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Ethics Paper

The U.S. Army and the Political Process

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The pro-political process of the United States Army during this election year of encouraging Active, Reserve, and National Guard members to participate although admirable and encouraging, has entered an arena which could be interpreted as an ethical dilemma that the Army has neither faced, nor anticipated before. The ethical dilemma is created by not addressing and informing our service members about the extent of their active involvement in the election process while wearing the military uniform. Outwardly exercising the guarantees of free speech while serving in the defense of our nation serves to disrupt order and discipline in the ranks, and opposes the core values upon which the military is built.

Unlike the civilian population of the United States, the President has a very unique role that differs greatly from any other elected official. The President is the only elected official that simultaneously represents the country as its leader, and also holds the highest military office in our chain of command: Commander-in-Chief. By virtue of the President's position with regard to the Armed Forces, each service member of the active or reserve components has an inherent and legal obligation, in accordance with regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice, to be loyal and obey the orders communicated by the President of the United States. Enlisted members of the US Army are bound by the core value of loyalty not to engage in, or talk about the President in a manner that would be considered disloyal or derogatory. Commissioned officers are held to a greater standard, and are subject to punishment under the provisions of the Uniform Code of Military Justice, Article 133, Conduct unbecoming an officer and gentleman.

A prime example of this unforeseen ethical dilemma surrounding the US Army during the present election campaign was provided when the Democratic Candidate for President, Senator John Kerry, was invited to speak at the 126th National Guard Association Convention. One would believe that the organizers of this convention, by inviting Senator Kerry to speak, did so

with the belief that he would address issues and provide personal praise to an association whose members have been on the fore front of the War on Terrorism. In fact, Senator Kerry (2004) did open his speech with praise to the United States Army and Air National Guard's men and women when he stated:

For more than three centuries, as you know better than anyone, our National Guard has stood on the frontlines of freedom. The Guard fought in that first great revolution, and has defended our country ever since, here in America and around the world. Like those who came before you, you joined the Guard because for you, threats to our ideals were a call to action. You joined because for you, sitting on the sidelines in a time of peril simply wasn't an option. And you joined because for you, patriotism isn't just about saying you love your country – it's about living it every single day.

Senator Kerry also went on to comment on the dependability of the National Guard during national disasters, such as responding to Hurricanes Frances and Ivan while simultaneously sending thousands of soldiers to support Operations Enduring and Iraqi Freedom.

The ethical dilemma began for the members in attendance of the United States Army National Guard, which primarily consisted of commissioned officers, when Senator Kerry made disparaging remarks concerning the President of the United States. The President, regardless of political party affiliation, is the Commander-in-Chief to all those who serve and wear the uniform of the armed forces, including those in attendance at the noted convention. Although Senator Kerry may not have realized it, a portion of his remarks created an unethical climate and were in stark contrast to the core values and discipline of the US Army. The ethical dilemma arose when Senator Kerry (2004) stated in his speech:

He was wrong to rush to war without giving the inspectors time to do their job. He was wrong to rush to war without understanding and planning for the post-war in Iraq which itself has become an ongoing conflict. He was wrong to rush to war without the allies we needed by our side. He was wrong to send our troops into battle without the equipment they need to do their jobs. He was wrong to ignore the best advice of America's own military including his own Army Chief of Staff about how many troops we needed to accomplish our mission.

Although it was Senator Kerry who made these remarks, it was the reaction he received from the audience that caused concern and placed the US Army as a whole in the midst of an ethical dilemma.

Members of the United States Army National Guard, comprised mostly of officers in uniform, were witnessed and photographed by members of the press as giving Senator Kerry an overt enthusiastic response to his comments concerning the President of the United States. To soldiers, this simple act of approval against the Commander-in-Chief violates many core values all soldiers are expected to hold true to heart. These seemingly meaningless actions by these officers displayed a lack of loyalty and respect to the Commander-in-Chief; a lack of honor and integrity to the uniform they wore, even on the night of the convention; and, a lack of respect and honor for those currently serving in harms way. These officers' values would have remained intact if they merely stood and listened to the speech without demonstrating a noticeably positive opinion to the negative remarks about the Commander-in-Chief. They instead placed the US Army in an ethical juncture which the US Army leadership was not prepared for -- how do you discipline such a large group of individuals, especially officers? The answer is simple. The situation should never have been allowed to occur. Senator Kerry being a presidential candidate, possibly a future Commander-in-Chief, should have done his homework a bit better and had a working knowledge of the core values and ethics that embody today's Army. Based on the sources cited throughout this research, it's very apparent that he did not.

A policy of non-partisanship should be addressed and adhered to by the US Army and other organizations that represent the Total Army Force, when encouraging its members to be politically aware. When opponents of a sitting Commander-in-Chief are invited to address an audience comprised of uniformed members of the armed services, active or reserve component,

an in-depth briefing should be provided to all that provides a clear understanding of the US Army's core values. By doing this, the US Army will prevent future ethical dilemmas, as faced by the US Army on September 16th, 2004. There will be those that argue this would be unfair because the sitting Commander-in- Chief would have an advantage. The answer to that is easy: the current Commander-in- Chief should have an advantage, by the virtue of his responsibility to execute national security missions and ensure good order and discipline among the ranks. By implementing and adhering to a policy of non-partisanship, members of the US Army would have little problem in upholding the ethics and core values of L.D.R.S.H.I.P., while participating in the United States political process.

In closing, military members of the United States Army are involved in a decision making process that has not occurred in the past 20 years. The decision is not a simple one; it is to choose a president while the nation is at war, and while soldiers that serve are paying the ultimate sacrifice in far away countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq. This has not occurred since the Vietnam War, and one can only wonder if it is the turmoil that permeated in the U.S. Army after that war that has allowed such an ethical dilemma to recur.

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