Strategic Value of an Ethics-Based Army Public Affairs Program Setting the Stage for Credibility in Large Scale Combat Operations

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While we are guarding the country, we must accept being the guardian of the finest ethics. The country needs it and we must do it.

—General Creighton W. Abrams, Creating the Credibility Gap

The information domain is one of the most prominent domains that commanders will be forced to acknowledge and engage in 21st century large-scale combat operations. Most military leaders acknowledge this in word. Yet, many relegate the public affairs program as a “soft” or “leaf-eater” skill. When the U.S. next engages in large-scale combat operations, the American public will demand clear answers on what the nation is fighting for. Public opinion among nations that partner with the U.S. in multi-national operations affects U.S. Army operational planning because of the limited tactical mission tasks that some multinational commanders can pursue with their publics’ backing. If the U.S. ever again faces casualty counts along the lines of Vietnam, Korea, or the two world wars, the public will likely express a high level of awareness and concern about the costs of combat. Those doubting the role that credibility with the American public plays in large-scale operations should study the effect that negative public opinion at home had on the military campaign in Vietnam in 1968.\textsuperscript{2} Tactical successes fell victim to a loss of trust in the military to get the job done. This reality might have been altered had military leaders not withheld information that could have made a difference in how the war was perceived.\textsuperscript{3} It took two decades for the services to begin recovering that trust with the American public.

Military operations can attract negative press attention because of factors that include a cultural tendency to avoid transparency during times of crisis. A crisis is an event or condition that has potential to create a firestorm of negative attention that disrupts operations and damages the reputation and future viability of an organization.\textsuperscript{4} Events that cause crisis situations happen to every kind of organization, whether public or private. To acknowledge the facts of a situation is not only a legal and moral requirement of professionals, but is also smart business. Vocational satisfaction equates to recruiting and readiness, according to communication professor and author Patricia Parsons. “Practitioners who are concerned about ethics have higher levels of job satisfaction than those who don’t.”\textsuperscript{5} A lack of codified communication ethics can result in actions that exacerbate the effects of organizational crisis events. Not every crisis can be prevented. Most can be mitigated. Commitment to a standard of professional ethics is most important when crisis strikes. The moment an organization experiences a crisis is not the time to review what is right and wrong. Those principles must be ingrained into the culture of the organization before a crisis event occurs.\textsuperscript{6}

The U.S. Army Public Affairs program is the military equivalent to the public relations program at a multinational corporation. Dustin Manley, who teaches communication at Centennial College, described public relations is an anxious profession, seeking to establish its practitioners as accredited professionals who play roles in leadership, culture and strategy.\textsuperscript{7} A 2016 global review of 31 credentialing programs, educational frameworks and global public relations (PR) trade group associations refined a list of skills,
abilities, knowledge and behaviors that communication leaders should demonstrate mastery, among them applying professionalism, ethics and law.  

The Army’s reputational value could rival kinetic firepower capabilities in building the force needed to compete against an existential threat in the 21st century. For U.S. Army leaders to prepare the force to dominate against a peer/near-peer rival in large scale combat operations, they must prioritize an ethical communication culture. Stakeholders see through empty rhetoric. Ethical codes only matter when enforced through organizational culture, starting with the chief executive. Creating, training, and enforcing a professional code of public affairs ethics is one immediate step service officials should take to compete in the information space.

Military leaders are stewards of the organization for a limited span of time. We must protect the institution and work to leave it credible and trusted. Credibility takes years to build, and minutes to destroy. The cost of a bad reputation at a unit, or of a single soldier, reflects on the military as a whole. Members of the public do not differentiate between a lie told at a brigade level versus a lie told at the Pentagon. When the news reports dishonesty related to the military at any level, it risks casting a negative perception over the institution as a whole. Professional ethics in communication is a top issue across corporate industry, in light of an ongoing collapse of public trust in government and corporations.

