

Values Statements and the Profession of Arms

A Reevaluation

By JOHN MARK MATTOX

Over the past decade and a half, the Department of Defense (DOD) and each of the uniformed Services has issued core values statements:

DOD: Duty, Integrity, Ethics, Honor, Courage, and Loyalty.

U.S. Air Force: Integrity first, Service before self, and Excellence in all we do.

U.S. Army: Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless service, Honor, Integrity, and Personal courage.

U.S. Coast Guard: Honor, Respect, and Devotion to duty.¹

U.S. Department of the Navy: Honor, Courage, and Commitment.

Each of these statements purports to constitute a succinct summary of the owning organization's most fundamental commitments—the moral reference points

that underwrite, circumscribe, and guide the organization's goals and work. As such, each merits both special attention and careful reflection. However, each additionally deserves critical examination—especially since each is intended to communicate to the profession's members, particularly its newest members, its core ethical commitments. A critical examination includes questions such as:

- How well do these statements capture the essence of how each organization's members ought to conduct their personal and professional lives?
- How successfully and comprehensively do they communicate the ethical standards of the organization?
- How well do they imbue the members of the organization with a sense of what it means to belong to the profession of arms in a democratic society?

Core Value Statements Compared

Upon undertaking a critical examination, the first thing we notice about these statements is that each is different, even though the uniformed members of the respective organizations are members of the same profession of arms and, with one exception, the same executive department. In their 2009 review of these core values statements, the Military Leadership Diversity Commission offered the following apologetic explanation for this lack of uniformity:

Although the DoD core-values statement indicates that uniformed military members share a common set of core values, each Service's identity is reflected in its own uniquely defined core values, which serve as common ground for all its members. For example, the Marine Corps' core values "form the bedrock of [a Marine's] character" (Sturkey, 2001), the Air Force's "tell us the price of admission to the Air Force itself" (United States Air Force, 1997), and the Army's are "what being a soldier is all about" (United States Army, n.d.).²

This descriptive statement, coming from a commission with a mandate to promote diversity, comes as no particular surprise, and, in all fairness, there is nothing overtly objectionable about it. On further reflection, however, it raises some questions that properly claim our attention:

- Since DOD has a common set of core values, and DOD is the organization that encompasses the profession of arms in the United States, why should its subordinate organizations find it necessary to espouse different sets of core values?

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Joint Forces Color Guard participates in National POW/MIA Recognition Ceremony

DOD (Cherie Cullen)

Core Values Compared

DOD	duty	integrity	ethics	honor	courage	loyalty					
Air Force		integrity first					service before self	excellence in all we do			
Army	duty	integrity		honor	personal courage	loyalty			respect	selfless service	
Coast Guard	devotion to duty			honor					respect		
Marine Corps				honor	courage						commitment
Navy				honor	courage						commitment

■ Is there something fundamentally different between DOD and the uniformed Services or among the uniformed Services themselves that makes distinctions in their core values a matter of logical necessity?

■ Do the Services’ values actually differ, or do the differences in wording and composition exist merely for cosmetic reasons?

■ If their values actually differ, why is this so?

■ If their distinctions are merely cosmetic, might not such artificialities actually have the effect of detracting from the seriousness that should attach to core values statements?

■ Are the individual tenets themselves logically necessary or are they essentially arbitrary?

■ If they are logically necessary, on what grounds is this so?

■ If they are arbitrary, does that mean that *any* list of virtues would suffice as a military core values statement?

■ Are the Service core values qualities that members of that Service have a unique requirement to possess, or are they merely desirable qualities that any virtuous citizen in a democratic society should have?

Members of a profession have an obligation to be self-critical—to look for ways in which to better themselves and more effectively discharge the special public trust that distinguishes them as members of a profession. That means they must, from time to time, scrutinize cherished notions, ideas that they have grown to hold dear, or things that because of the passage of time have come to be regarded as part

of their identity. If in the process of self-examination, they encounter discomfiting flaws in their assumptions or methods, they must resist the temptation to dismiss those encounters out of hand, but instead take as their touchstone the question, “What is best for America?” and relegate other considerations to a secondary status.

