immoral means is rarely a dilemma for the field commander. It is, rather, a political decision. That this is so suggests that, for the soldier, the suspension of rudimentary morality is hardly ever justifiable (questions of obedience momentarily aside). I raise this point for one reason only: a crucial feature of a professional ethic is the recognition of the *ethical status of the individual*; it is a code that is concerned with the moral validity of individual acts, even as a form of protection for the moral actor. The purpose, then, of a professional military ethic is not only the "maximum attainment of objectives," and the collective moral well-being of the occupation, but the enhancement of the moral status of the person who embraces it. It *should* have the effect of quelling the necessity for the entertainment of moral dilemmas.

More specifically, I believe there are five principal elements that form the base for a contemporary military ethic: personal honor; obedience and limits of moral freedom; relationships to the society as a whole; relationships to existing political institutions and forces; and the moral implications of command responsibility. Allow me to consider each of these in turn.

• *Personal honor.* One might think the term "personal honor" quaint in these times, but I remain convinced that it lies at the heart of the military ethic (conceiving such an ethic, I reiterate, as being a specialized body of moral canons). Honor is, of course, a generally well-esteemed quality in all persons,

not just those who pursue the military profession. I think, therefore, that it is necessary to talk rather precisely about honor in a military context, quite beyond its vaguely laudatory connotations.

The concept of "honor" is, I think, chivalric in express usage, although the groundwork for such a conception is Greco-Roman, especially the latter.<sup>8</sup> The cult of honor, in medieval times, was bound up with the idea of a hierarchy of fidelities, rather approximating the social structure of feudalism. Feudalism was, among other things, a series of reciprocal obligations; and honor, in its original context, implies this exchange of fidelities. In exchange for one fidelity (to God, to one's fellow man, to one's king and liege-lord) another fidelity was extended: the proffering of liberty, of esteem, of social status, even of mundane privileges. Thus, we today use the word to reflect this dichotomy. We receive "honors," we "honor" obligations, and so on. Honor is thereby a condition voluntarily assumed and, if maintained, productive of personal benefits, not the least of which is the extension of considerable personal freedom from mandatory regulation—"I give you my word of honor" is the equivalent of claiming exemption from actual inspection or verification. By subordinating oneself to a "code of honor," one is granted a considerable range of action, and one's motives are beyond question.

Of course, in earlier eras honor was closely associated with those who undertook military obligations (itself a feudal obligation).<sup>9</sup> But the chivalry of the *chansons des gestes* did not survive the 15th century. With the rise of professional armies, in contrast to feudal hosts, the preexisting devotion to honor was widely absorbed into the concept of the royally commissioned officer, fidelity to the nation-state replacing feudal vows.<sup>10</sup> There was an increasingly autonomous character to this idea of honor as its theological ties weakened, especially in the Renaissance, and the elements of individual pride, dignity, and self-esteem became prominent (influenced, perhaps, by the revival of the Greek idea of *arete*). The

concept of honor (related to fidelity) became wedded to the obligation of self-cultivation, of personal excellence. There is a vivid difference between this concept of pride, however, and egocentrism as conceived in voluntaristic philosophies or even Freudian ego-psychology. The pride that follows from self-cultivation and self-discipline is in accord with the acknowledged obligation of the person to fulfill his own nature (the idea is basically that of Aristotle), in contrast to self-gratification. The distinction is an important one, because excellence, the impulse toward the pursuit of self-generated standards, is vital to all significant human endeavors, the military arts among them. The soldier does not subsist on self-abnegation (glory is the legitimate compensation for his sacrifices, as most commentators from Plato on have conceded). Nor is his pride, derivable from his fidelity to honor, or even his professional excellence, which flows from the same source, an exercise in the "maximization of self-interest." Rather, they are rewards of freedom and self-identity.