Professional military communication ethics are important for three reasons. First, they can help to set a cultural tone for adhering to the Army’s accountability requirements to the public. Beyond being communicators, U.S. Army public affairs officers are soldiers. As service members, they have an extra level of accountability to the American public. Second, a public affairs code of ethics can help drive a communication culture that keeps commanders in compliance with public expectations of honest, transparent dialogue. Meeting these expectations is not simply a way to follow trends. This translates into maintaining public support, thus enhancing freedom of maneuver across the information domain, now a seventh joint function. Third, ethical communication improves organizational reputation. Reputation for ethical conduct correlates to higher levels of employee attractiveness. Many soldiers either have personal stories, or can share stories from people they know, about loved ones or friends who discouraged them from joining the Army. This is a problem reflected in recent news that the Army missed its recruiting goals by 6,500 new soldiers in 2018. Missed recruiting translates into reduced combat readiness, tying credibility to military capability.

Bowe Bergdahl, Jessica Lynch, and Pat Tillman are names that cast the Army in a negative light. Though each story includes elements that were embarrassing to the force, the reason each caused national scandal is because military officials allowed a false narrative to take hold, or reported a false story. The Bowe Bergdahl case is an example of allowing a false narrative to persist. On June 30, 2009 Private First Class Bowe Bergdahl abandoned his unit in Afghanistan. Soldiers with knowledge of Bergdahl’s actions were forced to sign nondisclosure agreements. The investigation into the disappearance was classified. Competing theories about whether Bergdahl deliberately left his unit or simply fell behind on a patrol went unanswered. Many among the public were sympathetic to Bergdahl, as defense officials refused to acknowledge that he deliberately separated from his unit. A lack of clear information left the American public misinformed. In 2011, the Army promoted Bergdahl to the rank of Sergeant in absentia. Upon his return to the U.S. in 2014, U.S. National Security Advisor Susan Rice said on national television that Bergdahl “served the United States with honor and distinction.” Bergdahl pled guilty to desertion and misbehavior before the enemy in a Fort Bragg courtroom on October 16, 2017 and received a dishonorable discharge.

On April 22, 2004 Corporal Pat Tillman died in a fratricide incident in Afghanistan. Tillman was nationally known, having left behind a football career with the Arizona Cardinals to become an Army Ranger.
Tillman’s command withheld the nature of his death in what a congressional report likens to a PR move to create a hero persona: to transforming a soldier’s death “into an inspirational message that served instead to support the nation’s foreign policy wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.” Army representatives told Tillman’s family that he was killed by enemy fire. As in the Bergdahl case, orders were given to not discuss the incident. The story of Tillman’s death brought national attention, even garnering a comment from then President George W. Bush at the 2004 White House Correspondent’s Dinner. Then Major General Stanley McCrystal signed off on a Silver Star recommendation for Tillman, a decoration that is not usually given in cases of where a service member dies from injuries sustained as a result of friendly fire. The citation for the award claimed that Tillman “placed himself into the line of devastating enemy fire,” with eye-witness statements altered by someone in the chain of command. A 2007 Department of Defense Inspector General report acknowledged that proper procedures for notifying Tillman’s family had not been followed, justifying their mistrust of the Army.

The story of U.S. Army Private First Class Jessica Lynch is one of the earliest media hero stories of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Lynch deployed to Iraq as a member of the 507th Maintenance Company. On March 23, 2003 her convoy was attacked in An Nasiriyah. Lynch survived and was taken to a hospital by Iraqi forces. U.S. forces retrieved her on April 1st. After her return to U.S. custody, military public affairs officials briefed reporters as if her capture and rescue were a story worthy of Hollywood treatment. It was claimed that Lynch shot at enemy troops until running out of ammunition, killing several, intent on fighting to the death, not wanting to be taken alive. Military officials rushed to tell a larger story of bravery using a broad brush at the expense of important details. A U.S. Central Command public affairs officer called it “an awesome story.” Military public affairs officials attempted to cast Lynch as a hero persona: “the little girl Rambo from the hills of West Virginia.” In congressional testimony, Lynch described the story told by military officials about her heroism as “not true,” adding “I am still confused about why they chose to lie and try to make me a legend.”

