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A proper understanding of honor is foundational to the profession of arms; yet, in the US military, honor is poorly defined and understood. Honor is explicitly stated as a core value of the American Armed Forces, but definitions in doctrinal publications are often vague and have only a tenuous connection with the true essence of honor in history. This study seeks to uncover the historical meaning of honor and link it more directly to honor as a core value in the profession of arms. For the US military, the external, social dimension of honor must serve and reinforce the internal elements grounded in morality and law. Military leaders should extol honor as the central, overriding core value undergirding the profession of arms.

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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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**THE HONORABLE WARRIOR:  
HONOR AS A CORE VALUE IN THE PROFESSION OF ARMS**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

**MARSHALL N. WIMBERLY III**

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## Executive Summary

**Title:** The Honorable Warrior: Honor as a Core Value in the Profession of Arms

**Author:** Major Marshall N. Wimberly III, United States Marine Corps

**Thesis:** The specific historic influences at work in Western civilization have produced a unique understanding of honor in the US Armed Forces. For the US military, the external, social dimension of honor must serve and reinforce the internal elements grounded in morality and law. Military leaders should extol honor as the central, overriding core value undergirding the profession of arms.

**Discussion:** A proper understanding of honor is foundational to the profession of arms; yet, in the US military, honor is poorly defined and understood. Honor is explicitly stated as a core value of the American Armed Forces, but definitions in doctrinal publications are often vague and have only a tenuous connection with the origins and true essence of honor in history. Although in the twentieth century, democratic ideals of dignity and individual rights largely supplanted Western cultural honor, honor remains an essential element of US military culture. This study seeks to uncover the historical meaning of honor in the West and link it more directly to honor as a core value in the profession of arms. A new definition of honor attempts to synthesize the various historic and contemporary aspects of honor. Additionally, the study proposes an ethical system built on the Marine Corps core values of honor, courage, and commitment in which honor is the central and overriding value. Finally, the study recommends specific ways in which leaders may cultivate a proper sense of honor in their services and units.

**Conclusion:** Military leaders should recognize and apply the social aspect of honor as a means of promoting right conduct, while yet affirming individual conscience. Above all, honor in the profession of arms must remain grounded in accepted standards of morality such as the Law of Armed Conflict and Uniform Code of Military Justice. In the uncertain and chaotic world of the twenty-first century security environment, it is more critical than ever that US soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines conduct themselves honorably.

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*Illustrations*

	Page
Figure 1. Marine Corps Core Values .....	30
Figure 2. Trust Relationships.....	31

## *Table of Contents*

	Page
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....	ii
DISCLAIMER .....	iii
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS .....	iv
PREFACE .....	vi
INTRODUCTION .....	1
HONOR: ORIGINS AND HISTORY .....	4
Etymology and Definitions .....	4
Honor in Ancient Greece and Rome .....	8
The Christianization of Honor and the Just War Tradition .....	9
Honor in Modernity: The Renaissance and Enlightenment .....	12
Honor in the US Military .....	14
HONOR AS A CORE VALUE .....	16
HONOR IN ACTION .....	21
The Effects of Honor .....	21
Aberrant Forms of Honor .....	23
Honor, Just War, and Obedience .....	25
Core Values in Practice: A Framework for Ethical Decision-Making .....	27
Cultivating Honor .....	32
CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS .....	35
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	41

## *Preface*

This project grew out of a general interest in the study of ethical leadership and a strong belief in its importance within the US Armed Forces. I am convinced that our nation's warriors should embody and reflect the very best of America's values and culture. While narrowing my focus at the urging of my mentor, Dr. Paolo Tripodi, I chose to explore the concept of *honor*, the first of the core values espoused by the naval services, yet the least understood. The topic of honor in the profession of arms has been a rich, challenging, and highly rewarding area of study.

I would like to thank Dr. Tripodi for his wisdom, guidance, and patience throughout all phases of this project. He provided critical pointers at key points throughout both the research and the writing phases. I greatly admire his knowledge of military ethics, his teaching style, and his personal example.

I would also like to thank my Military Faculty Advisor, Lieutenant Colonel Kevin Glathar, for his insightful and helpful feedback. His pointers regarding both form and content were invaluable. In addition, my father-in-law, Dr. Hugh McKinney, provided constructive criticism that led to a much stronger final product.

This project would not have been possible without the unwavering love and support of my wife, Mary, and our three children, Laura, John, and Michael. My family demonstrated patience and understanding during the many hours I spent in the library and office working on this project. I desire and pray that, as a husband and father, I would be able to live up to the demands of honor outlined in this paper.

While my interest in and passion for this topic is rooted in my Christian faith, a primary goal of this project has been to demonstrate that the concept of honor has broad application, specifically within the US Armed Forces. Pragmatically, I believe that by living and fighting

with honor, US service members increase their warfighting effectiveness while strengthening the services and our nation. Yet it is my personal belief that ultimately, we strive to live a life of honor in order to bestow honor and glory on our Creator, who is both the source of honor and its proper recipient.

*Yours, O Lord, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all. Wealth and honor come from you; you are the ruler of all things. In your hands are strength and power to exalt and give strength to all. Now, our God, we give you thanks, and praise your glorious name.*

1 Chronicles 29:11-13 (New International Version 1984)

## Introduction

In his “Core Values” speech in 2004, retired Commandant of the Marine Corps General Carl E. Mundy declared that “the foundation of our core value system is honor. A person cannot be a Marine without honor. It’s the bedrock of our character.”<sup>1</sup> Marines everywhere recognize honor as the first of the three core values of the Marine Corps. Yet three and a half decades earlier, moral philosopher Peter Berger captured the prevailing cultural mood in America by declaring honor obsolete. In his 1970 essay he writes:

Honor occupies about the same place in contemporary usage as chastity. An individual asserting it hardly invites admiration, and one who claims to have lost it is an object of amusement rather than sympathy. Both concepts have an unambiguously outdated status in the *Weltanschauung* of modernity...At best, honor and chastity are seen as ideological leftovers in the consciousness of obsolete classes, such as military officers or ethnic grandmothers.<sup>2</sup>

Recognizing its fall from common usage in everyday parlance and corresponding loss of social influence, most scholars have long abandoned honor as no longer relevant to modern Western society.<sup>3</sup> Many feel that honor is hopelessly linked to outmoded and harmful social structures in which human worth is socially derived, as opposed to being grounded in the basic dignity and rights of the individual.<sup>4</sup> Yet echoes of the concept of honor survive in the popular culture and in Western institutions, particularly in the military. Institutional phrases such as *on my honor*, *honor society*, and *honor code* provide a glimpse of its underlying essence; yet despite honor’s rich history and suggestive power, the term’s abstract nature and multiple layers of meaning render it difficult to define with precision. In his essay entitled “Honor and the American Warrior,” retired US Navy Rear Admiral Joseph Callo rightly notes that “[honor] remains a surprisingly difficult concept to pin down, and when one asks the simple question, *What is military honor?* brows furrow, and even linguistic specialists fail us.”<sup>5</sup>

Despite these challenges, the concept of honor remains deeply embedded in the ethos of the US military as demonstrated by its ubiquity in military language and custom—for example in the phrases *honorable discharge*, *honor guard*, and the *Medal of Honor*. These usages clearly cast honor in a positive light and reveal something of its essence, while remaining ill-defined. More fundamentally, four out of five of the military services claim honor as a core value.<sup>6</sup> Yet are these core values nothing more than abstract platitudes, or worse, cultural leftovers from a bygone era, incompatible with modern sensibilities? Or do leaders cite honor as an essential part of military service for good reason? This paper will argue that (1) the specific historic influences at work in Western civilization have produced a unique understanding of honor which endures in the US Armed Forces; (2) for the US military, the external, social dimension of honor must serve and reinforce the internal elements grounded in morality and law; and (3) military leaders should extol honor as the central, overriding core value undergirding the profession of arms. This study also proposes the following new definition of honor in an American military context:

***Honor:*** A holistic mindset, manifested in thought and action and reinforced via social pressure, law, and individual conscience, that promotes wholeness and soundness of character, preserves human dignity, and pursues truth regardless of personal cost.

This definition expands on what one typically finds in doctrinal publications in an attempt to synthesize the various aspects of honor in a more thoughtful and comprehensive fashion.

This paper begins with a discussion of definitions of the word *honor* and related terms, followed by a summary of the historical development of the concept of honor in the West. It then focuses on honor as a core value in the profession of arms, providing an exposition of the positive effects as well as the dangers of distorted conceptions of honor. A new framework for understanding honor as the primary value in a system built on Marine Corps core values is

proposed. Finally, the study concludes with an exploration of various methods of cultivating honor, followed by conclusions and recommendations.

## Honor: Origins and History

*Honor pricks me on.  
Yea, but how if honor prick me off when I come on? How then?  
Can honor set to a leg? No. Or an arm? No.  
Or take away the grief of a wound? No.  
Honor hath no skill in surgery, then? No.  
What is honor? A word.  
What is in that word "honor"? Air. A trim reckoning.  
Who hath it? He that died o' Wednesday.  
Doth he feel it? No. Doth he hear it? No.  
'Tis insensible, then? Yea, to the dead.  
But will it not live with the living? No.  
Why? Detraction will not suffer it. Therefore, I'll none of it.  
Honor is a mere scutcheon. And so ends my catechism.*

-Sir John Falstaff in William Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part I*<sup>7</sup>

### Etymology and Definitions

Webster's College Dictionary defines *honor* in two distinct ways: (1) "honesty, fairness, or integrity in one's beliefs and actions" and (2) "high respect, as for worth, merit, or rank."<sup>8</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, a historical connection exists between these two definitions. Historically, the idea of honor has been frequently associated with nobility, class, rank, and reputation.<sup>9</sup> Rough synonyms of this view of honor include *prestige*, *respect*, and *credibility*. Most scholars agree that what distinguishes honor from related concepts like virtue, integrity, morality, and conscience is an emphasis on one's worth or esteem *in the eyes of others*. Thus honor is fundamentally a social construct.<sup>10</sup> In the opening epigraph, Sir John Falstaff's cynical words questioning the value of honor reveal its importance in the social and historical consciousness of the West.