DOD Core Values

On the basis of the comparison in the table, we observe that all five uniformed Services contain one or more elements found in the DOD core values. This should come as no surprise since, after all, DOD is the parent organization. However, what should be startling to anyone familiar with standard five-paragraph operation orders is that there is *so little* overlap between DOD’s core values statement and those of the individual Services. Let us liken the DOD core values statement to a superior command’s operation order and the core values statements of the individual Services to the operations orders of subordinate units, derived from the order received from the superior headquarters. If the DOD core values statement were to appear in what we might call an “ethics operation” order, where would it appear? It seems clear enough that it would appear either as paragraph two (the mission statement) or in paragraph three in the “concept of the operation” subparagraph, which addresses the commander’s intent. One might argue that the individual Service core values statements are simply instances of the “restated mission statement” found in subordinate unit operation orders. Perhaps, but the problem with this interpretation is that there is no obvious connection between

the superior unit mission and the subordinate restated missions.

The next thing of note is that *none* of the Services includes “ethics” in their respective core values statements. At first blush, this may seem nothing less than incredible. Indeed, one might ask, “How can it possibly be that none of the subordinate commanders finds ‘ethics’ to be important enough to include from the superior commander’s ethics operation order into their own?” However, the likely answer is that the subordinate commanders omitted ethics precisely because its inclusion serves no clear purpose in a statement that, by its nature, is understood to enshrine the institution’s ethics. With respect to this particular tenet, the superior commander’s core values statement does not serve its subordinate commanders very well.

Now we turn to the individual Service core values statements (in alphabetical order) as shown in the table.

Air Force Core Values

It is immediately clear that the Air Force statement is the least aligned of all the Services with the DOD core values statement. That in no way implies that the Air Force does not cherish ethical values; it simply means that the DOD and Air Force statements do not, *prima facie*, appear to reflect a reliance on each other as might be expected between superior and subordinate organizations. In particular, we are struck by the Air Force core value not found in any other core values statement, namely “excellence in all we do.” In practical terms, this is not a particularly helpful tenet. It does not require a great deal of reflection on general life experience

to conclude that if everything truly is excellent then nothing is excellent. Human beings simply do not do everything excellently; and when they try to lead their lives in a way that insists on excellence in every single aspect, they often end up frustrated and excellent in nothing. Certainly members of the profession of arms are better served by being imbued with the understanding that they must learn to look at tactical situations, quickly and accurately assess them to separate that which is important from that which is not, and relegate that which is not important to the possibility of less-than-excellent outcomes.

The next most prominent feature in the Air Force core values statement is its reference to “service before self.” This statement is not precisely the same thing as the value of “selfless service” articulated in the Army statement. “Service before self” suffers from the same theoretical malady that attends many such moral-philosophical statements: If we always serve others before attending to ourselves, our ability to serve others ultimately diminishes because we fail to “sharpen the saw,” as it were. On the other hand, “selfless service” suggests that when one *does* serve—with the assumption that the idea of “service” in the profession of arms represents the norm and not the exception—one should do so *selflessly*. This characterization of service probably more closely reflects what is actually intended in the Air Force core values statement.

Army Core Values

The Army’s statement is the most closely aligned of all the Services with the DOD values statement. At the same time, however, it is also the longest—raising the question of whether Occam’s razor might be advantageously applied.

But why exactly is it the longest? The unfortunate answer appears to be that a corporate decision was made to express the Army’s core values as an acronym, no matter what contortions needed to be applied to make it so. The acronym L-D-R-S-H-I-P is what has come to be Soldier-speak for “leadership.” Now, acronyms certainly have their place. After all, what drill sergeant would object to having the aid of an abbreviation to help new recruits remember a long list of values, alongside the many other lists that trainees are expected to digest? However, insistence on this particular acronym appears to have imposed certain artificiali-

ties upon the values statement. For example, the Army core values statement refers not to “courage,” but to “*personal* courage.” This is, of course, a rather odd and counterintuitive construction since courage, by its very nature, *is* personal. Indeed, what would it mean if one were to refer to “corporate” courage? There is no such thing as a courageous squad, a courageous platoon, or a courageous company. Only the *members* of that squad, platoon, or company can be courageous. Courage, like all moral values, can be meaningfully experienced only at the individual level. Even if every member of a collective is courageous, the collective does not thereby become courageous; only its individual members can do that.

The other apparent artificiality in the LDRSHIP acronym is “honor.” On the face of it, this does not appear to be a problem, especially since every DOD and Service core values statement, except for the Air Force, includes it. However, its artificiality in the context of the acronym is betrayed by the Army’s own official definition of what it

apply, in the present context, to persons based on whether or not they are leaders.

Coast Guard Core Values

While it is understood that the Coast Guard is aligned bureaucratically with the Department of Homeland Security and not DOD, the nature of its work as a uniformed Service charged with the Nation’s defense aligns it, for purposes of the present discussion, both conceptually and philosophically with the Services under the Department of Defense.