The most important feature of this dedication to honor by military professionals, in more functional terms, has been to invest the officer with a necessary independence of mind. It is the presupposition of a dedication to a code of honor that allows for vital intellectual freedom in the military community. So long as an omnibus fidelity to a basic commitment to personal honor exists, then a notable freedom can proceed: the freedom to express unpopular theories, offer criticism, explore alternative methods, and even exhibit a sometimes invigorating professional eccentricity. This situation is the opposite of that which prevails in most civilian bureaucracies (except those embracing a stoically disciplined ethic themselves) where, minus a rigorous devotion to personal honor, the atmosphere is one of self-protection, conformity, pragmatic compromise, intellectual caution, and even, at times, mutual suspicion.

In general, with the decline of the significance of personal honor has come a corresponding diminishment of intellectual vitality in the military profession worldwide.

Officers now tend to follow a political ethic rather than a military one, are far more cautious about marching to the beat of a different drummer, and are more concerned with protective adaptations that contemporary bureaucracy inspires. I am not contending that innovators, eccentrics, and intellectual Jeremiahs have invariably fared well personally in armies—although their presences have undoubtedly been significantly stimulating—only that as a regard for honor fades, the presumption of fidelity and the extension of personal liberty for the officer contract, and with them the opportunities for respectable dissent, career enhancements aside.

\* *Obedience and limits of moral freedom.* The obligation to obey is never total, but with the soldier the *presumption* must always be of the legitimacy of command. I do not think this is true of the civilian at all. Quite the contrary, if I am given a command, a summary order, my first impulse and act is to question its validity and legitimacy. It is generally desirable that non-military persons *not* be disposed toward unqualified forms of obedience. Why do people in general, then, obey at all, if they are inclined to do otherwise? In extension, how is the social ethic enforced? At risk of being accused of a certain cynicism, I conclude that obedience to social rules generally arises from some form of punitive sanction. This need not be the threat of jail or other drastic penalties, but can more commonly be a fear of a loss of social approbation or, more severely, social ostracism. No doubt many people obey the prime social injunctions out of a rational and voluntary understanding of their efficacy, but in the case of law—specific statutory prohibitions—I suspect that wholly voluntary compliance would be quite small.

No army can function on the basis of compliance to commands (or "statutory prohibitions") that is the result of punitive threat, certainly not under the stress of battle. I do not entirely discount, of course, the need for such punitive arrangements (armies, too, need policemen, courts, and jails), and I believe that many men enter combat convinced that the penalties for failure to do so

may be harsher than the machinations of the enemy. But among military professionals, those who both accept and issue commands, the obligation to obey—to the point of self-immolation—is a *voluntary* commitment that presumes the legitimacy of command. This compliance is unique in human institutions, I believe, and yet it is an essential part of a military ethic.

It is possible, certainly, to conceive of commands that are either patently insane or morally reprehensible. I think that instances of their occurrence are relatively infrequent, but I concede that such instances would require a rational response. The *presumption* of command legitimacy is not a curtailment of essential moral freedom. *If* a reciprocal trust exists in mutual honor between commander and subordinate, then the subordinate is fully able to express his professional reservations about the prudence and rectitude of a command, and procedures should exist to facilitate this. The acceptance of an order is, in part, an abrogation of moral responsibility, *if* the person fulfilling the order has been free to declare his concerns about its contents, preferably in a formal mode. This presumed infringement on moral accountability is justified by two factors: the recognition of the rational need to assign moral responsibility in a hierarchical pattern, and the ultimate freedom of the individual to accept the consequences of his final unwillingness to obey. Refusing an order is invariably accompanied by forms of risk, but, at times, officers have felt impelled to do so, motivated by professional concerns and accepting the consequences of their action.<sup>11</sup>

• *Relationships to the society as a whole.* No military establishment exists exclusively for its own internal benefit, even in instances of rulership of states by explicit warrior societies. War, for sport or conquest, has frequently been a prime preoccupation of a society, but warfare has never been the sole *raison d'être* of a culture. Thus, a military organization is ancillary to the social whole, at least in its rudimentary role as protector of the physical safety of the society. But that this is true does not necessarily imply that the social ethos totally defines the military participation in the social order.