Despite being declared as archaic and irrelevant by many scholars in the latter half of the twentieth century, the past ten to fifteen years have seen a renewed interest in the concept of

honor. Many have recognized that even if honor is rarely called upon explicitly in Western culture, it still permeates many subcultures as an unwritten social or ethical code. The perception of honor as tied to social conformity, superficiality, and violence is one of the reasons modern scholars have viewed honor as antithetical to modern egalitarian, democratic ideals of individual dignity and the rule of law. Traditionally, many scholars have emphasized the external, social element of honor over any internal, moral element; however, in recent years some have questioned whether this emphasis is exaggerated. Whitley Kaufman persuasively argues that traditional honor is more complex and multi-faceted than commonly construed by modern scholars, and that even ancient forms of honor contain a stronger moral underpinning than is often assumed. He states that “the current scholarly consensus goes to the opposite extreme, portraying the honor ideal as superficial, egotistic, ruthless, and irrational.”<sup>11</sup> Jose Carlos Del Ama similarly argues that it would be a mistake to totally abandon the concept of honor, and that the role of honor in regulating society should be reconsidered.<sup>12</sup>

In his book *Honor: A History*, James Bowman identifies what he considers to be at the center of the concept of honor. He recounts overhearing a comment from a father to his son who is upset at the end of a snowball fight. The father says to his son “you can’t expect, when you get somebody, that they won’t get you back.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, in its most basic form, Bowman asserts that honor is the universal human tendency to stand up for oneself, to avoid humiliation in the sight of others, to “save face.”<sup>14</sup> Elsewhere he defines honor as “the good opinion of the people who matter to us, and who matter because we regard them as a society of equals who have the power to judge our behavior.”<sup>15</sup> Anthropologists refer to this group as the *honor group*.<sup>16</sup> The honor group can range in size and scope from a family to a nation, or somewhere in between such as a tribe, corporation, sports team, military unit, or even an entire service.<sup>17</sup> From this social

definition of honor, the opposite is *shame* or *disgrace*—words that carry the connotation of social disapproval or rejection.

Bowman's definition is consistent with the ideas of other scholars. Anthropologist Julian Pitt-Rivers offered one of the first formal studies of the concept of honor in 1965, defining it as “the value of a person in his own eyes, but also in the eyes of his society.”<sup>18</sup> Alexander Welsh defines honor simply as respect.<sup>19</sup> In his fairly exhaustive study, philosopher William Sessions postulates five “peripheral” concepts of honor: conferred, recognition, positional, commitment, and trust; all of which inform his central idea of personal honor. He then examines honor in relation to morality and religion, warrior cultures, sports, patriotism, academia, and the professional world.<sup>20</sup> Kaufman argues that “the essential element of honor is the idea of the independence of the individual from attachment to base material concerns, including wealth and even one's life—an ideal not so distinct from our own morality.”<sup>21</sup> Referring specifically to military honor, Sidney Axinn invokes Thomas Hobbes' concept of the “relish of justice”: “a certain nobleness or gallantness of courage, rarely found, by which a man scorns to be beholden for the contentment of his life, to fraud, or breach of promise.”<sup>22</sup>

Bowman is insightful in distinguishing between two fundamental types of honor: *reflexive* and *cultural*. Reflexive honor is the most basic and universal form, defined as “the foundational social reflex to let others know one is not to be trifled with.”<sup>23</sup> In contrast, cultural honor “comprises the traditions, stories, and habits of thought of a particular society about (among other things) the proper and improper use of violence.”<sup>24</sup> Thus for Bowman, concepts of honor can vary significantly from culture to culture while still retaining an underlying common reflexive thread.

Bowman's central thesis is that the Western understanding of honor that has developed over the past three millennia is unique amongst world cultures. Probably the single greatest cultural force shaping this unique conception of honor is the Judeo-Christian tradition.<sup>25</sup> The Bible exhibits both similarities and contrasts with the English understanding of the term *honor*. The Hebrew word translated honor in the Old Testament (OT) is *kabed* meaning "magnify, glorify, make great."<sup>26</sup> The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (ISBE) summarizes the use of honor in the OT as "usually result[ing] in people being elevated in the eyes of the community."<sup>27</sup> By contrast, the book of Proverbs emphasizes humility, personal morality, and a right relationship with God and others: "wisdom, graciousness, humility, a lack of conscientiousness, righteousness, kindness, lowliness of spirit, and fear of the Lord are characteristics of the honorable person. The result of doing the right things."<sup>28</sup> In the New Testament, the Greek word is *kalos*, meaning "bountiful, honest, true, worthy, of higher rank."<sup>29</sup> The ISBE further points out that a person's honor ultimately derives from God, who is not only its "source and giver," but also honor's "most appropriate recipient."<sup>30</sup> Thus for the Jew or Christian, the ultimate object of honor is not human beings, but God. The biblical text reveals an early tension between honor as social worth and honor as morality that resurfaced time and again over the course of Western history.

Related to the idea of honor, especially in the West, are the words *integrity*, *character*, and *virtue*. Webster defines *integrity* as "uncompromising adherence to moral and ethical principles; soundness of moral character" and also "the state of being whole or entire."<sup>31</sup> Though *character* is broader and can be used in the sense of the "sum of qualities that define a person,"<sup>32</sup> it can also be used as a synonym for integrity referring to "the moral qualities and ethical standards that make up the inner nature of a person."<sup>33</sup> Finally, Webster defines *virtue* as

“conformity of one’s life and conduct to moral and ethical principles; moral excellence; rectitude.”<sup>34</sup> The emphasis is on conforming one’s life to a set of ideals, defined not as social standing but universal principles. According to Bowman, the idea of linking honor to inner virtue and universal morality is a uniquely Western conception.<sup>35</sup> Beginning with the simple, reflexive honor common to all cultures, Western cultural honor has evolved into a complex phenomenon with a wholly distinctive flavor at the hands of two historical forces: Greco-Roman culture and Christianity.<sup>36</sup>

### **Honor in Ancient Greece and Rome**

The earliest form of Greek honor shares much with the reflexive honor of ancient tribes. In his *History of the Peloponnesian War* from the 5th century BC, Thucydides writes “the greatest dangers are ever the source of the greatest honors.”<sup>37</sup> Greek scholar E. R. Dodds states that the “Homeric man’s highest good is not the enjoyment of a quiet conscience, but the enjoyment of *tīmē*, public esteem: ‘Why should I fight,’ asks Achilles, ‘if the good fighter receives no more *tīmē* than the bad?’”<sup>38</sup> Dodds goes on to state that the “strongest moral force” for the Homeric man is not fear of God, but *aidos* which means “respect for public opinion.”<sup>39</sup> Yet even in ancient Greece, hints of a distinctively Western understanding of honor began to emerge in the Greeks’ elevation of the individual. Bowman asserts that much of the drama of Greek tragedy is founded on this tension between the honor of the individual and the good of the community.<sup>40</sup> This stands in contrast to the reflexive honor in tribal cultures, in which the individual was “ruthlessly subordinated” to greater society. Bowman sees the roots of the Western honor culture most clearly in Aristotle, who asserted that honor was the reward of virtue (*arete*).<sup>41</sup> Aristotle wrote that “virtuous conduct constituted the good for man, essential to our

flourishing as human beings. A brave soldier displays courage in the heat of battle because that is the honourable thing to do and does not seek for further reasons.”<sup>42</sup> Finally, for the Greeks, virtue entailed not only the martial values of valor and strength, but “nobility of mind.”<sup>43</sup> This included values such as education, liberality, and truthfulness.

The Romans continued the reformulation of honor as tied to inner virtue, specifically with the introduction of the concept of *piety*. Although Roman *virtus* primarily implied fierceness or aggression, a much broader concept of both virtue and honor appears in Virgil’s *Aeneid*. The hero of this story is Aeneas, who as the destined founder of Rome, is driven by honor for *pietas*, characterized by Bowman as “a combination of duty, loyalty, and reverence” for his ancestors and his country.<sup>44</sup> Thus honor began to expand from simply the esteem of the community to include inner virtue and devotion to country. In concert with this increasingly nuanced concept of Western honor, both the Greeks and the Romans displayed the beginnings of an underlying discomfort with or suspicion of an exclusively public form of honor. Plato considered honor to be an illusion rooted in public fame, in contrast to the pursuit of ideals which stand independent of public recognition.<sup>45</sup> These early hints of an inherent tension or distinction between honor and morality came to fruition with the introduction of Christianity.

### **The Christianization of Honor and the Just War Tradition**

Although Greco-Roman cultural distinctives certainly contributed to the unique form of honor that developed in the West, the Western honor culture owes much to the influence of Christian theology and ethics. Christianity was a progressive, even radical force in the ancient world, wreaking havoc on the traditional concept of masculine, virile honor.<sup>46</sup> Whereas in traditional honor cultures, personal worth derives from the esteem of the honor group, in Judaism

and Christianity, human beings derive their worth from their Creator, and this worth is independent of human action or valuation. Traditional honor is local and relative to a particular culture and society; whereas Judeo-Christian virtues are based on universal standards derived from natural law. Thus, the two systems are fundamentally at odds at many levels. The pursuit of honor drives people to merit the admiration and approval of others, whereas Christians are called to live moral lives not to merit God's favor, but as a response to God's love and grace. From a Christian perspective, traditional honor seeks worth independently from God and is thus ironically one step removed from pride, the chief Christian sin. Honor cultures exalt self via a person's relationship to society; whereas Christianity exalts God through personal humility, self-sacrifice, and love for God and others.<sup>1</sup> Bowman summarizes the contradictions as follows:

Where honor was local, Christianity was universal; where honor was elitist, Christianity was catholic and inclusive; where honor was warlike, Christianity was pacifist; where honor treated women only as property, Christianity treated them as human beings, if not yet equals of men.<sup>47</sup>

He concludes that, while traditional honor and Christian morality managed to exist "side-by-side" for centuries, honor in the West could not escape the influence of Christianity in shaping it into something vastly different from what it had been before.<sup>48</sup>