Each of these cases resulted in years of bad press for the Army, under headlines like “Pat Tillman: the superstar cut down by friendly fire then used to sell war,” “What the Army Doesn’t Want You to Know About Bowe Bergdahl,” and “5 Years Ago: When the Pentagon and Media Lied about Jessica Lynch.” It was unnecessary for the death of Pat Tillman, the capture and rescue of Jessica Lynch, or the desertion of Bowe Bergdahl to facilitate years of media friction and public suspicion for the Army. An ethical communication approach would have reduced the appearance that U.S. defense officials potentially withheld or deliberately distorted information. To unnecessarily withhold facts not only violates the Army’s values, but causes problems for the institution as a whole. In spite of the Army’s status as a values-based organization, public affairs actions sometimes fail to meet transparency expectations. This is a symptom of a larger problem: the Army does not formally recognize public affairs as an ethics-based profession within the service.

Ethics Defined

Acting ethically is not simply following the letter of the law, or figuring out what one can get away with. Parsons defines ethics as “the study of moral rightness or wrongness, which is limited by the human ability to reason.” It fills the gaps between knowledge and experience to guide decision-making. Absent a deistic worldview, seeking an ethical approach becomes a humanistic exercise that is susceptible to becoming a ritual in which people look for evidence to support a preferred decision. Gino, Norton, and Weber defined the actors in this scenario as motivated Bayesians, individuals who seek plausible explanation to act egoistically while exuding the appearance of selfless morality.

Seeking out an ethical approach acknowledges that there is universal right and wrong, regardless of where each individual believes the power of determination resides. Every person and organization holds to some sort of ethical code, whether deliberately or passively. Personal codes of ethics, framed by worldview and...
experience, drive how we act in daily life. Members of the U.S. Army consider its members to comprise an ethics-based collective that puts service to others ahead of self.

Personal ethics are sometimes challenged in the professional realm, when the aims of a leader do not align with what a follower believes to be right. In the 2016 book *Ethics in Public Relations*, Patricia Parsons writes of five pillars of ethics in public relations.

- Veracity (to tell the truth)
- Non-maleficence (to do no harm)
- Beneficence (to do good)
- Confidentiality (to respect privacy)
- Fairness (to be fair and socially responsible)

Being an ethical professional is a delicate balancing act of competing loyalties. Because professional communicators work on behalf of their organizations and publics, ethical dilemmas are inevitable. The most fundamental role of professional communication ethics is to be able to quickly recognize an ethical dilemma and make a defensible decision.

**Codes of Professional Ethics**

The concept of ethics is directly linked to military professionalism. A recognized and practiced code of ethics maintains standards and strengthens the profession. It serves as a contract between a profession and the society that it serves. Professionals must be self-policing in order to be afforded such status by society. Professionals also need the trust of their clients in order to self-regulate. Public affairs officers and public relations practitioners must be able to successfully navigate through frictions in representing the best interest of the public and the client.

*It is Department of Defense policy to make available timely and accurate information so that the public, the Congress, and the news media may assess and understand the facts about national security and defense strategy.*

—U.S. Department of Defense, *Principles of Information*
Military professionals are linked to the will of the citizenry more than civil professionals. A sense of ethics calls the professional to make decisions for accomplishing the mission, with disregard to career benefit. Communication leaders have an ultimate duty to the public, the practitioner and the profession. The U.S. Constitution, National Security Strategy, the Principles of Information, as well as Joint and U.S. Army public affairs doctrine rightly put a heavy burden of honesty and transparency on the Army for the good of the nation. Though military doctrine memorializes these requirements, military communication practitioners sometimes encounter resistance to a professional communication ethics. This reality is often rooted in command culture. Ethical codes are meaningless if senior leaders do not support and enforce them.

