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The Simons Center
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The Lewis and Clark Center
100 Stimson Ave., Suite 1149
Fort Leavenworth, Kansas 66027
Ph: 913-651-0624 • Fax: 913-651-4519
Email: office@TheSimonsCenter.org
www.TheSimonsCenter.org

Publisher
Lora Morgan

Editor-in-Chief
John J. Nelson
Lt. Col., U.S. Army, Ret.

Contributing Editor
Jennifer Dessert

Design/Production
Mark H. Wiggins
MHW Public Relations and Communications

Features

From the Editors

As we present the Fall 2025 edition of the *InterAgency Journal*, the through-line across this volume is the strain placed on professional ethics, institutional trust, and leadership judgment in an era of strategic competition, domestic polarization, and accelerating complexity. The authors in this issue confront that strain from multiple vantage points—strategic communication, intelligence, climate, civil-military relations, command and control, and ethics education—offering readers both sober warning and practical avenues for renewal.

Tom Kuehnel opens with an examination of NATO's public diplomacy that traces the alliance's shift between threat-based legitimacy and value-based narrative "hegemony," and shows how renewed great-power rivalry, the war in Ukraine, and the return of President Trump expose deep fractures in NATO's ability to speak with one coherent voice. Matthew Tompkins then addresses the politicization of intelligence, arguing that when both elected officials and practitioners expect bias in intelligence products, skepticism itself becomes self-fulfilling and corrodes the trust on which apolitical service depends.

John Craig turns to national security and climate change, making the case that environmental instability is no longer a peripheral concern but a central strategic variable that will shape infrastructure, readiness, and interagency planning for decades. Michael Forsyth follows with a reminder that professional duty in civil-military relations still begins with disciplined subordination to lawful civilian authority, especially when senior officers are tempted to signal partisanship or selectively obey. Valiant Haller's contribution on complexity leadership theory in command and control offers a framework for combining mission command with adaptive and emergent leadership, so that decentralized initiative is enabled rather than constrained by hierarchy.

At the heart of this edition is a three-part series on military ethics and leader development by Joseph Blanding. One article emphasizes virtue and character formation, arguing that annual compliance training and sporadic PME exposure are insufficient preparation for right-versus-right dilemmas in complex operational environments. A companion piece integrates systems thinking with the ethical triangle to discipline judgment under mission command, linking commanders' intent, realistic vignettes, and ethics-aware AARs to turn abstract principles into unit habits. The third article explores consequentialist ethics in practice, contending that Army culture and accountability norms often push leaders toward rigid rule-following and away from the balanced use of rules, outcomes, and virtues that the ethical triangle is intended to foster.

We close with three book reviews that extend these themes into adjacent domains. Two of the books, *The Impossible Mission* and *Implementing U.S. Arms Control Agreements*, were published as part of the Simons Center book program. Andy Schoffner assesses *The Impossible Mission*, drawing lessons about alliance strain, political decision-making, and the burdens of command for practitioners wrestling with contemporary crisis management. Andy Morgado's review of *Implementing U.S. Arms Control Agreements* reflects on the technical and diplomatic challenges of sustaining verification regimes when great-power competition and domestic divisions threaten long-established norms. Brian Schmitz's review of *Bioethics in Medicine* reminds readers that ethical leadership is equally vital in clinical and operational contexts, where questions of human dignity, risk, and consent are never abstract.

Taken together, the contributions in this issue underscore a simple but demanding proposition: in a world of fractured narratives, contested expertise, and accelerating change, ethical leadership and interagency cooperation remain the decisive advantages of free societies. Thank you for your continued engagement with the Simons Center's mission, and for the work you do every day to steward that advantage in your own organizations and formations. – **JJN**

Contributors Wanted!

The Simons Center is looking for articles that involve contemporary interagency issues at both the conceptual and the application level.

The *InterAgency Journal* is a refereed national security studies journal providing a forum to inform a broad audience on matters pertaining to tactical and operational issues of cooperation, collaboration, and/or coordination among and between various governmental departments, agencies, and offices. Each issue contains a number of articles covering a variety of topics, including national security, counterterrorism, stabilization and reconstruction operations, and disaster preparation and response.