What are, then, the principal determinants that undergird the professional ethic of this apparatus of protection? The most fundamental one may be the preservation of the society—but from what? In the first place, there is a shadowy distinction between the *society* and the *state*. I shall not here digress into a discussion of the problems of defining “state,” but it is clear enough that some difference exists between a society (thought of as being an aggregate of the citizenry) and a formal institution or, perhaps, a symbolic construct, that embodies it as a state. Is there, then, a conflict between social loyalty and loyalty to the state? Does “preservation” of the society refer only to external aggressions or also to domestic insurrections? If both, then insurrections against whom or what? These conflicts of loyalties have been real enough; historically, they are simple to document. Interesting, too, is the fact that this broad issue has sharpened in recent times due to the “force monopoly” of the contemporary state, its possession of decisive weaponry generally unavailable to its citizens.

Moreover, the current age is one beset with a bewildering range of quarreling ideologies, a sizable proportion of them freely advocating the most violent means of securing social hegemony. To a large extent the contesting factions of religion have been replaced in modern industrial states by contesting claims of social preferment.

The contemporary military professional is harrassed on two fronts. Whom does he finally serve? What are the moral implications of this social turmoil that seethes around him?

Theological disputes in the past have less affected the homogeneity of officer corps than have these ideological conflicts (granting certain notable instances of bigotry in many armies). Does religious toleration (to the extent of the private worship of individuals) suggest, now, a comparable toleration of ideological dogma? It would be naive to assume that military officers are not exposed to and affected by ideological blandishments, and, indeed, the military occupation does not preclude the nominal options of the citizen in all particulars. But as religion is not overtly

an ingredient in a professional military ethic, ideological premises cannot be so embraced either, regardless of how moralistic may be their motivations or, I might add, how generally they might be cherished in contemporary America. This would seem a more straightforward prohibition than it in fact is. In other terminology, the military ethic is not a body of patriotic sentiments, least of all a collection of social principles reflecting cultural preferences about arrangements substantially ungermane to the responsibilities of military professionals.

The military ethic is, rather, a code whose only recourse is to serve the physical embodiment of the state. Where is that "state" to be found? All other argumentative considerations aside, one virtue of the monarchical system is that it provides a visible, personal symbolization of the sovereignty of the state. In a monarchy, there is not much question of who is, *pro forma*, the "commander-in-chief," if you will. That personal connection with the embodiment of the state is far more difficult in a republic and, in some respects, even more awkward in the case of a despotic dictatorship (where power may be centralized but also unstable). Moreover, it is somewhat more aloof to venerate a written constitution in a glass box or, in the American instance, separate the role of chief of state from that of leader of the government, avowedly a political role. Generally, however, it is to the head of state, monarchical or republican, that the loyalty of the military services is extended, not, of course, as a person, but as the emblem of national sovereignty, irrespective of the convolutions of political activity.

I think that this is an unavoidable commitment, to be tampered with only in the direst of extremities. Such extremities have arisen, of course. But it is not the function of a military establishment to evaluate the efficacy or even the legitimacy (in the broadly constitutional sense) of those who exercise sovereignty. The presumption of obedience to the state is rooted in a presumption that the state exists to advance the commonweal. The agents of the state—governments—have on occasion forsaken this primary obligation, to

be sure, and I think the litmus test of this condition may be what amounts to the waging of war upon the citizenry by those operating under the aegis of state authority. Such occurrences have been rarer, historically, than might be supposed, however. It is one thing to conclude that a nation is either ill-governed or even ruled oppressively, by one's own standards, but quite another to presume that a government has embarked upon a policy of deliberate internecine pillage. I am not saying that all revolutions, all insurgencies, against existing regimes are unjustified, only that the judgment of the military professional of rival claims to social power must be confined by a prior fidelity to act on behest of the existing machinery of the state—except in the infrequent cases of intrasocietal deprecation.<sup>12</sup> To do otherwise is to make military establishments either the pawns of contending social forces or to have them assume the loathsome role of a Praetorian Guard.