The U.S. military has been slow to formally adopt and enforce ethical communication frameworks. The Public Relations Society of America published its first code of ethics in 1950. The International Association of Public Relations created a set of governing principles for its members, known as the Code of Athens, in 1965. The European Confederation of Public Relations adopted the European Code of Professional Conduct in PR, more commonly known as the Code of Lisbon, in 1978. Codes of professional ethics created by the Public Relations Society of America, International Association of Business Communicators and Arthur W. Page society share the same foundational principles of honesty and accuracy. The Page Principles provide a starting point for military public affairs doctrine writers to consider in writing military codes of communication ethics. The U.S. Department of Defense published the Principles of Information in 1983. In 2000, Donald Rumsfeld became the only Secretary of Defense to sign the Principles of Information. In 2012, the Department of the Navy’s public affairs regulation became the first and only service public affairs regulation that includes a canon of ethics. The U.S. Army Public Affairs Center completed a draft re-write of the service’s public affairs regulation (AR 360-1 The Army Public Affairs Program) in early 2018, including a draft code of professional communication ethics.

**Ethics as Strategy**

When public affairs leaders advocate for values-based communication programs, they advocate for policies that connect their commands to doctrinal and strategy documents up to the U.S. National Security Strategy. Using an ethics-based public affairs approach builds trust inside and outside the organization, enhancing freedom of maneuver across the information domain and maintaining public support. This translates into...
practical support from the public through the appropriations process and maintains a reasonable level of autonomy for military leaders to achieve military objectives.

The 2017 National Security Strategy calls for “direct communication campaigns to advance American influence and counter challenges from ideological threats... These campaigns will adhere to American values.” At the Department of Defense, the Principles of Information support the National Security Strategy, directing transparency to maintain the public trust, within the confines of operations security. Army Doctrinal Reference Publication 1-0 memorializes the Army Ethic, which directs that soldiers’ actions must be in accordance with the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution, in adherence with the nation’s values, fully accountable to the people.

American values affect every aspect of how U.S. forces fight and win. The Army Ethic guides us and the profession, always. This is non-negotiable. We demonstrate the Army Value of integrity as we make decisions and take actions that are consistent with the moral principles of the Army Ethic. To violate the Army Ethic is to break our sacred bond of trust with each other and with those whom we serve. Failure to live by and uphold the Army Ethic brings discredit on us all and may have strategic implications for the mission.

Army Regulation 360-1 The Army Public Affairs Program supports this ethical framework, saying that the Public Affairs Program “fulfills the Army’s obligation to keep the American people and the Army informed and helps to establish the conditions that lead to confidence in America’s Army and its readiness to conduct full-spectrum operations.”

Trust is the most critical component to successful public affairs work. This is what sets the U.S. Army apart from our nation’s competitors, who place little value on truth. What we say must match what we do. U.S. Army doctrine seeks to bridge the “say-do” gap by using information operations practices. Communication ethicists address it through public relations strategy. U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel Jeffery Schwander warned in a 1988 U.S. Army War College report that in spite of regulations that demand ethical behavior from its members, U.S. military leaders many times choose to cede the moral high ground, undermining military professionalism.

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**Ethical Checklist**

- Would I be happy for this decision to headline the news tomorrow?
- Is there a universal rule that applies here?
- Will the proposed course of action bring about a good result?
- What would happen if everybody did this?
- What will the proposed action do to my character or the character of my organization?

Is the proposed course of action consistent with my values and principles?