One of the key influences in the development of a uniquely Western concept of honor was the 5th century Christian theologian, Saint Augustine. Augustine recognized the necessity of distinguishing between the application of Christian ethics in an ideal world, represented by the City of God, and how these principles should manifest themselves given the harsh realities of a fallen world, represented by the City of Man.<sup>49</sup> Thus began the just war tradition, a body of ideas

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<sup>1</sup> The Christian ethic defines true strength not by might or independent action but by faith in and reliance on Jesus Christ. Thus, Christian virtues are considered to be products of God's Spirit working in the heart of a believer through faith, not personal achievements attained via self-improvement or individual merit. Finally, honor focuses on an individual in relation to society; whereas Christianity teaches that the individual, trapped in sin, must first be made right with God before he can have a right relationship with other people.

which attempts to address the questions of if, when, and how a Christian civilization can and should engage in the use of force. Addressing the tendency of the early church to gravitate towards pacifism, Dr. David Fisher states: "...a pacifist response had an appealing moral clarity but was not always easy to reconcile with the harsh realities of daily life, where force might sometimes be necessary to allow right to prevail—for example, to protect the innocent from assault."<sup>50</sup> Thus Augustine and the just war tradition attempted to strike a balance between two seemingly opposed strands of Christian ethics: the "love your enemy" ethic of Jesus, and the need to establish some form of real-world justice by actively resisting violence and evil. Augustine's ideas were further refined by the church-led Truce of God and Peace of God movements in the eleventh through the thirteenth centuries and the medieval chivalric tradition.<sup>51</sup> The Catholic theologian Saint Thomas Aquinas shaped the developing tradition into its recognizable modern form by merging Augustine's ideas with Aristotle, teaching that "for a war to be just three things are required: the authority of the prince...a just cause...and a right intention."<sup>52</sup> In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Spanish jurists Vitoria and Suarez and Dutch lawyer/theologian Hugo Grotius further refined and codified just war theory by extending its guidelines into universal principles based on natural law.<sup>53</sup>

The evolution of just war theory is important because it both reflected and influenced the development of a uniquely Western conception of honor. Western honor thus evolved from a simple reflexive honor—in which the honor group confers status and esteem on one who avenges a perception of being slighted or disrespected—to one in which honor is linked to a universal sense of justice and propriety.<sup>54</sup> Thus honor in the West moved from martial prowess and vengeance towards the defense of life and property, and in some cases an actual *restraint* on force. Bowman explains the ideal of Christian knighthood and chivalry as arising in the early

Middle Ages in response to Christian ethics “[coming] to terms with the martial necessities of a chaotic and dangerous world.”<sup>55</sup> He further states that Christian chivalry emerged as distinct from traditional pagan honor during the Crusades in the “exalted position occupied by women and the forms of courtesy owed to them” which he says has no equal in any other honor culture.<sup>56</sup> Fisher points out that the chivalric tradition was the source of the modern prohibition on attacking women and children, “whom the courtly knight deemed it un-chivalric to assault.”<sup>57</sup> The present-day Geneva Conventions and Law of Armed Conflict (LOAC) codify this idea of protecting the weak and defenseless in their requirement to distinguish between combatants and non-combatants (distinction), and again to weigh civilian casualties in any military decision (proportionality). Yet, despite this unique confluence of traditional honor and Christian ethics in the chivalric ideal, the underlying tension between social esteem and internal morality still stood unresolved.<sup>58</sup>

### **Honor in Modernity: The Renaissance and Enlightenment**

Western honor underwent further changes during the Renaissance with its focus on the “inward man” and the power of human will and virtue. The deepening association of honor with virtue and conscience created tension with, and eventually replaced, the aristocratic honor of the Middle Ages.<sup>59</sup> Honor became less associated with externals of class, status, and nobility, and linked more closely with inner virtues available to all men (and eventually all people).<sup>60</sup> The emphasis on self-evident and objective truths during the Enlightenment further eroded the concept of traditional honor in the West. Enlightenment thought built on the idea of a universal moral law central in Judeo-Christian teachings, but approached it from a new direction independent of religious dogma. For thinkers during this period, human reason extended into the

moral arena and revealed universal principles of morality that applied to all of humanity.

Enlightenment moral thought reached perhaps its highest expression in the words of German philosopher Immanuel Kant. By emphasizing the morality and rationality of the individual as an extension of universal reason, Kant further diminished the importance of the social aspect of honor and tied it more closely to personal virtue. Bowman sums up this remarkable distinction between Western morality and that of most other cultures:

the Kantian categorical imperative—the maxim that no one should act on a principle that he would not wish to be universal—which is so central to Western moral thinking since the Enlightenment is simply incomprehensible in the moral world of the honor cultures that survive outside the penumbra of Western thought.<sup>61</sup>

In the wake of the Enlightenment, rising in parallel with new democratic ideals, Western honor began to take on a more modern form. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, medieval chivalry and aristocratic honor fell in contempt in favor of the democratic ideals epitomized in the American and French revolutions.<sup>62</sup> Addison expanded this form of honor to “minds which are naturally noble” and not just the social elite.<sup>63</sup> The ideal of the Victorian Christian gentleman was born, arising during the Romantic period as a synthesis of modernism with more traditional ideals of honor and chivalry. Bowman summarizes it well:

The Victorians produced an accommodation between old-fashioned chivalry and the forces of modernity that reached its highest development with the ideal of the Christian gentleman. Democracy, essentially egalitarian, found itself able to coexist with and even to make use of traditional honor, essentially aristocratic—and vice versa. Nowhere except in the Christian countries of the West were such radical modifications of the canons of honor ever made.<sup>64</sup>

This new democratic form of honor was perfectly suited to early America.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, the Declaration of Independence concludes with the words “and for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.”<sup>66</sup> George Washington, who was a disciple of

Addison, believed strongly in cultivating this new form of honor defined not by social standing or class but by personal virtue and moral behavior. According to Richard Brookhiser:

Washington and his contemporaries thought of reputation as a thing that might be destroyed or sullied—some valuable cargo carried in the hold of the self...The cargo was precious because reputation was held to be a true measure of one's character—indeed, in some sense, identical to it.<sup>67</sup>

Washington evidences this high view of honor in his own words: “[In war] you must have men of character activated by principles of honor.”<sup>68</sup> In this statement, Washington almost directly equates honor with personal character or virtue. It is this distinct strand of democratic honor, shaped and refined over 3,000 years of Western civilization, that when combined with the martial values inherent to a warfighting organization, forms the basis of the modern concept of honor in the US military.

### **Honor in the US Military**

American military icons from John Paul Jones of the Continental Navy to Army General Douglas MacArthur have espoused honor as an ideal.<sup>69</sup> In his D-Day address to the US Third Army, General George S. Patton, Jr. states “a real man will never let his fear of death overpower his honor.”<sup>70</sup> Essentially bypassing the social elements of the term, Joseph Callo more directly equates American military honor with individual virtues such as courage, patriotism, and self-sacrifice, especially in combat. Callo argues that “physical courage and commitment to the cause of liberty” of American heroes like early spy Nathan Hale and Vietnam Prisoner-of-War Rear Admiral Jeremiah Denton helped define American military honor.<sup>71</sup> Admiral Denton states “the vast majority of American prisoners in North Vietnam upheld their country's honor, with enormous consequences for their nation's pride and prestige. If we had come out of there defeated and bowed, our country would have too.”<sup>72</sup> Interestingly, Denton here intuitively grasps

the root meaning of honor as “pride and prestige” but assigns it ultimately not to individuals, but to the nation as a whole. Callo points out that from the example of Hale, who was ultimately hung by the British, and the US defeat in Vietnam, “military honor is not inexorably linked to victory.”<sup>73</sup> Honor is thus conceived as more than simply competence, success, or victory: one can die and retain his or her honor. Callo concludes that, while honor is clearly important and entrenched in the ethos of the US military, it remains elusive: “it is a dominant but inexact—and possibly impermanent—concept, one that can never be committed fully to paper by scholars or pundits.”<sup>74</sup> The next section builds on the origins and history of this complex concept by defining and examining honor as a core value within the profession of arms.

## Honor as a Core Value

*Will a good soldier lie, cheat, kill women and children, and torture and mutilate for the sake of country? The answer...is 'No. A soldier offers to sacrifice his or her life, but not honor.'*

- Dr. Sidney Axinn, Professor of Philosophy at Temple University and author of *A Moral Military*<sup>75</sup>

Honor has clearly played an important role in American military culture, as four out of the five services explicitly state it as a core value. The fifth, the US Air Force, expresses a similar concept via the phrase “Integrity First.”<sup>76</sup> An exhaustive review of honor and how it relates to the core values of each service is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, as a case study, the following section will examine the place of honor within the core value system of the US Marine Corps. Since the US military as a whole shares a common history and understanding of honor, the study’s major conclusions should apply equally well to the other services.

While the phrase *semper fidelis*, Latin for “always faithful,” has been the official motto of the US Marine Corps since 1883, the Marine Corps did not have explicitly stated core values until 1992. It was the Tailhook scandal that prompted General Mundy, then Commandant of the Marine Corps, to adopt the core values of *honor, courage, and commitment* in conjunction with the Navy. In a speech in 2004, General Mundy defined honor as follows:

At the foundation of our core value system is honor. A person cannot be a Marine without honor. It's the bedrock of our character. Honor is integrity, honesty, and responsibility. It's the quality that guides Marines to exemplify ethical and moral behavior; never to lie, cheat, or steal; to abide by an uncompromising code of integrity; to respect human dignity; and to have respect and concern for each other.<sup>77</sup>

Marine Corps publications such as MCWP 6-11 *Leading Marines*, originally published by

General Mundy in 1995, include a similar definition:

The bedrock of our character. The quality that guides Marines to exemplify the ultimate in ethical and moral behavior; never to lie, cheat or steal; to abide by an uncompromising

concept of integrity; to respect human dignity; to have concern for each other. The quality of maturity, dedication, trust, and dependability that commits Marines to act responsibly, to be accountable for actions, to fulfill obligations, and to hold others accountable for their actions.<sup>78</sup>

These two definitions share four major elements: (1) honor as foundational to good character, (2) honesty and personal integrity, (3) respect for human dignity, and (4) accountability or responsibility. The second definition expands accountability to include maturity, dedication, trust, and dependability. In both definitions a clear connection exists with the modern Western concept of honor described earlier as practically equivalent to personal virtue.