• *Relationships to existing political institutions and forces.* It would be simpler, I grant, if military professionals restricted themselves to military matters and politicians attended solely to political ones. Needless to say, these areas, military and political, overlap (most apparently, of course, in "grand strategy," an amalgam of the two); but even if they did not, there are generals and admirals who yearn to penetrate the "affairs of state" and politicians who wish to direct armies.

Despite what might seem an evident division of labor, the increasing preoccupation of the professional military officer with political affairs arose, in part, from understandable and even commendable motives prompted by the mounting complexity of world affairs. Greater understanding of political matters appeared a wholesome attribute for the post-World War II officer, especially in view of the advent of military situations in which operations were overlaid with often complex political considerations (which is true, in a certain sense, of all warfare involved with counterinsurgency). But despite the apparent logic of this new orientation, the effort was ex-

cessive and resulted in three regrettable consequences: a neglect of pure military art, which, I believe it is fair to say, inhibited the success of American efforts in Indo-China; a further obfuscation of a military ethic and a professional appreciation of the vocation, and a growing tendency to replace a military perspective with a political one; and an increasing interest on the part of military professionals in wider governmental assignment.

Let me deal with the last of these points first. The history to date of political performance by former professional military officers is woeful, by and large, and remains so in truth despite the claims of their often zealous apologists. While ex-generals have made quite unsatisfactory presidents, former officers have also hardly done well as secretaries of state, directors of intelligence, ambassadors, or program chiefs. The reasons for this are worth examining. If those outside the military often tend to deprecate the intellectual demands of the profession of arms, soldiers very frequently have a simple-minded appreciation of the political arts and, furthermore, are rarely prepared, either educationally or psychologically, for the trials of careers essentially alien to them. Further, the best minds in the military generally are more than content to grapple with the intellectual challenges inherent in their own calling and have little enthusiasm for becoming politico-military hybrids.

It is necessary to rethink the relationship of military officers with the political realm, if only to revive an ethical foundation for the profession that is not transfused with political dicta. Politics obeys an ethic of its own—more intricate and no less noble in its composition than that of the military—but such a moral outlook is not appropriate to military circumstances. It is not merely a question of repulsing the enticements of political power; it is a matter of not adulterating military competency by an excessively political orientation, a world view, I might add, usually only dimly understood by most career officers.

The sharp line must be reestablished between the political and the military, and the

reconstituted professional military ethic must include a strict prohibition against the incursion of professional officers into political governmental service and a reconcentration of talents and energies on the development of the military arts. This change of posture must also include the termination of the sub rosa participation of officers in partisan political affairs and the refusal of senior officers to become expressly identified with specific governmental administrations.

Such prohibitions enhance rather than restrict the freedom of officers to engage, quite publicly, in their ongoing *professional* life, indeed, to express military opinions that do not at all times echo the views of the current political administration. Military ethics should permit the free participation of officers in public discussion and even in disputes regarding matters *within their professional competence*. Too frequently, for illustration, the Joint Chiefs of Staff appear, justly or not, as a monolithic body devoted to the advocacy of whatever defense policies have been espoused by the civilian component of government, the administration in power. Defense policies, needless to say, involve considerations that go beyond explicitly military concerns, but for too long a sophisticated discussion of military affairs has been stifled by the application of politically motivated restraints upon such exposure of views, restraints imposed both from outside and inside the Department of Defense. I know of no other crucial area of public affairs in the United States about which the public at large is so ill-informed as national security policies. This is in part attributable to the relative silence of professional officers on these issues. Indeed, in another sense, the professional soldier has a claim on “academic freedom” as substantial as that of any other professional. Just as military rank cannot be the arbiter of the merit of ideas, neither can political interests dictate the professional ideas of conscientious officers.