The Coast Guard core values statement is not particularly distinctive, except for its reference to “respect”—a reference shared with the Army’s core values statement. Prima facie, it is not entirely clear what role “respect” should play as an essential characteristic of the profession of arms. This is not to say that “respect” is not an honorable or desirable trait; but how does its inclusion in a core values statement illuminate the essential character of the profession of arms any more than, say, “cheerfulness,” “friendliness,” or

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means by “honor,” to wit: “Live up to all the Army values.” The notion thus becomes self-referential and to that extent, vacuous; for what good is a “value” that merely tells one to “live the values”?

The idea of making a core values list fit an acronym is something that probably merits discussion among Army professionals. However well intended the gesture, might it not be the case that forcing a fit with an acronym results in a case of misplaced emphasis? Indeed, the acronym LDRSHIP is itself a choice that invites some questioning. Is the intent of the acronym to suggest that core values are the province of leaders only? Is it to suggest that everyone in a civilian-led military (in which all uniformed personnel are, to that extent, followers) are actually leaders—and if so, in what sense? Indeed, moral values are not about leaders per se; they are about persons. To confuse the two is to misunderstand something fundamental about our humanity. Values apply to leaders because they are persons; values do not

“courteousness” would? Contrast “respect” with ideas like “courage” or “duty” and it quickly becomes clear that no special explanation is necessary for why one carrying a loaded weapon in defense of the Nation should be courageous or dutiful. Rather, the inclusion of a notion like “respect” raises the question of how it helps capture the essence of the profession of arms as a distinct social entity with highly specialized responsibilities. Upon considered reflection, it may be that those values statements that refer to “respect” as a core value do so as a genuflection to political correctness. If so, it should be noted that any such genuflection undermines the spirit of seriousness that ought to attend ethical reflection. Perhaps inclusion of a value such as “respect” is a reactive response to media scrutiny in recent years of cases of physical or other kinds of abuse by or among military members. If so, the oddity of its inclusion in a military core values statement stands in even greater relief, for it is not clear that there exists a rational basis to say that



Sailors in formation for seasonal uniform shift inspection from whites to blues

a member of the uniformed Services has any greater responsibility to demonstrate respect for others than every other member of American society does. The law holds—or should hold—every American citizen accountable for the abuse of other persons. If that is what “respect” refers to here, it simply is not the case, legally or philosophically, that a distinctive standard need exist on this point for members of the uniformed Services. In contrast, there is both a legal and philosophical basis for expecting a member of the uniformed Services to demonstrate “courage” in a way that cannot necessarily be expected of members of American society at large. “Courage” must be understood as not only fundamental to the performance of military duty—as a defining hallmark of the profession—but also distinctively so, in a way that “respect” must not necessarily be understood.

Department of the Navy Core Values

The Department of the Navy core values statement, as manifested in both the Navy and Marine Corps core value statements, features a singular elegance that is worthy of special attention: *The Navy and*

Marine Corps core values are presented as having been derived from the Constitution of the United States. This is a remarkably powerful and sophisticated approach because it provides a grounding and derivation for the core values and a rationale for their selection. Hence, the Department of the Navy statement does not suffer from the apparent arbitrariness in selection of core values that plagues the other statements. The Navy statement ties each core value to key phrases from one of the oaths administered upon entry into naval service,³ to wit:

Honor: “I will bear true faith and allegiance . . .”

Courage: “I will support and defend . . .”

Commitment: “I will obey the orders . . .”

Even if the connection of the Navy and Marine Corps core values to these key phrases is not obvious, the Navy’s official explanation of the connection is compelling and makes an excellent basis for elucidating the import of these core values—and for explaining precisely why they are core values—in instructional settings with naval personnel. On the downside, the fact that the key phrases come from a mixture of the Navy’s oath of

enlistment and from its commissioned officer oath of office constitutes a curious juxtaposition that may detract from the philosophical elegance of the arrangement.

This goes to a point that some might consider esoteric, but which in fact deserves consideration, namely, the question of what exactly constitutes the “professional” part of the military profession. By their very nature, codes of ethics pertain most directly to the professional segments of society. For example, while medical doctors are bound by the Hippocratic oath, it does not follow that the hospital medical records clerk or the radiology clinic receptionist are professionals in the same, relevant sense. They may be skilled technicians or tradespersons, but it is hard to make the case that they are classifiable as *professionals* in the traditional sense of the word. American society has grown so accustomed, in the last quarter or third of a century, to referring to *anyone* who is gainfully employed as a “professional” that the concept has become quite diluted. Hence, one routinely hears references to “professional” golfers, “professional” air conditioner repair persons, “professional” sales clerks in department

stores, and the like. Please note that this is not to say that “professionals” thus described do not make meaningful contributions to society. Rather, it means that members of professions hold special responsibilities that set them apart from the rest of society.