The Marine Corps website provides a more recent description of Marine Corps core values, and honor in particular. These words generally conform to Gen Mundy's "honor as virtue" concept, with some subtle differences. The website offers the following general purpose for core values:

Honor, courage and commitment, the core values of the Marines, define how every Marine in the Corps thinks, acts and fights. Throughout the austere battlefields of the 21st Century, every Marine in the Corps must be confident they can rely on each other to think, act and lead. In the chaos of battle, character matters.<sup>79</sup>

Thus, Marine Corps core values focus primarily on effectiveness on the battlefield. Yet the website's definition of honor is centered more on an all-encompassing concept of personal conduct and morality:

A code of personal integrity, honor guides those who do the right thing when no one is looking. It is not only a duty, but also a distinction, as those who possess honor are held in honor. It's found in one's beliefs, but exhibited through one's actions. Marines are held to the highest of standards, ethically and morally. Marines are expected to act responsibly in a manner befitting the title they've earned.<sup>80</sup>

Language such as "code of personal integrity," "beliefs," and "highest standards" again emphasizes individual morality and personal virtue. In fact, the phrase "those who do the right thing when no one is looking" is the colloquial definition of *integrity* for many service members.

Interestingly, this definition not only references personal virtue, but also contains vestiges of the ancient concept of honor as socially derived, i.e. in the esteem of others. While the word *duty* here implies doing right for the sake of right, *distinction* connected with the idea of being “held in honor” implies a social benefit, i.e. earning the respect of others in the honor group. This is reinforced by the last sentence which connects honor with the title of US Marine, the Marine Corps as a service being the honor group in this case. MCDP 1-0, *Operations*, offers the following insight: “The warrior spirit includes not only tactical and technical proficiency, but also adherence to the highest standards of personal and professional integrity. In doing so, Marines, individually and collectively, ‘keep our honor clean.’”<sup>81</sup> These words invoke the Marines’ Hymn, a key icon of Marine Corps culture. Here is a concept of honor that is both private and public in nature: upholding both high standards of individual integrity and also the collective honor of the Corps.

From these examples, Marine Corps leaders and publications espouse a conception of honor that is a direct reflection of the unique Western honor they have inherited. Honor is strongly associated with personal character and morality; yet vestiges of the old honor code remain—a code that ties personal worth not only to individual merit and universal values but to the evaluation of the honor group writ large. Remnants of the old tension between social honor and individual virtue are still evident. To be a useful concept as a core value of the US Marine Corps, should honor be construed as personal virtue, as social esteem, or as some combination of the two? To answer this question one must gain an appreciation for the unique culture of the US Marine Corps.

The Marine Corps is generally recognized as elite and exclusive when compared with the other services. The pronounced emphasis on legend, lore, and transformation of identity lends a

mystical, almost religious, quality to service in the Corps. This is simultaneously both effective and dangerous. Positively, it lends itself more readily to the concept of a professional ethic, the idea of military service as a calling rather than simply a vocation. The common expressions “once a Marine, always a Marine” and “you are a Marine 24/7” exemplify this attitude. The identity of oneself as a Marine easily aligns with a sense of cultural honor—of keeping oneself within Marine Corps standards of professional excellence and conduct.

On the other hand, elite, exclusive organizations can have a propensity to become disconnected from the greater institutions and values that they serve. A survey on Battlefield Ethics conducted by the US Army in Iraq in 2006 revealed a disconcerting number of soldiers and Marines willing to mistreat non-combatants, destroy Iraqi property, and refuse to report battlefield ethics violations.<sup>82</sup> Perhaps most troubling, for some key metrics such as willingness to report a unit member for injuring or killing an innocent non-combatant, Marines fared significantly worse than Army soldiers (40% vs. 55%).<sup>83</sup> Ironically, the higher levels of *esprit de corps* and unit loyalty in Marine units vs. Army units may explain this difference. For some Marines, “ratting out” a buddy is a worse sin than turning a blind eye to immoral acts. While one normally views these as positive traits, is *esprit de corps* a good thing when it encourages insular, self-protective behavior at the expense of universal ethics and the rule of law? Clearly, loyalty to one’s unit and Corps can be taken too far.

Another example is the 2015 Marine Corps Birthday Message which included a Marine combat veteran declaring that the phrase “God, Country, Corps” is out of order—that in his mind *Corps* should be first, even above God and country.<sup>84</sup> While understandable and presumably good-intentioned, this line of thinking can have dangerous consequences when it comes to ethical decision-making. This statement betrays an elevation of devotion and loyalty to the

Marine Corps even above devotion to God as the source of morality, and dedication to the nation it serves. When loyalty to individual, unit, or service is elevated above the US Constitution and the religious or universal ideals inherent in the nation's Judeo-Christian heritage, an unhealthy insularity and over-zealous allegiance can develop. The Marine Corps does not exist for itself, but to serve the American people and defend its way of life. Beyond simply benefiting the institution, what is held in honor must be what is good, i.e. it must reflect and exhibit American and universal values. In a letter-to-the-editor in response to Joseph Callo's essay, Joshua Uhall writes:

Honor is held internally and individually but exists as a standard external to the individual and above his immediate circumstances. The individual that is honorable in the civilian arena will, if he adheres to the absolute standards honor requires, be an effective practitioner of military honor as soon as he dons a uniform.<sup>85</sup>

Uhall's words underscore the importance of grounding individual honor in universal, objective standards of conduct. This becomes even more critical when considering the power of honor to shape behavior, the topic of the next section.

## Honor in Action

*Honour's a sacred tie, the law of kings, the noble mind's distinguishing perfection  
That aids and strengthens virtue where it meets her,  
And imitates her actions, where she is not:  
It ought not to be sported with.*

- Joseph Addison in *Cato*<sup>86</sup>

## The Effects of Honor

This paper has argued that honor in the profession of arms comprises both internal (moral) and external (social) components, and that what the services hold to be honorable behavior must align with and bolster American values. Yet how can honor influence the behavior of Marines for the better? A clearly defined and philosophically rigorous concept of honor ultimately has no value unless it enables better ethical and moral decision-making. Does honor only constrain options, or does it provide any benefits? In particular, why is it important for an effective military? The following section will attempt to answer these questions.

Honor can be an incredibly powerful motivator for extraordinary action. Often when recipients of the Medal of Honor have been asked how they were able to perform incredible feats in the presence of extreme danger or pain, they reply that they fought not for abstract ideals like freedom or democracy, not even for their nation or loved ones back home, but for the men on their right and left.<sup>87</sup> When asked how they have been able to overcome the fear of death, they often reply it was the thought of disappointing or letting down their peers that motivated them to persevere.<sup>88</sup> Indeed, the desire to be seen as honorable in the eyes of one's peers has been shown to overcome almost any obstacle. The idea of disgracing one's unit, one's friends, or the uniform has inspired service members to perform incredibly difficult acts in the face of fear, physical

deprivation, or even injury and death. This longing above all else to be esteemed, to be respected by one's honor group, lies at the very heart of the concept of honor.

Similarly, honor can discourage antisocial or unethical behavior. Social pressure in the form of shame or disgrace can powerfully shape what is acceptable behavior within a given social setting. This is the basis for the honor codes commonplace in educational institutions. While there is no doubt a legal deterrent in these systems as well, much of their power stems from the social stigma associated with violating the honor code. For example, many universities employ a student-run honor system, an embodiment of a democratic honor imposed not top-down by authority structures, but socially through peers. The honor system at the University of Virginia is a good example:

The University of Virginia's Honor Code is at once an injunction and an aspiration. The injunction is simple: students pledge never to lie, cheat, or steal, and accept that the consequence for breaking this pledge is permanent dismissal from the University. It is for its aspirational quality, however, that the Honor Code is so cherished: in leading lives of honor, students have continuously renewed that unique spirit of compassion and interconnectedness that has come to be called the Community of Trust. In the words of the Michael Suarez, S.J., Professor of English, "honor calls us to be honorable to each other not merely by not committing transgressions, but also by doing reverence to the other in our midst."<sup>89</sup>

While such systems are not perfect, by empowering the students to embrace and enforce the honor code themselves, honor systems foster a sense of trust amongst the student body and between students and faculty. Several studies have validated the effectiveness of honor codes in reducing the incidence of cheating at academic institutions.<sup>90</sup> Is it not reasonable to conclude that a service-wide code of honor or professional military ethic would discourage dishonorable behavior in a similar way?

Military honor involves much more than simply not lying, cheating, or stealing, however; honesty is merely a starting point. This is the thesis of an article written by three senior Army officers entitled "Developing Trustworthy Commissioned Officers." The authors argue that the

narrow understanding of honor promoted by honor codes (i.e. refraining from lying, cheating, or stealing) is not broad enough for the military: “honor in the sense of the proscriptive code, does not encompass all that is necessary to be trustworthy—a characteristic that demands much more.”<sup>91</sup> The authors conclude that officer training programs should expand their ethical training focus from honor codes to a broader code of ethics focused on overall trustworthiness.<sup>92</sup>

In *Ordinary Soldiers: A Study in Ethics, Law, and Leadership*, the authors examine the varied responses of three German officers during World War II who receive an order to execute unarmed Jewish civilians.<sup>93</sup> First Lieutenant Josef Sibille was the only officer to refuse outright this order. Sibille explained to his battalion commander that he could not “expect decent German soldiers to dirty their hands with such things.”<sup>94</sup> Eventually he directly refused the order on the basis of honor, stating that he would “besmirch neither his honor nor that of his company.”<sup>95</sup> This is a potent example of the power of a proper understanding of honor to restrain unethical conduct in wartime situations.