The *InterAgency Journal* has worldwide circulation and has received praise from various military, government, and non-government institutions, including the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

We're also looking for book reviews!

Submit a book review or suggest a book to review to editor@TheSimonsCenter.org.

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www.TheSimonsCenter.org • editor@TheSimonsCenter.org
www.facebook.com/TheSimonsCenter
Location: 655 Biddle Blvd., Fort Leavenworth, KS 66027
Mailing Address: CGSC Foundation, 100 Stimson Ave., Suite 1149, Fort Leavenworth, KS 66027
913-651-0624 - office • 913-651-4519 - fax

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From Narrative Hegemony to the Audience Dilemma:

Structural Transformations in NATO's Public Diplomacy

by Tom Kühnel

In times of geopolitical transition, institutions anchored in the postwar liberal order face mounting pressure to justify their continued relevance—not only to adversaries, but increasingly to their own publics. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), as both a political and military alliance, is at the heart of this dilemma. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 triggered not only a strategic shift within NATO, but also a rhetorical shift. NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept reinvoked the language of collective defense, systemic rivalry "strategic competition," and deterrence—echoes of Cold War thinking re-emerging in a fragmented international order.[1] Yet this return to strategic clarity on paper masks a deeper problem: the Alliance's ability to generate public legitimacy and understanding is eroding, both among its own people and among states in the Global South. NATO's public diplomacy must therefore be analyzed not only as a vehicle for external communication, but as a contested field of legitimization within fractured public spheres.

Historically, public diplomacy has served NATO both as a means of projecting unity in times of strategic threat and as a soft power tool to reinforce legitimacy within member states. During the Cold War, the threat was visible and the publics mostly aligned with NATO's mission. After 1991, messaging shifted toward liberal peacekeeping and democracy promotion, and by the early 2000s it was reframed again to justify interventions under the banner of the "War on Terror." Each phase reflected broader strategic transformations and recalibrations of NATO's purpose.

Today this model is faltering, moral clarity is contested, internal political will is fragmented, and external threats are increasingly hybrid and diffuse. The line between war and peace is becoming blurry. As NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte observed, "We are not at war, but are certainly not at peace either."[2]

This article argues that NATO's public diplomacy has entered a new era, distinct from previous

Tom Kühnel is a Political Science student and an international scholar with a deep interest in global political dynamics. Born and raised in Hamburg, Germany, Tom has cultivated a strong academic background and is focused on understanding the intricacies of political systems and international relations. Currently studying in the United States, at the Park University in Parkville Missouri, Tom is dedicated to expanding his knowledge and contributing to the field through his academic pursuits.

phases. The Alliance no longer operates from a hegemonic center and its normative authority is questioned by adversaries and the public alike. Public diplomacy is no longer about explaining missions or defending budgets but about bridging diverging perceptions between NATO's strategic imperatives and societies shaped by decades of peace and prosperity. This gap is structural: legitimacy is filtered through critical discourses that highlight hypocrisy, historical amnesia, and double standards. NATO's adversaries exploit these vulnerabilities through "negative soft power,"[3] while publics in democratic societies, where institutional trust has eroded, are increasingly receptive to such narratives.[4]

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In this fragmented environment, NATO faces the paradox of needing broader public support for deterrence and readiness while possessing fewer narrative tools to mobilize it. Traditional reliance on "shared values" is insufficient unless critically examined against how they are enacted in practice. To address this challenge, this paper reconstructs NATO's four eras of public diplomacy, analyzes the current gap between geopolitical reality and public perception, and outlines avenues for future research. The aim is not to defend NATO policy, but to understand how public diplomacy functions when moral narratives, strategic imperatives, and public expectations no longer align.

Eras of NATO's Public Diplomacy

The Cold War Era (1949–1991)

The origins of NATO's public diplomacy are inseparable from the early Cold War. In an era of ideological polarization, NATO's role was less to explain policy than to affirm a shared identity: a transatlantic democratic community under existential threat. Public diplomacy served two purposes—reassuring domestic publics about deterrence and presenting the Alliance as morally superior to the Eastern Bloc.

The 1949 Strategic Concept emphasized political and economic stability and the "moral strength of the peoples of the North Atlantic area" as essential for defense.[5] By 1952, this logic was reinforced with explicit reference to ideological confrontation, underscoring that cohesion and public support were vital elements of deterrence.[6] In practice, this meant centralized messaging, speaker programs, and controlled media campaigns aimed at legitimizing containment.

