

Ethics Training

Identifying a gap in professional military education

by LtCol Joel Leggett

During a stressful deployment to Iraq in 2006–2007, a captain was looking to improve the morale of his Marines. Aware that several of his Marines were dedicated users of smokeless tobacco, he thought he would be able to brighten their day if he could get them access to a consistent and plentiful supply of their favorite form of tobacco. To that end, the captain wrote an American tobacco company a letter explaining how much his Marines were sacrificing for their country, how much they enjoyed their product, and how patriotic and considerate it would be for the company to provide his Marines with free samples of their product.

The tobacco company, only too happy to prove their corporate patriotism, provided the captain's Marines with more than ample supplies of their smokeless tobacco. However, when word got out that the captain had used his and his Marines' status as service members to solicit a generous free gift from a large tobacco company, the captain got into a bit of hot water. While the captain was inspired by the purest of motives to provide his Marines a comfort item during a highly dangerous and stressful deployment, he had violated a couple of ethical rules—specifically the prohibitions against soliciting a gift from a prohibited source and using his public office for private gain.

Unfortunately for the captain, nothing in his training or professional development would have alerted him to the ethical issues highlighted and raised here. He, like every Marine Corps officer, received no training in government ethics at The Basic School (TBS), his MOS school, or even Expeditionary Warfare School. In fact, outside of a few MOSs (law and fiscal), Marine officers are not even exposed to the

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requirements and prohibitions of government ethics rules until the Cornerstone Course, assuming he is selected for command.

This example highlights a significant gap in the professional training of Marine Corps officers. Without even a minimal exposure to the main principles of government ethics, Marine Corps officers are completely unprepared for the ethical issues they will encounter on a daily basis. These issues involve everything from unit fundraising, interactions with government contractors, and

tious decision making. While these are important topics, they are separate from government ethics. Morality deals with deeper, philosophical principles of good and evil, while government ethics are a professional code of conduct, established through regulations and laws, intended to achieve a basic standard of workplace behavior. While there are areas of overlap, the concepts are different. The standard of behavior that government ethics seeks to ensure is the realization and appearance of government integrity, neutrality, fiscal responsibility, and transparency.

Government integrity, neutrality, fiscal responsibility, and transparency are important because they represent sound government action and promote trust in the government on the part of the citizenry, not because they necessarily involve issues of morality. For instance,

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relationships with non-federal entities such as charities and corporations. This is especially troublesome when one considers that violations of ethics rules may subject an offender to administrative and/or disciplinary action that could lead to prosecution, fines, and prison.

Part of the problem is the term “ethics” is often conflated with morals and virtue. For instance, second lieutenants at TBS will participate in a two-part ethics lecture and case study. However, this instruction focuses on moral-and virtue-based leadership and conscien-

ensuring that one non-federal entity is not given favorable treatment over another does not involve issues commonly associated with moral conduct. It does involve making sure that the government is not seen as playing favorites among different groups. It promotes good government through transparent, equitable action. All Marine officers, as agents of the government, have a duty to practice and promote ethical government action.

Another part of the problem appears to be the assumption that Marine of-



Marines need to have productive interaction with defense industry—thorough government ethics education facilitates this interaction. (Photo by Sgt Melissa Karnath.)

Officers do not need training in government ethics until they are in command. That could explain why this topic is not discussed in any of the formal schools until the Cornerstone Course. However, as stated above, that is a faulty assumption.

Marine officers at all ranks, as well as staff noncommissioned officers (SNCOs), will regularly encounter problematic government ethics issues, such as fundraising, throughout their careers. In fact, the largest social event of the year for Marines, the Marine Corps Ball, is a virtual minefield of government ethics issues. These issues range from fundraising, gifts, and travel to appropriate use of government resources. Unfortunately, it is often a more junior and inexperienced officer that is assigned the duty of serving as the unit's Marine Corps Ball representative. Consequently, Marine units regularly place the officers least prepared to deal with ethics issues in charge of organizing one of the most ethically challenging events.

In fact, fundraising issues regularly raise problematic ethics issues for officers and SNCOs. One of the most common involve golf tournaments used to raise funds for unit events. Oftentimes, these golf tournaments are scheduled during the workday and advertised to a wide audience that includes non-DOD civilians and contractors. As such, these golf tournaments violate prohibitions against fundraising activities interfering

with performance of official duties and unauthorized solicitations in the work place. (See section 3-210 and subsection 3-211.b of *DOD 5500.07-R.*) Additionally, such golf tournaments raise concerns of impartiality and equitable treatment since those that participate are essentially rewarded with a day off while those that do not must remain on duty. (See section 12-401.e of *DOD 5500.07-R.*) However, because most officers have not received any ethics training, they rarely, if ever, recognize these issues.

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The solution to this problem is increased government ethics education beginning at entry-level officer training, specifically TBS. Second lieutenants should at least receive a one-hour period of instruction covering the “Principles of Ethical Conduct for Government Officers and Employees.”¹ The same training should also be provided to SNCOs at their schools. These fourteen principles provide a basic and accessible instruction in the standard of conduct

expected of all federal employees and officers. While this instruction would not make the LTs or SNCOs experts in the field of government ethics, it would expose them to the basic principles. It would at least make them aware that they should not solicit gifts from corporations or make unauthorized commitments that bind the government.

Furthermore, this instruction should also be included in the curriculums of both career and graduate-level schools, resident and nonresident. This would have the benefit of exposing officers and SNCOs to government ethics training at different periods throughout their careers instead of waiting until they reach command level. This could be facilitated by integrating the SJAs assigned to the commands for these schools into the instructor cadre. Ethics training is already one of their primary duties.

If we truly want to prioritize ethical behavior among our leaders, it must be emphasized throughout their education and professional development. It is impractical to expect our leaders to act in accordance with the ethical standards required for government officers and employees if we never teach them what those standards are before they are selected for command. Our leaders will perform and conduct themselves in accordance with the standards to which they are trained.

Notes

1. U.S. Office of Government Ethics, *Executive Order 12674, Principles of Ethical Conduct for Government Officers and Employees*, (Washington, DC: April 1989).