### **Aberrant Forms of Honor**

Earlier, a distinction was drawn between reflexive honor, which Bowman suggests is instinctual to all humans, and cultural honor, which builds on and adapts this simple honor into a form unique to a specific culture. It was also pointed out that in its original and most elemental form, honor is based not on individual virtue but is bestowed by the honor group; it is not an individual force but a social one. Thus in its most basic form, honor may be divorced from morality. Bowman provides countless examples of honor-gone-astray in both Western and non-Western cultures. He depicts the old idea of honor as “a society of men bound together by ties of blood and honor,” referring to the traditional link between honor, violence, and masculinity

exemplified by the duels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe and America, and the sanctioned “honor killings” of some non-Western cultures.<sup>96</sup> Other examples such as “honor” in gangs and organized crime such as the Mafia are telling of the dangers of an honor culture that has lost its grounding in morality. Bowman even suggests that a desire for reflexive honor in the form of vengeance as an expression of grievance lies at the root of Islamic terrorism.<sup>97</sup> Fisher writes “it is crucial for both the internal self-respect of the military and our external pride as a nation in their achievements that they are able to distinguish themselves from assassins or murderers.”<sup>98</sup> Clearly, honor in American society and as a core value of the US Marine Corps must look radically different from these aberrant forms exemplified by gangs, criminals, and Islamic terrorists.

Thus, there is a dark side of honor. Unmoored from its moral foundation, honor can be deceitful, self-serving, and bloodthirsty. When honor is disconnected from morality and law, it can and has resulted in dehumanization of friends and enemies alike, leading to abuse and war crimes. When the cultural honor engendered within a particular military unit becomes markedly different from that of the society it represents, the stage is set for atrocities. For example, Adolf Hitler twisted a cultural honor rooted in the proud heritage of the German people to serve his depraved ideology, convincing many in both the military and the civilian populace of the “honor” of exterminating the Jewish people. In the Pacific, the Japanese cultivated an extreme form of honor in their fanatical devotion to the Emperor. In 1972, a Japanese soldier named Lance Corporal Yokoi was discovered hiding in the jungles of Guam twenty-seven years after the end of World War II. For almost three decades, this soldier had managed to successfully evade capture while remaining loyal to his Emperor.<sup>99</sup> While Corporal Yokoi’s loyalty and dedication are noteworthy, his refusal to acknowledge reality or to admit defeat illustrates an

extreme view of honor. As Axinn points out, “he is an inspiring example of honor, as well as an example of the stupidity of such a conception of honor. There is point at which devotion to honor becomes fanaticism. 27 years playing hide-and-seek is hardly a rational and dignified way to live.”<sup>100</sup> Thus, honorable behavior must live within the bounds of reason and reality.

### **Honor, Just War, and Obedience**

One must conclude that a form of honor suitable for the US military must remain true to our American values, to its cultural ideologies, and to national and international law. One concrete way to tie honor to American values is to ensure American service members at all levels understand and comply with the *jus in bello* principles outlined in the LOAC. In fact, the US Department of Defense Law of War Manual states that this body of law “was preceded by warriors’ codes of honor.”<sup>101</sup> The four traditional principles of distinction (or discrimination), military necessity, unnecessary suffering (or humanity), and proportionality provide a comprehensive framework for evaluating the legality and morality of any act or decision in war in accordance with the just war tradition. While these principles do not eliminate all grey areas, and their application to specific situations still requires good judgment, they do provide clearly defined criteria to help bound what is permissible in war. For example, while identifying and deciding whether a particular individual is a combatant or non-combatant requires personal judgment, the LOAC is clear that non-combatants may never be intentionally targeted in war.<sup>102</sup>

At the operational and tactical level, the *jus in bello* principles should be embodied in comprehensive and clearly worded Rules of Engagement (ROE). Yet understanding the principles behind these ROE still benefits the military by instilling a sense of the “why” beyond mere political considerations. Service members from private to general should understand that

properly written ROE rooted in the LOAC are not just inconvenient rules that they have to obey, but a formal expression of *who we are* as American soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines. Fisher agrees, arguing that “we need not just politicians and generals but our ordinary service people to become adept in just war doctrine. Just war teaching needs to provide guidance to all those involved in war, from the highest to the lowest level.”<sup>103</sup> By embracing a deeper appreciation for and understanding of *jus in bello* principles, good conduct in war becomes not simply a matter of obedience to ROE, but a matter of personal honor.

Fittingly, in June 2015, the DoD’s Office of the General Counsel introduced a fifth *jus in bello* principle into the Law of War Manual: *honor*. This document states that honor “demands a certain amount of fairness in offense and defense and a certain amount of respect between opposing forces.”<sup>104</sup> The manual directly ties honor to *chivalry*, further stating that “honor has been vital to the development of the law of war,” and “honor continues to be vital to giving the law of war effect today.”<sup>105</sup> It appears that the authors of the document realize that the historic concept of honor undergirds the traditional four principles: “honor supports the entire system and gives parties confidence in it.”<sup>106</sup> It is in fact the goal of this paper to provide greater clarity regarding what honorable behavior looks like in the context of the American military.

Additionally, honor must act as social pressure without totally erasing individual conscience. Leaders in particular, especially officers, have an individual responsibility to act in accordance with their own conscience, which is presumed to reflect American values. Without this check, honor can devolve into “group think” and becomes nothing more than peer pressure, which is essentially amoral. Honorable leaders must demonstrate the moral courage to act independently, to resist the status quo, and even to do the opposite of the group consensus when

the group is clearly in the wrong. Honor for the US military must not be reduced to morality by majority opinion.

The dangers of discouraging independent thought and action in the military are clear from history. Following the My Lai atrocity in Vietnam in 1968, a key phrase in the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) was changed from “obedience to orders” to “obedience to lawful orders” to reflect the lessons learned from this horrific incident.<sup>107</sup> The military establishment was forced to admit that obedience at all costs could lead to future atrocities if subordinates are unwilling to challenge the unlawful orders of misguided seniors. Marine Lieutenant Colonel Andrew R. Milburn goes so far as to assert that military officers have a duty to not only disobey an illegal order, but are obligated to disobey an immoral order as well.<sup>108</sup> While the debate over dissent in the military is beyond the scope of this paper, American military officers undoubtedly have a special responsibility to carefully consider the legal and moral ramifications of any order issued to or by them. Honorable warriors, especially officers, may not hide behind the mantle of obedience when they decide to comply with an illegal order.

### **Core Values in Practice: A Framework for Ethical Decision-Making**

Too often, core values are mere platitudes—abstract ideals with no direct bearing on daily military life. To be useful, *honor*, *courage*, and *commitment* must be expanded from the generic definitions in doctrinal publications to interrelated and internalized concepts that inform the relationships between the various social elements of the military organization. As a starting point, the following new definition was proposed in the introduction:

*Honor*: A holistic mindset, manifested in thought and action and reinforced via social pressure, law, and individual conscience, that promotes wholeness and soundness of character, preserves human dignity, and pursues truth regardless of personal cost.

Former US Secretary of State Colin Powell believed that “the essence of all leadership, of all interpersonal activity, is trust.”<sup>109</sup> Trust is essential to constructive relationships at any level, from individual Marines on a fire team to the relationship between the US military and the American people. Trust relationships exist at five distinct levels within the US military, describing the relations between (1) leaders and subordinates; (2) peers; (3) military and civilian leadership; (4) military and the American people; and (5) military and the world. A primary goal of any system of ethics or core values is to foster and preserve the trust in each of these relationships.

Using the US Marine Corps as an example, Figure 1 is an attempt to more explicitly define the role and distinctives of the services’ core values, the interrelationships between these values, and the way in which each value supports the end goal of promoting trust at all levels. Note that in this concept, *honor*, represented by the large blue ellipse, is the primary and overriding value. Honor is primary because it is the ideal that ties military ethics to universal values; it is what sets ethical organizations apart from unethical ones. An organization or individual can be courageous and committed yet thoroughly evil (e.g. the SS under the Nazi regime or Islamic terrorists). Thus, as critically important as courage and commitment are, the essence of an institution’s ethical code is found in its sense of honor.

The bulletized list under *honor* summarizes the aspects of honor that are tied to *virtue*: treating people with respect and dignity, protecting innocent life, obeying laws and regulations, obeying one’s conscience, and acting to preserve one’s integrity and pursue truth. These virtues, recognized by many to be universal, ground the concept of military honor in morality backed by US and international law. The virtues can be summarized as pertaining to three major areas: the sanctity of human life, the value of truth, and obedience to law. The diagram depicts the social

aspect of honor via green arrows linking it to the other values, *courage* and *commitment*. These arrows represent the social pressure that honor imposes in promoting courage and commitment within the organization. In other words, the honor group bestows esteem on actions and individuals who demonstrate courage and commitment; conversely it discourages cowardice and lack of commitment by imposing a sense of shame or dishonor on those who behave accordingly.

As the diagram implies, in its broadest sense honor encapsulates both courage and commitment. One can be courageous or committed without being honorable; however one cannot be honorable in a holistic sense if one lacks courage or commitment. Indeed, courage and commitment are the qualities that *empower* and *enable* one to behave honorably under difficult circumstances. Thus, while honor is primary, courage and commitment are enabling values that support honorable behavior under trying conditions. It is also worth noting that courage and commitment overlap; courage often requires commitment and vice versa.

Figure 2 depicts an individual Marine's various trust relationships as ever-widening circles of trust or responsibility. Marines (and other service members) must promote trust in each of these relationships by applying the core values appropriately at each level. Thus, honor, courage and commitment apply not only at the unit level, but also are binding on an individual Marine's relationships with the Marine Corps as a whole, the nation, and even the world. In its broadest sense, the world includes the combatants and non-combatants the US fights alongside or against. Hence core values govern not only one's relationship with peers, leaders, and non-combatants but also dictate appropriate behavior towards the enemy.