• *The moral implications of command responsibility.* Independent command responsibility (and I refer here to the command of major military forces of the size of field

armies or their equivalents, and above) presents, I believe, some especial ethical considerations since, for all practical purposes, persons in such situations are confronted by the moral implications of having to determine the number of casualties that are acceptable in pursuit of a given objective. It is probably a universal expectation that success in war ought to be obtained with the fewest possible casualties and that skill in leadership is reflected by such accomplishment. But there are serious pertinent qualifications to this proposition. Indeed, numerous celebrated commanders have been accused by critics of causing exorbitant casualties (Frederick the Great, Grant, and Haig, just to choose three rather prominent examples among many). Study of the historical record suggests some conclusions in this regard. First, there are shifting levels of acceptable casualties, levels that are in part reflective of prevailing social attitudes and in part the result of differentials in resources, human and material. But the principal conclusion to be drawn, in brief—beyond some flamboyant examples of utter military stupidity—is that the relative sizes of casualty totals (beyond the sheer sizes of forces involved) cannot be judged on the basis of isolated conflicts, but must be appraised in terms of the overall consequences of a protracted campaign. Frederick, for illustration, was habitually short of manpower and generally sought to hoard it when possible. He managed his startling victory at Rossbach with extraordinarily few casualties, while at Torgau he was willing to expend his last grenadier to gain a decision. The explanation lies in the realization of a strategic purpose, of course. Grant's Wilderness campaign, at first appalling in its expenditures of manpower, is quite defensible in terms of its having effectively shortened the ability of the Army of Northern Virginia to resist.

I have made, here, what may seem to be an odd digression into the field of strategy, but I do so in order to focus on the moral dimension of independent command. Surely the commander must seek to conserve the lives of those he leads, but he must be prepared—have the moral resolve—to use his

troops in ways most propitious to the culmination of his projected strategy, bringing it to a successful termination. Such a balancing of concerns is one feature of the art of generalship.

Further, the professional soldier must subscribe—indeed, as a postulate of his occupational ethic—to the thesis that military leadership *is* an activity in which skill and intellectual acumen are critical. That might appear truistic—except for the fact that I am convinced that some military professionals no longer believe it. The reasons for their skepticism arise, I gather, from three main assumptions: that technology has superceded intellectuality in the conduct of war, that conflicts are finally decided by intangible moral and psychological factors over which high-level commanders exercise little discretion other than deploying their forces before the enemy,<sup>13</sup> and that battles are won or lost by small unit effectiveness and *not* by the personal skill of commanders. These assumptions are not borne out by historical evidence (even that of the current era), and the retention of these specious ideas is reflective of the rather widespread anti-historical bias that has recently characterized American military education.

A vital part of any military ethic is the *moral obligation* of commanders to revere and cultivate the skills of command. The men they lead have every right to expect that this will be the case. Yet it is not always so. A thorough analysis, for example, of World War II will reveal in all the major armies numerous instances, regrettably, of incompetency that arose not only from ignorance and ineptitude but from a failure of military leaders to subordinate various forms of personal aggrandizement and hubris to the ends of recognizing skill in command as the prime criterion for high command.

**W**hat, then, is the corpus of a military ethic? It should contain a series of essential precepts: the recognition of the primacy of personal honor; a voluntary presumption of the legitimacy of command, subordinating personal conceptions of self-interest; loyalty to the state as the em-

bodiment of social survival; a prohibition against active participation in political affairs; and the obligation to cultivate professional skill.

