

**ETHICS THOUGHT PAPER: DOES SOCIETY  
HOLD THE MILITARY SOLDIER TO A STRICTER  
ETHICAL STANDARD**

**BY**

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Does society hold the military Soldier to a higher ethical standard? This is not so much a problem but, a thought to ponder the fairness of the question. As stated in a Washington Post article, written by Captain Marc Hedhal, "It certainly seems true that military professionals are subject to unique moral situations. For example, military members can be called on to use lethal force when most of their civilian counter-parts are not. The question, however, is whether military members should be held to a stricter ethical standard. Is it worse for a military member to steal than his civilian counterpart? Is it worse for a military member to cheat on their spouse than their civilian counter-part? Why is it not possible that a corrupt man could still be a good soldier?" It is my belief that the military professional is held to a stricter ethical standard than the civilian business professional and society in general, even though the military professional does not perceive himself or herself to be of a "higher moral caliber" than the civilian members of society.

We are members of society that join an organization; an organization that is held by society and the organization itself, to maintain a higher ethical standard. Is this fair? For example, think of the Soldier who is involuntarily discharged from the military other than honorably; they are subject to much prejudice from society. Discharge papers reveal "less than honorable conditions" which makes finding decent employment rather difficult. However, a civilian business professional that gets fired from their position is not scrutinized by society to the same extent that the former military Soldier is.

To take it a step further, lets consider the Soldier who has served more than 6 years active service and is involuntarily discharged for abusing the use of the impact credit card; unethical indeed! However, the unethical Soldier will receive severance pay from

the government while the Soldier who served honorably for a three year term, who chooses to leave the service and pursue college gets no such compensation.

The term “ethics” according to Webster, refers to the “study and philosophy of human conduct, with emphasis on the determination of right and wrong; the basic principles of right action, with reference to a particular person or profession.” Personal experiences, personal values and our organizational relationship basically determine our individual moral range.

The professional soldier, sailor, airmen, operate in a community that is a contained society. While the Army understands Soldiers enter the service with their own individual value system, it is expected that when they take the oath, they pledge to accept the organizational values of our Army: Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honor, Integrity, and Personal Courage. This value system is in addition to what is required by society of an individual.

The civilian sector, meaning the business professional, also operates in a community that is a detachment of society. The business community has a set of values and ethical standards that their employees are to adhere too. According to John Dalla Costa, who wrote *The Ethical Imperative: Why Moral Leadership is Good Business*, he states, “The core concepts that comprise the business professional’s ethical standards are integrity, dignity, fairness, justice and respect.” However, these values are at work only when interacting with other entities in their business world for example, suppliers, investors, creditors and the like. Therefore, this value system is not in addition to what is required by society.

Society provides individuals with a set of ethical standards in an effort to regulate

behavior. The ethical standards for society, in general, are: “Courage, Temperance, Truthfulness, Proper Ambition, and Magnanimity,” according to Peter Vardy and Paul Grosch, authors of *The Puzzle of Ethics*. It is these “core concepts” that describe a standard of behavior and performance that individual members of society are expected to acknowledge and follow.

While some of the values between the military and civilian business professionals are similar, there is one difference and that is the issue of accountability. Military personnel are accountable to all of society. The military professional is sometimes forced to make decisions involving life and death. We are accountable to all the mothers, fathers, spouses and children of the Soldiers in our charge. While the civilian business professional is required to make difficult decisions, he or she is not making life or death decisions. Their decisions affect only those in the business world, like the suppliers, creditors, etc.

One of the reasons society holds the military professional to a stricter ethical standard is because the military professional is directly accountable to society as a whole. A perfect example of society’s high expectations placed upon our military professionals is evident in the recent prison scandal at Abu Graib. All the publicity displayed on public airways showed how the leadership failed to signify to society that a high ethical standard environment existed. New editorials claimed that current Army leadership is responsible for the unfortunate incident at Abu Graib. Army leaders were scrutinized by the civilian sector, especially the media, knowing similar crimes occur within the state prison system in our country. As stated, in *Executive Summary Investigation of Intelligence Activities at Abu Graib*, “Clearly abuses occurred at the prisons at Abu Graib. The primary causes

are misconduct by a small group of morally corrupt Soldiers **and civilians.**” To my knowledge, the report of civilians abusing prisoners was never aired or reported by the national media.

Army recruiting reveals a different spin. The general civilian attitude regarding the “kind of people” the Army recruit’s are those individuals who do not possess a higher education, could be in trouble with the law and entrance into the military is their only option. Yet society holds these individuals to a higher ethical standard?

Society expects all individuals to follow a set of ethical standards. The question this paper attempts to address is whether or not society’s standard is equally applied to all elements of society, or does society single out certain groups and hold those groups to a higher ethical standard? It is my conclusion that the military professional is held to a stricter ethical standard than the civilian business professional. Captain Hedhal believes, “Military members cannot compartmentalize their lives: they cannot lead a virtuous life when in uniform and live a less than virtuous life in civilian clothes. Therefore we cannot claim that it is worse for an officer to lie to his superiors because this fact demonstrates his lack of ethical character, which will have a devastating impact due to the military’s unique mission.”

At the Air Force Academy in 1970, Sir John Winthrop Hackett said it best. “A man can be selfish, cowardly, disloyal, fleeting, perjured and morally corrupt in a wide variety of other ways and still be outstandingly good in pursuits in which other imperatives bear than those upon the fighting man. He can be a superb creative artist, for example, or a scientist in the very top flight and still be a very bad man. What the bad man cannot be is a good sailor, soldier, or airman. Military institutions thus form a repository of moral

resource which should always be a source of strength with the state.”