Properly speaking, professionals are persons charged with the control of expert

values statements. Rather, it is a reevaluation of the efficacy of the current core values statements in terms of their ability to communicate to the members of the profession the serious nature of the ethical enterprise. Some might feel inclined to counter by saying, in effect, “Aren’t we making much too big a deal about this? Is it not far more important that we have

arms should be able to articulate a defense of why this is so.

Some members of the profession might find these claims to be unduly theoretical. Some might regard them as bordering on irreverence. They might place such questioning in the same class with, for example, tinkering with the words of “America the Beautiful” or of the Pledge of Allegiance. However, the current core values statements deserve to be scrutinized. If after a decade of experience with the various core values statements their words are found to withstand scrutiny, they will become stronger and more enduring. If they are not able to withstand scrutiny borne of careful reflection, they need to be changed. In either case, it may well be that the time has come to conduct that reevaluation. **JFQ**

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knowledge not easily obtained by and not readily available to lay persons.⁴ That is why the medical doctor is a professional in the relevant sense and the medical office receptionist is not. In a similar vein, it is not entirely clear that every member of the uniformed Services is a “professional” in the relevant sense. At least the question should be asked as to whether there is a relevant difference in terms of professional status between, say, the young enlistee who drives a truck and the company commander who has far-reaching responsibilities concerning everything his or her company accomplishes or fails to accomplish and everything his or her subordinates do or fail to do. Of course, that does not mean that the truck driver is not important in his or her own circumscribed sphere; it just means that the label “professional” may not apply to that person in the same way that it does to a company commander.

In any case, the issue invites the question of whether the profession of arms should have a core values statement for those in bona fide professional positions, as is the case with medical doctors vis-à-vis the medical profession, or for all members of the team, as it were. The answer is probably the latter, and that is probably the best answer, given the enormous ethical decisionmaking responsibilities presently reposed even in junior enlisted personnel—the so-called strategic corporal—and given the context of America’s egalitarian social priorities.

Conclusion

The forgoing discussion is not a critique of the proposition that the profession of arms in the United States ought to champion core values, and it does not seek to question whether the profession should have core

some core values statements than it is that we have any *particular* values statements?” The question is a fair one, but it is also one that invites members of the profession to recall the ancient words of Socrates: “This is not a trivial question; what we are talking about is how one ought to live.”⁵ Presumably, the various uniformed Services expect their members to take their respective core values statements seriously—to memorize them, to reflect upon them, and to incorporate the values thus enshrined in their individual lives. However, if serious reflection on the content of a core values statement results in the impression that the statement itself is in some respect deficient or ill-conceived, that statement, rather than producing the intended sense of gravitas, might actually have a different effect. It may serve to trivialize the ethical enterprise and thus call into question the ethical commitments of the institution that embraces the statement. Instead of inspiring awe, the words actually could become, as the ancients might have said, merely “sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal.”⁶

Perhaps the time has come for DOD and each of the uniformed Services to consider what values distinctively define the profession of arms in a democratic society and why, if at all, there should be any differences among the Services. After all, it is one thing for the Services to have distinctive uniforms that serve the need of their varied operating environments, but it is quite another thing for a Service to have core ethical values that differ from other segments of the profession of arms. Moreover, if a uniformed Service’s core values really are “core”—not merely an arbitrary list of desirable traits that it would be nice if everyone had, military professional or not—then members of the profession of

NOTES

¹ As will be argued hereafter, the Coast Guard’s mission clearly makes it a part of the profession of arms, even if it is not aligned bureaucratically with the Department of Defense.

² “Department of Defense Core Values,” Military Leadership Diversity Commission, Issue Paper 6, December 2009, 1, available at <http://mldc.whs.mil/download/documents/Issue%20Papers/Core_Values_6.pdf>.

³ The oaths are as follows: For enlisted personnel: “I, [name], do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; and that I will obey the orders of the President of the United States and the orders of the officers appointed over me, according to regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice. So help me God. I swear (or affirm) that I am fully aware and fully understand the conditions under which I am enlisting.” For commissioned officer personnel: “I, (state your name), having been appointed a (rank) in the United States (branch of service), do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office upon which I am about to enter. So help me God.”

⁴ See Andrew Abbot, *The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

⁵ Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: The Modern Library, 1941), bk. 1, 352:d.

⁶ 1 Corinthians 13:1.