*Source: The Ethics Centre, *What is Ethics*"
Communication ethics are not for bullying commanders. There are times that withholding information is necessary to achieve a greater good than can be realized if that information becomes public. The principles and rules for withholding information must be defined ahead of time. In the midst of a crisis is not the time to determine organizational values or rules of information engagement. No public affairs program can ever live up to full disclosure of all facts of every happening across Department of Defense operations worldwide in real time. The mission is to ensure that relevant information is made available and to respond to questions as openly as operational security allows. The ethical approach includes protecting information that could be used by enemy forces. In her book *Ethics in Public Relations*, Patricia Parsons writes that “If telling the truth outright is likely to harm one or more publics, then it is reasonable to conclude that it is probably more ethical to avoid full disclosure.” It is ethical to limit disclosure, as long as it is not done to deliberately mislead the public. Ethics in crisis situations include withholding comment until the facts are known, or acknowledging that facts are unknown in initial comments.

Ethics in public relations rely on a symbiotic relationship with ethical practices in journalism, a field that is also facing challenges with public trust at the national level according to 2018 Gallup polling. Ethical organizational communication responsibilities include making wise judgments about how to best work with members of the press to provide the right information to the public, whether according to a requirement of morality or law. Sometimes the interests of reporters and military pursuits do not align. A 1981 case study from Korea provides a case in point. In the aftermath of a U.S. soldier killing four soldiers, and seriously wounding one at Camp Casey’s Ingman range in South Korea, division leadership chose not to reference the 2nd Infantry Division in press releases, and to take a passive public affairs release posture out of concern that sensational news coverage could cause racial problems across the division, interfering with the mission to deter an invasion from North Korea. This decision did not uphold the Department of Defense Principles of Information, but did support theater strategy. This points to a reason why a code of ethics is important to have before crisis strikes. Following policy that was previously vetted in times of calm can lead to better decisions in the heat of a crisis than decisions made without the benefit of consideration and debate.

**Gambling with the Army’s Credibility**

Commanders and public affairs officers are not owners, but stewards of the profession and public trust. Leaders who served over the decades since the end of the Vietnam War put great effort into reviving trust between the military and the public. It is a professional and moral responsibility to preserve that trust. It is not guaranteed, nor predetermined as a right. Trust must be earned through long term through relationship with the public. Military public affairs officers are at the center of that mission.

The public relations and public affairs communities have suffered negative perceptions over the years. Some members of the public and military consider PR practitioners and public affairs officers to be less than completely honest. The military apparatus defines ethical lines that must not be crossed into codes of personal conduct and rules of engagement, but often leaves wider, unwritten margins in non-kinetic practices. This sets conditions that allow for a normalization of deviance. In an effort to build a trusted profession, many among the collective PR industry are taking ethical conduct seriously. U.S. Army leaders must codify that same concern into public communication efforts across the force.

The military enjoys the highest levels of public approval of any institution, with 80% of survey respondents saying they have a great deal of trust in the military in 2018. However, polling also suggests that the U.S. Army has the lowest public approval ratings among the military services and is viewed as the second most important military service, behind the Air Force. The most critical demographic for the Army is young people. U.S. adults between the ages of 18-29 exhibit the lowest level of confidence in the military, according to a 2016 Pew Research Center survey. (See Figure 4.)
Figure 4. Results of the 2016 Pew Research Study.
Source: Pew Research Center, Older American most confident in military to act in public’s interest.

Though most public affairs officers are ethical professionals, there are people in all vocations who take questionable action to prevent embarrassment for the organization or person who signs their paychecks. This has been a fact throughout human history. Some common ethical failings among public communicators

Public affairs efforts are effective when trusted. The command has the greatest freedom of movement when the commander is trusted. The current generation of military professionals has enjoyed very high levels of public support. In contrast, the Vietnam generation of service members was spit on and described derogatory terminology because of a loss of public trust. A culture that works according to a code of professional ethics will resist normalizations of deviance that could lead to future reductions in public trust. The public affairs officer plays a central role in building and maintaining that trust. Trust is fragile. It takes time to build and can be destroyed instantaneously. The key to gaining the critical element of trust is ethical action by the public affairs officer.82