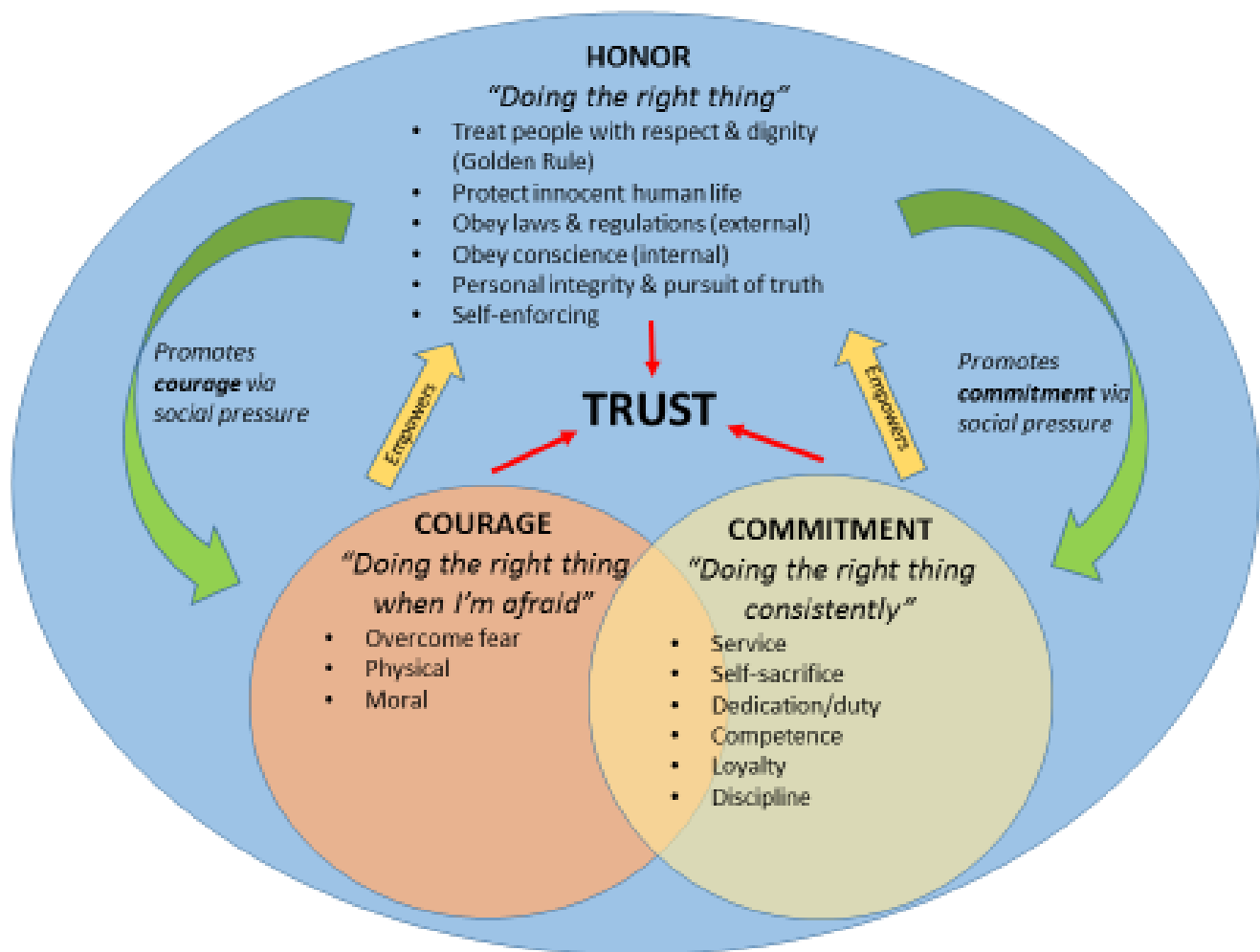


Figure 1

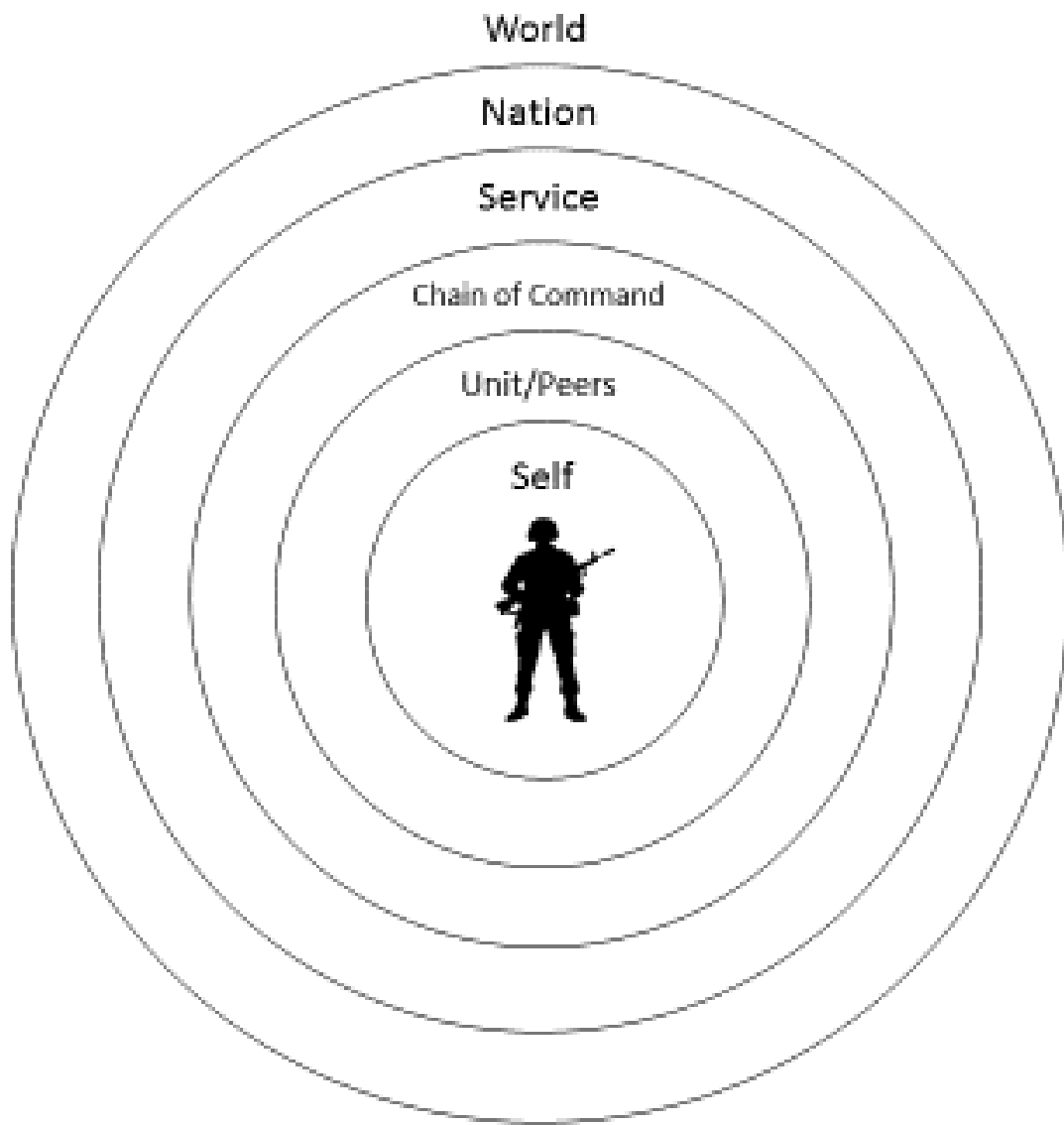


Figure 2

The application of core values within the various levels of trust relationships highlights the fact that these relationships can easily come into conflict with each other. For example, in military units, one's loyalty (commitment) to a peer who has disobeyed a regulation may overshadow one's loyalty to leaders or the service as a whole. This is often what lies behind situations where a service member "turns a blind eye" toward illegal or immoral behavior committed by a peer or immediate supervisor. Indeed, valuing one's immediate, local, relationships above all else can foster the kind of insularity and misplaced loyalty that leads to atrocities and war crimes. Soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines must be cognizant of their obligations to not only their peers and military leaders, but also to civilian leaders, the American people, and the world at large.

### **Cultivating Honor**

How then should military leaders cultivate a sense of honor that reinforces American values while discouraging the formation of aberrant and distorted forms of honor? The related fields of applied ethics, organizational culture, and character formation can shed light on this question. In the Society of Human Resource Management's recent publication entitled "Shaping an Ethical Workplace Culture," the authors identify six means, or "levers," that an organization can use to cultivate ethical behavior. These levers include *Onboarding; Ethics and Compliance; Pay, Promotion, and Performance Procedures; Leadership Role-Modeling; Training and Development; and Workplace Communications and Routines*. These six levers span various forms of both formal and informal means of influence. Formal influences include the employee socialization process (onboarding) and explicitly stated core values or organizational policies (ethics and compliance). Informal means of influence include the personal example of leaders

(leadership role-modeling) and organizational processes (workplace communications and routines).<sup>110</sup> In his doctoral dissertation entitled “Shaping Exceptional Moral and Ethical Character Among Leaders of Higher Education Institutions,” Philippe Upperman similarly identifies six character development pressures that help shape moral character.<sup>111</sup> For Upperman, these include internal pressures such as personal well-being and intrinsic/extrinsic motivations (desiring to serve self or others), and external pressures such as educational strategy, experience, and societal influences. Societal influences encompass ideological forces such as family and religion.<sup>112</sup>

The influences that the SHRM and Dr. Upperman identify manifest themselves in four distinct though overlapping ways: through ideology, law, social pressure, and modeling/personal example.<sup>113</sup> Traditional honor and *esprit de corps* belong in the category of “social pressure.”<sup>114</sup> The original essence of honor is social in nature; thus the power of honor to shape behavior is social in nature as well. This social pressure must align with the organization’s beliefs, values, and laws. For the US military, honor is a powerful means of instilling, enforcing, and promoting American and Marine Corps values. By bestowing honor or high esteem on someone as a reward for praiseworthy actions, leaders offer a powerful incentive that in many cases trumps all other means of influence. Formally, this means that awards, public recognition, and promotions must reward what is honorable, not simply what is efficient, effective, or successful. Informally, leaders at every level must establish a culture in which the group rewards honorable behavior and frowns upon, or “shames,” what is dishonorable (i.e. unethical or immoral). As Axinn succinctly states: “military education must emphasize the need to balance the goal of winning with the goal of honor.”<sup>115</sup>

The opposite of honor is shame. Shame can be equally powerful in encouraging sanctioned behavior while discouraging behavior that is morally wrong or socially destructive. However, shaming must be limited; it must establish a sense of guilt and embarrassment without resorting to hazing or abuse. The social pressure of honor must tie one's behavior, on and off duty, to his or her identity as an honorable warrior while still affirming the basic dignity and worth of all regardless of personal conduct. The title of US soldier, sailor, airman, or Marine should be contingent upon upholding the standards of the service and nation; indeed in extreme cases individuals should lose their claim on that title as in the case of a dishonorable discharge. To be meaningful, it must be understood and accepted that honor can be lost. Yet an individual's worth should never be so bound up in his honor that he loses his status as a human being. A person's individual dignity and worth must never be compromised.