But this is merely a beginning, a bare skeleton that invites substantial amplification. Much is left to resolve, but I have tried to dwell on the most basic considerations as a means of illustrating how contentious the subject is. None of the above premises would be universally accepted, I would surmise, in or out of the military services. But I am thoroughly convinced, too, that the volatility of the present situation, both in terms of the national culture and the military profession itself, now demands what would be, in effect, an articulated professional ethic. The role of the military establishment in a society as irrepressibly pluralistic as the American makes the creation of that ethic even more crucial. No longer is it possible to assume that the social or academic conditioning of career officers is an adequate introduction to military ethics; I strongly suspect that even the service academies have somewhat cautiously downplayed the character of an independent professional ethic. But the fact of the matter is that those who serve the nation in a military capacity no longer can assume any dominant moral consensus in the United States. Such a lack of ethical homogeneity may be tolerable in the nation as a whole, but ethical incongruities are simply not feasible in a military establishment. That organism must be knit by a relatively tight ethical code—and perhaps one that must now be formally postulated in contrast to a looser and less juristic tradition. It is time to consider such a commitment to professional rectitude.

#### NOTES

1. The best source on the medieval period regarding the history of warfare remains Sir Charles Oman's *History of Warfare in the Middle Ages*. It is a classic not likely to be duplicated.

2. As a matter of fact, this Moslem disdain for technological invention, at least on the part of the desert peoples, directly led to the fall of the Mamaluke dynasty in the early 16th century and the conquest of Syria and Egypt by the Turkish Empire.

3. There are intriguing exceptions to this pattern of public school morality transferred to military circumstances. Take the case of William Stephen Raikes Hodson (1821-1858), who was educated at Rugby under the renowned Dr. Arnold and was likely the model for "Harry East" in Thomas Hughes' *Tom Brown's School Days*. During the Indian Mutiny of 1857, the then Major Hodson personally shot out of hand the three sons of the insurgent King of Delhi and thereby precipitated a storm of public indignation in Victorian England. A short time later, however, Hodson was killed during the last relief of Lucknow.

4. The most excellent account of this phenomenon is to be found in Cyril Fall's *The Great War* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1959).

5. It may be useful to consult a history of ethical theories in this century. A concise overview of social ethics and political theory can be found in my own *Twentieth Century Political Philosophy* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974).

6. The best source for an understanding of the conflict between Hitler and the professional officers remains Walter Goerlitz's *The German General Staff, 1657-1945*, trans. Brian Battershaw (New York: Praeger, 1953).

7. The roster of self-taught military leaders of exceptional ability in American military history is decidedly brief, and most of those were successful leaders of irregular forces in the stamp of Rodgers, Morgan, Marion, Doniphan, and Forrest. The far-and-away outstanding American commander in the Revolutionary War, Nathaniel Greene, was self-taught (an ex-Quaker, incidentally), but he was also a former bookseller who avidly digested military literature. There has been, of course, quite a procession of "gifted amateurs" in the history of war. Narses was a Byzantine court eunuch, Wallenstein more or less an adventurer, Cromwell a farmer, and even Frederick II of Prussia was in most respects initially an amateur, to cite a few prominent cases.

8. Perhaps the most outstanding treatise on those virtues that befit a military commander is the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius—much of it written in a tent in the field by a most reluctant soldier. I should think it might well lie on the bedside table of all military professionals.

9. The basic education of gentlemen included training in arms until the late Renaissance (see Castiglione's *Libro del Cortegiano*—the "Book of the Courtier"—as a useful reference), and familiarity with weapons continued long after that. Officers with little or no formal military education (beyond, again, attendance at public schools or their Continental equivalents) persisted in Britain, along with the sanctioning of commissions by direct purchase, until the debacles of the Crimean War of 1854. The appearance of state-sponsored military schools took place in the late 18th century in Europe as a product of the increased need for technical competence in engineering and artillery, and these institutions were largely peopled, initially, by the sons of the emerging commercial classes, but their élan was clearly an outgrowth of the traditional aristocratic virtues. In lieu of mandatory attendance at cadet schools, however, prospective officers entered regiments as "coronets" or served with fleets as "midshipmen" at as early an age as 12 or 13 years. Thus, the conception of "honor" derived from the social code of traditional aristocracies became inculcated into a military profession whose practitioners increasingly represented a broader spectrum of the population.