Public Relations: A Troubled History

For the message to be trusted, the one delivering it must be trustworthy. The earliest days of public relations used media influence for the good of companies, often to the public’s detriment. Early 20th century PR practices often used social sciences to influence how people think.83 Similarly, during World War II, military communicators worked to influence the American public to support the war effort. This legacy still taints public opinion of professional communicators as spin doctors.84 Like its PR cousin, public affairs is regarded with suspicion by some. More than one soldier has told me that public affairs officers are uncompensated to bend the truth. Unfortunately, that suspicion is not entirely unjust. Public relations practitioners have a reputation for developing skills to manipulate the public for profit.85 The 2002 book
Toxic Sludge is Good for You: Lies, Damn Lies and the Public Relations Industry and the 2005 movie Thank You for Smoking use real case studies to make the case that devoid of ethics, PR is a dangerous tool of influence for those who can afford to wield it. This negative perception interferes with the trustworthiness of professional communicators.86

The best way to change the negative view of public relations or public affairs practitioners is to self-impose a professional code of ethics that is supported, and enforced, by top organizational leaders.87 Unfortunately, professional ethics is not routinely prioritized as a topic of discussion beyond the training environment, except when a crisis strikes.88 It is a leader responsibility to set the culture in which ethical practitioners will not be forced into having to choose between loyalty to the organization and loyalty to the profession. Without a culture that revolves around specified, enforced professional ethics, the current model of the Army Public Affairs Program will continue to struggle to achieve full professional recognition. If the U.S. government broadcaster Voice of America, which exists to influence foreign publics in favor of American policies, has a published code of ethics,89 the information capabilities of the U.S. Army should as well.

Public affairs communication does influence, but is not a battlefield fire. It is what Alexander Frame, association professor of communication at the University of Burgundy, calls a “force of cultural innovation.”90 In the wake of the Iraqi insurgency, military leaders across the joint force began to recognize the information domain’s strategic importance. Military culture adapted to weaponize communication as a battlefield effect. The Army briefly realigned public affairs within the Maneuver, Fires and Effects branch structure. The Army also created an Information Operations functional area, as a coordinating function to align information efforts across the battlespace. In 2011, Rolling Stone ran a story accusing Army officials in Afghanistan of using elements of information operations to manipulate a visiting congressional delegation.91 One can argue that a tactical mission success is the penultimate ethical consideration for managing public engagement efforts, encouraging a return to a fires-based mentality for public affairs leaders. However, using public communication to explicitly influence U.S. and North Atlantic Treaty Organization member country publics could cause greater problems than the existing challenges the messaging command is trying to solve.92 In his farewell speech last year, Navy public affairs officer Captain Jeff Davis warned that using public affairs as a weapon system runs counter to the basic values of the profession, and the values that the military seeks to defend.93 An ethics-based professional perspective asks whether victory at the expense of our constitutional values is a true victory at all. To sacrifice credibility now is to sacrifice it for at least a generation.

Role of the Professional Communicator

Public relation leaders are rising to top executive roles as chief communication officers across corporate industry, a role that is gaining greater influence on corporate strategy and culture. Though the role of chief communication officers is gaining prominence, there is debate as to whether communicators can be considered professionals. The prevailing concept of professionalism holds that societies proffer profession status based on communities of self-policing workers who together hone specialized fields of work that provide a benefit to society. The most commonly recognized professionals include medical doctors, attorneys and members of the clergy. In a study of the military profession in Europe, Universita Degli Studi di Torino professor Dr. Marina Nuciari summarized a frequent set of attributes typically ascribed to professionals.