Finally, military honor is closely related to the ideals of *service* and *self-sacrifice*. It is *honorable* to serve; to sacrifice one's rights, desires, and even one's life, on behalf of others. Once again, a paradox lurks beneath the surface. Pure reflexive honor is concerned exclusively with one's reputation—one's worth in the eyes of others—and is thus intrinsically self-focused. This seems to be exactly opposite the ideals of service and sacrifice; yet by aligning individual honor closely with the greater good—the preservation of unit, Marine Corps, and nation—leaders can construe *honor* and *service* in such a way that they are no longer antithetical, but actually self-reinforcing. In conclusion, honor as a core value of the US Marine Corps must be closely aligned with the honor and reputation of unit, Corps, and country. What is viewed as honorable behavior on an individual level must go hand-and-hand with what brings honor to the greater institutions which the individual Marine serves. As Aristotle stated 2,000 years ago, honor must be the reward of virtue.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The goal of this study has been to gain a greater understanding of the origins, history, and enduring utility of honor in shaping ethical behavior in the profession of arms. Although only vestiges of honor as a social concept remain in the American civilian culture, honor must continue to serve as the foundation of an ethical culture within military organizations. The nature of warfare demands ethical warriors bound by a code of honor who conduct themselves in accordance with the values they represent. Honor in the American military must remain true to the unique understanding of honor that has been nurtured over centuries of Western civilization. This unique Western conception respects the fundamental social nature of honor while grounding it in the laws and morality that America has inherited from its Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian heritage. Thus honor must impose social pressure for acceptable behavior while consistently affirming human dignity and respecting individual conscience.

A secondary goal has been to bridge the plethora of academic studies dedicated to understanding honor with the view of honor common within military organizations (as defined in doctrinal publications). To be effective in its role as a core value, the concept of military honor must be more widely understood, better articulated, and tied more directly to ethical decision-making in daily life. To attempt to fill this void, this paper proposes adherence to an ethical system based on the core values of honor, courage and commitment that provides a deeper and more complete understanding of the role of these values and their interrelationships. The goal of this core value system is a culture that fosters trust at all levels. In this system, honor serves as the overriding value, providing an ethical foundation for all other Marine Corps values and for service culture. Courage and commitment are enabling values that support honorable behavior under trying conditions and active opposition. Honor must be understood as much more than

simply integrity or honesty, but as a holistic way of life that governs one's behavior in all situations.

Finally, honor must be understood as applying not only to individuals, but also to each unit and to the US military as an institution. Dishonorable behavior brings discredit not only on the individual soldier or Marine, but on the respective service and the US as a nation. Thus, while individuals never lose their dignity or worth as human beings, holding the title of US soldier or Marine should be contingent on upholding the honor of one's service and the nation through one's honorable behavior. By reaffirming and strengthening a culture of honor within the US armed forces, the hope is that such a culture will encourage ethical conduct at all levels while reducing the incidences of moral failure, corruption, and abuse. Dishonorable conduct, such as a scandal involving senior military leaders or an atrocity such as Abu Ghraib, damages the bond of trust between the military and the American people, provokes the nation's enemies, and diminishes the moral leadership and authority of the nation within the international community. Most importantly, such acts betray the values the nation was founded upon and further weaken a unique honor culture that has been carefully nurtured over 3,000 years. By contrast, reinforcing such a culture would foster greater trust within military, between senior military leaders and civilian officials, between the military and the American people, and between America and the world writ large. As honor becomes increasingly marginalized within the civilian culture, the American people look to those in the profession of arms to exemplify honor, and by doing so to preserve an important legacy for our nation and the world.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Carl E. Mundy, "Core Values," (speech, April 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Peter Berger, "On the Obsolescence of the Concept of Honor," in *Revisions: Changing Perspectives in Moral Philosophy*, eds. Stanley Hauerwas and Alasdair MacIntyre, 172-181 (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1983), 172.

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<sup>3</sup> Alexander Welsh, *What is Honor? A Question of Moral Imperatives* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), Adobe Digital Edition, x; William Sessions, *Honor For Us: A Philosophical Analysis, Interpretation and Defense* (London: The Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd, 2010), Adobe Digital Edition, xi, 3, 4; James Bowman, *Honor: A History* (New York: Encounter Books, 2006), 7, 10; Whitley Kaufman, "Understanding Honor: Beyond the Shame/Guilt Dichotomy," *Social Theory and Practice*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (October 2011): 557.

<sup>4</sup> Kaufman, "Understanding Honor," 557; Sessions, *Honor For Us*, 4-6. Sessions pp. 4-6 provides a fairly exhaustive list of the major criticisms of honor from a modern perspective.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Callo, "Honor and the American Warrior," *Military History*, September 2015, 69.

<sup>6</sup> "Living the Army Values," US Army, accessed March 21, 2016, <http://www.goarmy.com/soldier-life/being-a-soldier/living-the-army-values.html>; "Traditions," US Navy, accessed March 21, 2016, <https://www.navy.com/about/tradition.html>; "Principles and Values," US Marine Corps, accessed March 21, 2016, <http://www.marines.com/history-heritage/principles-values>; "Introduction," US Coast Guard, accessed March 21, 2016, <http://www.gocostguard.com/family-and-friends/the-helmsman/introduction>.

<sup>7</sup> *Henry IV*, Part I by William Shakespeare, George Mason University, accessed March 20, 2016, [http://www.opensourceshakespeare.org/views/plays/play\\_view.php?WorkID=henry4p1&Scope=entire&pleasewait=1&msg=pl](http://www.opensourceshakespeare.org/views/plays/play_view.php?WorkID=henry4p1&Scope=entire&pleasewait=1&msg=pl).

<sup>8</sup> Random-House Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 2nd ed., s.v. "honor."

<sup>9</sup> Online Etymology Dictionary, s.v. "honor," accessed January 11, 2016, [http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed\\_in\\_frame=0&search=honor](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=honor). Etymologically, the English word *honor* entered Middle English c. 1200 from French, which in turn derived from the Latin *honorem*, meaning "dignity, office, or reputation." Significantly, the Online Etymology Dictionary points out that in Middle English, the term honor could also mean "splendor, beauty; excellence." From c. 1300 the noun form implied "nobleness of character or manners; high station or rank; a mark of respect or esteem; a source of glory; a cause of good reputation." By 1540 the word had evolved a more specific meaning as "one's personal title to high respect or esteem."

<sup>10</sup> Kaufman, "Understanding Honor," 559; Sessions, *Honor For Us*, 5; Welsh, *What is Honor?*, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Kaufman, "Understanding Honor," 572-573.

<sup>12</sup> Jose Carlos Del Ama, "Honor and Public Opinion," *Springer Science+Business Media B.V.* (2010): 458-459.

<sup>13</sup> Bowman, *Honor*, 1.

<sup>14</sup> Bowman, *Honor*, 2.

<sup>15</sup> Bowman, *Honor*, 4.

<sup>16</sup> Bowman, *Honor*, 4.

<sup>17</sup> Bowman, *Honor*, 4.

<sup>18</sup> Welsh, *What is Honor?*, 9.

<sup>19</sup> Welsh, *What is Honor?*, x-xvi.

<sup>20</sup> Sessions, *Honor For Us*, vii, 9.

<sup>21</sup> Whitley Kaufman, "Understanding Honor: Beyond the Shame/Guilt Dichotomy," *Social Theory and Practice*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (October 2011): 559.

<sup>22</sup> Hobbes in Sidney Axinn, *A Moral Military* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 40.

<sup>23</sup> Bowman, *Honor*, 2.

<sup>24</sup> Bowman, *Honor*, 6.

<sup>25</sup> Bowman, *Honor*, 47.

<sup>26</sup> D. F. Morgan, "Honor," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Vol II, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 750-751 (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982), 750.

<sup>27</sup> Morgan, "Honor," in *ISBE*, 750.

<sup>28</sup> Morgan, "Honor," in *ISBE*, 750.

<sup>29</sup> Morgan, "Honor," in *ISBE*, 750.

<sup>30</sup> Morgan, "Honor," in *ISBE*, 750.

<sup>31</sup> Webster, s.v. "integrity."

<sup>32</sup> Webster, s.v. "character."

<sup>33</sup> Webster, s.v. "character."

<sup>34</sup> Webster, s.v. "virtue."

<sup>35</sup> Cf. David B. Cushen, Joseph P. Doty, and Patrick A. Toffler, "Developing Trustworthy Commissioned Officers: Transcending the Honor Codes and Concepts," *Military Review*, March-April 2014, 19. The authors define

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honor as “reverence for the truth (honesty) and justice (fairness), regard for the property of others, and commitment to upholding the Army Professional Ethic.”

<sup>36</sup> Bowman, *Honor*, 46-47.

<sup>37</sup> Thucydides, quoted in Callo, “Honor and the American Warrior,” 69.

<sup>38</sup> Bowman, *Honor*, 45.

<sup>39</sup> Bowman, *Honor*, 45.

<sup>40</sup> Bowman, *Honor*, 46.

<sup>41</sup> Bowman, *Honor*, 46.

<sup>42</sup> David Fisher, *Morality and War: Can War be Just in the Twenty-First Century?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 54.

<sup>43</sup> Bowman, *Honor*, 45.

<sup>44</sup> Bowman, *Honor*, 46-47.

<sup>45</sup> Bowman, *Honor*, 47.

<sup>46</sup> Bowman, *Honor*, 47.

<sup>47</sup> Bowman, *Honor*, 51.

<sup>48</sup> Bowman, *Honor*, 51.

<sup>49</sup> Bowman, *Honor*, 48.

