

DOD Senior Leadership Dilemmas

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## Outline

Thesis: Department of Defense senior leaders face ethical dilemmas routinely while trying to accomplish their respective duties.

- I. Redux Retirement System.
- II. Tricare/United Concordia Dental Plan Implementation.
- III. Solutions.

## DOD Senior Leadership Dilemmas

Senior Department of Defense (DOD) leaders testify in front of Congress on a myriad of issues. DOD leadership routinely gives background information, statistics, and advice to congressional leaders on many confrontational issues that affect service member's futures. The political nature of these inquiries must cause much consternation behind the leader's closed doors. As they perform their daily duties they have to balance accomplishing their mission (political objectives that control the budget) or providing for the welfare of their subordinates (recommending fair policy for the benefit of the service member). Department of Defense senior leaders face ethical dilemmas routinely while trying to accomplish their respective duties.

To further explore this position we must first identify what constitutes an ethical dilemma. Simply put, an ethical dilemma occurs when individuals come across a problem that has two or more conflicting values. Leadership within the DOD will always attempt to accomplish their mission; however, there is an informal norm that specifies leaders should also take care of their subordinates. This norm has even been granted publication in the US Army's Noncommissioned Officer Creed "... my two most basic responsibilities will remain uppermost in my mind, the accomplishment of my mission and the welfare of my Soldiers".

In 1986 Congress changed the military service member's retirement system from a 50% proration of base pay to a 40% proration of base pay. It wasn't until the turn of the century, FY2000, that military leadership and lobbying organizations finally got the strength to overcome this grievous error. Luckily, it changed prior to any service member receiving reduced benefits under the 40% plan.

Upon a closer look, it becomes apparent that DOD leaders once again were in an

unenviable position. Congress agreed to alleviate this reduced retirement plan but needed to fund the program to satisfy budget balancing requirements of that time. It was within these parameters that senior leaders faced another ethical dilemma. The outcome bordered on bribery or got overlooked as looking out for the service member.

The fourteen year period, while the 50% plan existed, caused an unforecasted budget gap. Senior leaders agreed to bring in a \$30K buy back option but failed to provide detailed education to the service member when requiring a decision. Service members could waive the \$30K and immediately revert to the 50% plan or they could take \$30K (bribery) and keep their 40% plan. With proper education, service members would know that the bonus is an OK opportunity if you are planning a thirty year career and invest it to overcome the 1% negative inflation adjustment. However, if a career goal is only for a twenty year commitment then the individual should deny the bonus. Unfortunately, proper education did not happen and the congressional budget reaped the benefit. This is a classic demonstration where DOD leaders looked the other way to satisfy the mission, balancing the political budget, and failed to satisfy the informal norm of taking care of their subordinates by providing proper education and training.

Another situation that continually haunts senior leaders over the past two decades is the never ending changes in military health benefit plans. When most of today's senior leaders entered the service it was an informal norm that service members would have guaranteed medical and dental coverage. This issue is extremely debatable; however, one must understand that our senior military leaders did testify with Congress and brief the DOD officials many times. Once again, this clearly highlights the fact that leaders must balance a political requirement with their own personal beliefs and places them in a continuous ethical dilemma.

In the 1990s, DOD leadership failed to protect service member's dental coverage. Senior leaders believed they were taking care of the service members because they protected their medical coverage by changing the Civilian Health and Medical Program for the Uniformed Services to an updated Health Management Office (Tricare). Thus, a "give and take" situation that some believed was in the service's best interest. Unfortunately, they mistook the intentions of Congress and must continually fight for service member's medical coverage today. Congress used the "give and take" method to show the unnecessary expenditure of assets in our dental coverage as a reason to reduce our medical benefits. This is a never ending battle as Congress continually degrades the service's medical coverage under Tricare, the most recent cuts being in 2004.

Understanding that senior DOD leaders face ethical dilemmas on a daily basis is only part of the problem. As long as DOD leaders must balance a political mission (balanced budget) and preserve the welfare of the service member, this problem will exist. Senior DOD leaders must ensure that the decision making process on service member benefit programs do not always tie to the effectiveness of a budget.

Senior leaders must continue to use current budgetary guidelines as a tool, but they owe it to the services, the service members, and themselves to input moral obligations as well. As they develop courses of action on today's hot topics, leaders must ensure they protect the welfare of the service members for generations to come. They must use the military value system as a tool to counter balance purely monetary decisions. It is not only about legalities and rules; senior leaders must input their personal morality and the military value systems to solve today's problems and ensure a better tomorrow.