- Acting according to professional knowledge to achieve optimum results for the institution
- Adherence to a code of professional ethics
- Leadership based on vocational competence94
The chief communication officer is an advocate between an organization and the public and has loyalties that require a clearly defined ethos to walk the line between competing interests among stakeholders with different agendas. Communication practitioners who do not ground to a code of ethics will inevitably be drawn into an ethical quagmire because one cannot equally represent opposing sides in an issue. The school of thought that considers communicators as professionals cite adherence to an industry code of ethics as a major indicator of professionalism. At its core, the role of civilian and military communication officers is as keeper of the organization’s image and advocacy from the organization to the public and from the public to the organization.

Gaining a credible information edge requires a fully professionalized, ethics-based public affairs capability. In the public relations community, this means that practitioners are expected to advocate for causes authentically. In military public affairs, it means that the professional knows that duty is ultimately to the truth, even if the truth is at odds with a leader, unit or even military service. Military professionals are obligated to steward advancement of their professions. The ultimate mark of a professional is to be willing to take personal and professional risk to make the right call on hard decisions for the benefit of the organization.

Role of Professional Ethics in the Public Affairs Profession

Though professional ethics in public relations is receiving renewed interest in an age of reduced social trust, it is not a new concept. A 1970 U.S. Army War College study concluded that “ethical behavior and technical competence are tightly interlaced.” In 2005, a study at the University of Alabama found that practitioners who prioritize professional ethics are more likely to become highly-successful communication leaders. Organizational leadership is a key actor in setting a culture that acts as a key factor in affecting how its members perform. Ethical culture is not just an organizational virtue. It also promulgates professionalism. Parsons wrote that “Public relations ethics focuses on the ethical implications of the strategies and tactics that are applied to solve the public relations and communications problems of organizations.” It is separate from the corporate ethics program or, in our case, the Army Values. Among the profession of corporate communicators, military public affairs officers have the highest obligation to the public in a system where the military is owned by and accountable to the public. The military officer swears an oath not to a commander, service or even the defense department. The military officer’s oath is to the constitution,
the nation, the people. Where corporate communicators face competing obligations between the client and public, the military public affairs officer’s duty is overwhelmingly to the public. U.S. military doctrine understands this. It is often command culture that does not.

The U.S. Army is not the only service with a cultural climate that sometimes resists an ethical implementation of public affairs. In 2018, the U.S. Air Force implemented a temporary ban on proactive public engagement until Air Force public affairs officers completed a recertification process. The policy letter announcing this guidance itself was originally published as an “for official use only: not for public release” document. Ethics plays a key role in public affairs, especially relating to the role of public affairs officer as mediator. The pursuit of professional ethics cannot be a mechanical process that finds a way to justify actions because of convenience. Military officers who seek those ends are abdicating their moral duty. Writing in Redefining the Military Profession: The Intersection of Profession and Ethics, former U.S. Army officer Casey Landru noted that the Army “propagates an Army ethics so that Army professionals understand the spirit of self-regulation, and not just the letter of the law.”

Where Loyalties Lay

There is a natural friction in practicing public relations, a latent moral conflict where practitioners must choose between competing loyalties to client and public. The same is true of military public affairs officers. Nuciari wrote of two kinds of loyalty in military organizations: a loyalty to the organization and a loyalty to the profession. Loyalty to the organization is akin to a loyalty to the bureaucracy, in which the professional is an “obedient and faithful defender of the ‘uniqueness’ of the organization to which he belongs.” Unchecked this can lead to adopting the organizational ethical imperative: protecting the organization by not telling the truth. Loyalty to the profession is based on socio-ethical imperatives that honor the ethical commitments that professionals make to the role they play as members of a professional body that provides a specific service to their organizations. Ethical codes should guide communicators to make choices that serve to elevate the professional status of the community of organizational communicators.