<sup>50</sup> Fisher, *Morality and War*, 64.

<sup>51</sup> Fisher, *Morality and War*, 65.

<sup>52</sup> St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIa IIae40: ‘On War’, art I, responsio, in *Aquinas: Political Writings*, ed. R. W. Dyson (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002), 240-241, quoted in Fisher, *Morality and War*, 65.

<sup>53</sup> Fisher, *Morality and War*, 65.

<sup>54</sup> Bowman, *Honor*, 41-92.

<sup>55</sup> Bowman, *Honor*, 49. Although, the stubborn honor of the earliest knights had more in common with traditional honor cultures—for example Roland in an anonymous Anglo-Norman epic who refuses help when surrounded by a vastly superior force for the sole reason that he fears that the French people would “sing a bad song” about him.

<sup>56</sup> Bowman, *Honor*, 50-51.

<sup>57</sup> Fisher, *Morality and War*, 65.

<sup>58</sup> Bowman, *Honor*, 51. The ideal of Christian knighthood was always a bit awkward in writers such as Joinville, the 13th century historian who attempted to distinguish between “the prideful man” and “the man of noble virtues—which included pride!”

<sup>59</sup> Bowman, *Honor*, 67-92.

<sup>60</sup> Bowman, *Honor*, 59-65. Bowman credits forces such as the rising cultural importance of sincerity or authenticity, the Protestant reformation and its renewed emphasis on the Bible, and Renaissance writers and thinkers such as Montaigne, Rabelais, and Cervantes.

<sup>61</sup> Bowman, *Honor*, 18-19.

<sup>62</sup> Bowman, *Honor*, 70-75.

<sup>63</sup> Christine Dunn Henderson and Mark E. Yellin, eds., *Cato: A Tragedy and Selected Essays by Joseph Addison* (Indianapolis: The Liberty Fund, 2004), 195, quoted in Bowman, *Honor: A History*, 71-72. Bowman describes this new honor as “a sincere but not ostentatious Christian piety and was meant as a useful and living code of manners and conduct for the rising middle classes.”

<sup>64</sup> Bowman, *Honor*, 75.

<sup>65</sup> Bowman, *Honor*, 73. Bowman equates this new democratic form of honor to English romantic poet William Wordsworth’s “aristocracy of nature.”

<sup>66</sup> US Declaration of Independence, quoted in Joseph Callo, “Honor and the American Warrior,” *Military History*, September 2015, 69.

<sup>67</sup> Richard Brookhiser, *Founding Father: Rediscovering George Washington* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 131, quoted in Bowman, *Honor: A History*, 72-73.

<sup>68</sup> George Washington, quoted in Callo, “Honor and the American Warrior,” 69.

<sup>69</sup> Callo, “Honor and the American Warrior,” 69.

<sup>70</sup> Callo, “Honor and the American Warrior,” 69.

<sup>71</sup> Callo, “Honor and the American Warrior,” 70-71.

<sup>72</sup> Callo, “Honor and the American Warrior,” 71.

<sup>73</sup> Callo, “Honor and the American Warrior,” 71.

<sup>74</sup> Callo, “Honor and the American Warrior,” 71.

- <sup>75</sup> Axinn, *A Moral Military*, 6.
- <sup>76</sup> US Air Force Vision,” US Air Force, accessed March 21, 2016, [https://www.airforce.com/mission/vision?gclid=Cj0KEQjw763BRDZx\\_Xg3-Pv2cABEiQAoDfeGH1wRAhtyYgR81vkPKqedLo3zyYf7E-3B-gwbJ1fymcaAk-o8P8HAQ&gclidsrc=aw.ds](https://www.airforce.com/mission/vision?gclid=Cj0KEQjw763BRDZx_Xg3-Pv2cABEiQAoDfeGH1wRAhtyYgR81vkPKqedLo3zyYf7E-3B-gwbJ1fymcaAk-o8P8HAQ&gclidsrc=aw.ds)
- <sup>77</sup> Mundy, “Core Values.”
- <sup>78</sup> Headquarters US Marine Corps, *Leading Marines*, MCWP 1-0 (Washington, DC: US Marine Corps, August 1, 2014), 1-6.
- <sup>79</sup> “Principles & Values,” US Marine Corps, accessed February 12, 2016, <https://www.marines.com/history-heritage/principles-values>.
- <sup>80</sup> “Principles & Values,” US Marine Corps.
- <sup>81</sup> Headquarters US Marine Corps, *Operations*, MCDP 1-0 (Washington, DC: US Marine Corps, August 9, 2011), 1-4.
- <sup>82</sup> “Mental Health Advisory team (MHAT) IV Operation Iraqi Freedom 05-07 Final Report,” November 17, 2006, Office of the Surgeon Multinational Force-Iraq and Office of the Surgeon General, United States Army Medical Command, 34-42, <http://armymedicine.mil/Pages/Mental-Health-Advisory-Team-IV-Information.aspx>.
- <sup>83</sup> MHAT IV OIF 05-07 Final Report, 34-42.
- <sup>84</sup> Burt Hinson, “2015 Marine Corps Birthday Message: The Legacy Within,” YouTube Video, October 23, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sg5GPSsSQHo>.
- <sup>85</sup> Joshua Uhall, Letter to the Editor response to Callo article.
- <sup>86</sup> Christine Dunn Henderson and Mark E. Yellin, eds., *Cato: A Tragedy and Selected Essays by Joseph Addison* (Indianapolis: The Liberty Fund, 2004), II.v.103-7, quoted in Bowman, *Honor: A History*, 71-72.
- <sup>87</sup> Hinson, “2015 Marine Corps Birthday Message.”
- <sup>88</sup> Hinson, “2015 Marine Corps Birthday Message.”
- <sup>89</sup> “The Honor Committee,” Rector and Visitors of the University of Virginia, accessed March 22, 2016, <http://www.virginia.edu/honor/>.
- <sup>90</sup> Donald L. McCabe, Linda Klebe Trevino, and Kenneth D. Butterfield, “Academic Integrity in Honor Code and Non-Honor Code Environments: A Qualitative Investigation,” *The Journal of Higher Education*, Vol. 70, No. 2 (March – April 1999): 211-234. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2649128>; James J. Ely, Linda Henderson, Yoav Wachsmann, “Testing the Effectiveness of the University Honor Code,” *Academy of Educational Leadership Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (2014). <http://xxxx>.
- <sup>91</sup> David B. Cushen, Joseph P. Doty, and Patrick A. Toffler, “Developing Trustworthy Commissioned Officers: Transcending the Honor Codes and Concepts,” *Military Review*, March-April 2014, 18-22.
- <sup>92</sup> Cushen, Doty, and Toffler, “Developing Trustworthy Commissioned Officers,” 18-22.
- <sup>93</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies at West Point, *Ordinary Soldiers: A Study in Ethics, Law, and Leadership*, 4.
- <sup>94</sup> *Ordinary Soldiers*, 15.
- <sup>95</sup> *Ordinary Soldiers*, 15.
- <sup>96</sup> Bowman, *Honor*, 265.
- <sup>97</sup> Bowman, *Honor*, 19-27.
- <sup>98</sup> Fisher, *Morality and War*, 128.
- <sup>99</sup> Axinn, *A Moral Military*, 54.
- <sup>100</sup> Axinn, *A Moral Military*, 54.
- <sup>101</sup> US Department of Defense, *Department of Defense Law of War Manual*, June 12, 2015, 66.
- <sup>102</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies at West Point, *Ordinary Soldiers: A Study in Ethics, Law, and Leadership*, 31-33.
- <sup>103</sup> Fisher, *Morality and War*, 4.
- <sup>104</sup> *DoD Law of War Manual*, 66.
- <sup>105</sup> *DoD Law of War Manual*, 66.
- <sup>106</sup> *DoD Law of War Manual*, 52.
- <sup>107</sup> Hugh Thompson, “Moral Courage in Combat: the My Lai Story” (speech, US Naval Academy, Annapolis, MD, 2003). Transcript.
- <sup>108</sup> Andrew R. Milburn, “Breaking Ranks: Dissent and the Military Professional,” *Joint Force Quarterly*, Issue 59 (4<sup>th</sup> Quarter 2010): 101-107. <http://ndupress.ndu.edu>.
- <sup>109</sup> Colin Powell quoted in Cushen, Doty, and Toffler, “Developing Trustworthy Commissioned Officers,” 22.

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<sup>110</sup> Society of Human Resource Management Foundation, *Shaping an Ethical Workplace Culture* (Alexandria, VA: SHRM Foundation, 2013), 16-21.

<sup>111</sup> Philippe Upperman, "Shaping Exceptional Moral and Ethical Character Among Leaders of Higher Education Institutions" (doctoral dissertation, Seattle University, 2007), 163.

<sup>112</sup> Upperman, 163.

<sup>113</sup> Effective institutions employ all four methods of character development. Whether the institution is small in size, such as the family; medium-sized, such as a church or school; or large, such as an entire military service, the principles remain the same. The behavior of a member of any organization will be influenced by the organization's values and ideology, by the body of rules or laws which govern the group, by the approval or disapproval of the honor group, and by the personal example, whether good or bad, of leaders within the group. Thus to determine the proper role of honor in the US Marine Corps we must understand what it is and where it falls within this spectrum of influence.

<sup>114</sup> Ideological influences use ideas to influence behavior via cognition. Sources of ideology in the US military include foundational documents such as the Bible, the US Constitution, the Code of Conduct, and Marine Corps doctrine, as well as the bodies of ideas that surround and interpret these documents, such as Christian theology and Just War Theory. Legal influences shape behavior via the threat of punishment or reward. For the military these include both federal and international law, the Uniform Code of Military Justice, and the Law of Armed Conflict. They also include the military's formal promotion and award systems and service regulations. Social pressures include any means of shaping behavior that relies on the approval or disapproval of other people. Traditional honor and *esprit de corps* belongs in this camp, along with peer pressure, command climate, and service culture. The fourth and final category, modeling/personal example, encompasses the ability of leaders to directly influence the behavior of subordinates through their own words and actions.

<sup>115</sup> Axinn, *A Moral Military*, 43.

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