10. From the twilight of feudalism to the emergence of truly national armies in the 17th century, general reliance was placed on the services of mercenaries (both troops and, to some extent, commanders): Italian *condottieri*, Swiss pikemen,

German *landsnechts*, *reiters*, "black bands," assorted artillerymen, et al. This method of providing military resources was distinctly a mixed bag—perhaps confirming Machiavelli's warnings on the subject. Italian *condottieri* were especially adept at avoiding battle in the interests of self-preservation and monetary gain (one of the most admired of them, Prosper Colonna, was dubbed "Fabius Cunctator"), and the Swiss pike battalions, awesome on the battlefield before the intervention of efficient firearms, were prone to abrogate their commitments if their services could be sold profitably elsewhere. Before the battle of Pavia in 1522, for example, a large bloc of Swiss pike simply deserted the French, annoyed over a failure to seek immediate battle and its attendant spoils. Arrears in pay might prompt Swiss and other mercenaries to offer instant service with the enemy. Moreover, mercenary proclivity for savagery and the slaughter of prisoners was notorious. Such circumstances hastened the formulation of national military establishments and the adoption of professional military codes of loyalty and moral deportment.

11. Of course, it must be recognized that self-confident commanders have on occasion seen fit to ignore, often ingeniously, the orders of their superiors in what they presumed to be the interests of victory. The most celebrated case, perhaps, is that of Admiral Nelson's convenient inability to see a flag signal that would have prevented his destruction of the Danish fleet in Copenhagen. Grant, during his campaigns in the West, was known to have cut his own communications so as to prevent his receipt of recalls from his superior, Halleck. The line between "initiative" and "disobedience" is often an indistinct one in practice. It might be provocative to mention that there has been a long-standing tradition that commanders, despite formal orders, always retained the option of "marching to the sound of the guns." The failure of Grouchy at Waterloo to do precisely that, thus ignoring Napoleon's somewhat garbled field order, has been warmly criticized by military analysts since. Of course, a general tradition of bellicose

initiative has long been a part of military custom, often even in the face of a more studied prudence. Admiral Byng, you may recall, was court-martialed in the 18th century for failing to sail out of Majorca harbor to engage a decidedly superior French fleet, likely a not unreasonable decision at the time. Voltaire quite wittily commented that the unfortunate admiral's fate was instigated "*pour encourager les autres.*" Martial spirit frequently is seen as more commendable than a strict interpretation of either formal orders or even military discretion.

12. I am tempted to use a contemporary illustration for this point. I should think the regime of Idi Amin in Uganda, of lamentable recent memory, fits most precisely this definition of both depravity and intra-societal predation, and no officer of his forces could be morally bound to support him even as the personification of sovereignty.

13. This is a view vividly presented by Tolstoy, among other writers. Serious historians have advanced this theory of warfare from time to time, suggesting that the cerebral qualities of military commanders are largely irrelevant. In point of fact, however, the number of decisive "soldiers' battles" are relatively few. This is not to discount the moral (or morale) factor in military success. Courage, fortitude, and even passionate anger have been elements that have swayed the course of battle. In that crucial engagement of the Thirty Years War, Lutzen, the death of Gustavus Adolphus occasioned a tumultuous spontaneous charge of the Swedish infantry (some Imperial soldiers were actually strangled in rage), but the victory was the consequence, rather, of Gustavus' preparations, technical and tactical; the tide was turned by his innovative artillery. The most thought-provoking recent discussion of the role of generalship as against the psychological variables affecting soldiers in battle (and, in consequence, the validity of military history as well) is provided by John Keegan in his brilliant work *The Face of Battle* (New York: Viking, 1976).