Writing for Military Review, U.S. Army Major Walter E. Richter wrote that the ethical role of public affairs “supersedes any one command or mission.” Ethical communicators serve their clients, but not when the clients act in bad faith. Every U.S. citizen is constitutionally entitled to a legal defense. Unlike the legal system, there is no Constitutional right to a defense in the court of public opinion. Unfortunately, there are times that a unit leader takes a position that necessitates an evaluation of loyalty to the command, or to the principles of the profession or military service. This is a friction addressed in law of warfare training that every U.S. service member receives. Every soldier knows that one cannot mount a legal defense on grounds of simply following orders. Public affairs officials must be savvy enough to know when those times are and courageous enough to make and defend the ethical decision. Public affairs officers have an ethical responsibility to not conduct malpractice, as their stakeholders are the public who sustain the military.

A New Concept of Public Affairs Mission and Professional Ethics

Historical trends suggest that public trust in one of the biggest predictors of who will prevail in a military contest involving U.S. forces. As the U.S. Army adapts to the modern strategic environment, it should put the same energy into a change culture for building trust through ethical communication practices as it is currently using to redefine physical readiness. All U.S. Army public affairs practitioners should follow a code of professional ethics to ensure that the U.S. Army retains the trust and confidence of the American people and the host nation audiences in the lands we operate. This code must include a principle-based vision that speaks to the spirit of public accountability, rooted in common values including service to country, honesty and loyalty to the U.S. Constitution, rather than a litany of overly detailed rules. It is not
enough to create a code of professional public affairs ethics. Leaders must inculcate it into service culture forcefully and frequently.\textsuperscript{114} The author proposes the following as a recommendation for a future code of professional ethics within U.S. Army public affairs doctrine.

In 1968 President Lyndon B. Johnson had to contend with the reality that losing the battle for public opinion was a bigger strategic blow to the war effort than operational successes in Vietnam could overcome. Social media and the democratization of information will amplify this reality in future large-scale combat operations involving U.S. forces. The nation that is the most trusted by its people is likely to be the nation that wins. The military that is the most honest is the one that will be the most trusted. The military communication program that operates ethically is one most likely to gain and hold trust over the long term. The public relations industry provides over 60 years of examples to draw inspiration from for a modern code of public affairs ethics. The time to create, support, and enforce such a policy in the U.S. Army is now, before the United States meets the next near peer threat in large-scale combat operations.
Public Affairs (PA) enhances the commander’s freedom of movement by maintaining the nation’s trust, setting favorable conditions among publics in areas of operation, defeating propaganda and enabling ethical, timely, continual communication between primary stakeholders and the command. Above all else, public affairs keeps the U.S. Army accountable to the public it serves and guards the Army’s reputation as an ethical institution.

- PA will at all times be truthful. PA soldiers and civilians will hold themselves to be experts in their craft.
- PA will be loyal to the public, the mission, and the command.
- PA will support a free flow of information between the organization and its audiences.
- PA will disclose information in accordance with the Department of Defense Principles of Information: Maximum Disclosure—Minimum Delay.
- PA will serve to enhance the value of communication to the command and the military community.

U.S. Army public affairs activities will operate under the principles of Security, Accuracy, Propriety and Policy.

Security: PA activities will not release classified information, but will not withhold information simply because it could be embarrassing to the organization.

Accuracy: PA will not deliberately release any inaccurate information, nor refrain from correcting inaccurate information released or transmitted by other sources.

Propriety: PA activities will respect the legal and privacy rights of persons, parties and organizations that are represented in PA products because of an affiliation or mission connection with U.S. forces or Department of Defense activities.

Policy: PA activities will adhere to U.S. laws and service regulations.

Figure 6. U.S. Army Public Affairs.
End Notes


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Tench (Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2013), 229.


24 House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, 7.


27 House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, 43.

28 Kampfner.

29 House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, 43.

30 Ibid., 2.


35 Parsons, 8.

36 Ibid.


40 Parsons, 18.

41 Ibid., 26.

42 Ibid., 129.

43 Johnson, 88.

44 Parsons, 62.


46 Johnson, 95.


51 Parsons, 25.


56 Carr, 67.


59 The Ethics Centre.


63 Bowen et al., 21.

64 Parsons, 149.

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