During the late 1950s and 1960s, NATO institutionalized these efforts through the NATO Information Service and the move to Brussels, transforming Public Diplomacy into a structured field. Psychological defense—winning "hearts and minds"—became central as the Soviet Union achieved nuclear parity.[7] Throughout the Cold War, NATO's Public Diplomacy operated within a unipolar narrative: the enemy was clear, the goal was survival, and communication relied on binary contrasts of freedom versus oppression, democracy versus totalitarianism. While enthusiasm varied, publics largely accepted NATO's mission because the threat was tangible. Legitimacy rested not only on defense commitments, but on NATO's role as the embodiment of a liberal-democratic order resisting authoritarianism. This coherence of threat, identity, and narrative gave public diplomacy a clarity it would not fully recover in later eras.

The Peacekeeping Era (1991–2001)

The collapse of the Soviet Union forced NATO to reorient both its strategy and its public diplomacy. Without a singular existential threat,

the Alliance redefined itself as a stabilizing force in a wider security environment. The 1991 Strategic Concept emphasized crisis management, conflict prevention, and arms control, and extended NATO's communicative ambition: Promoting a "zone of stability and well-being" across Europe through partnership and outreach.[8]

Public diplomacy shifted from reassurance to persuasion, presenting NATO not only as a defense alliance, but as a liberal peace project. This narrative found expression in the Balkans, where interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo were framed as humanitarian actions to prevent genocide and ethnic cleansing. However, civilian casualties and contested legal justifications revealed the fragility of this approach. Externally, initiatives like Partnership for Peace aimed to prepare Eastern European publics for integration. Internally, NATO increasingly relied on values-based language to convince skeptical Western audiences. This dual-track strategy innovated but also exposed vulnerabilities, as legitimacy now depended less on defense and more on normative identity.[9]

Critics highlighted the selectivity of interventions and warned of mission creep. Questions such as "Why Kosovo and not Rwanda?" underscored the limits of NATO's moral framing. In the absence of a clear enemy, public diplomacy became contested and revealed early signs of normative overstretch.[10] Ultimately, the Peacekeeping Era successfully rebranded NATO for a post-Cold War world but at the cost of long-term credibility. By aligning its communication too closely with idealistic projections, the Alliance laid the groundwork for future crises of legitimacy that would emerge in the conflicts to come.

The War on Terror Era (2001–2021)

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 marked a turning point for NATO. For the first time, Article 5 was invoked, but the adversary was not a state—it was al-Qaeda, a diffuse transnational network. NATO's mission thus shifted from defending borders to defending values and public diplomacy became central to justifying this transformation. NATO's 1999 Strategic Concept had already introduced the notion of "out-of-area" missions, but after 2001, this became the operational norm.[11]

Messaging leaned heavily on freedom, democracy, human rights, and the responsibility to protect. The intervention in Afghanistan was framed as both defensive and transformative, a campaign of liberation and nation-building.[12] Early public support was strong, with Afghanistan portrayed as the moral extension of Kosovo. As the war dragged on, NATO's rhetoric diverged from realities on the ground. Corruption, mission creep, casualties, and public fatigue eroded legitimacy. The Iraq War, launched outside NATO's framework, deepened disunity and damaged trust. Public diplomacy shifted from strategic identity-building to reactive damage control.

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Younger generations increasingly questioned the coherence between NATO's stated ideals and its actions. Why promote democracy abroad while tolerating autocratic allies? Why defend human rights while conducting drone strikes? NATO's reliance on normative rhetoric left it vulnerable to charges of hypocrisy and overreach.

This was no longer an era of narrative cohesion—it became an era of narrative struggle. Publics were no longer aligned behind a singular vision of liberal internationalism. The younger generation, in particular, began to question the coherence between the West's stated ideals and its actions. Why promote democracy abroad while

tolerating autocratic allies? Why speak of human rights while supporting drone strikes? NATO's reliance on normative rhetoric left it vulnerable to charges of hypocrisy and overreach, and its public diplomacy was increasingly reactive, not strategic—more focused on damage control than identity construction.[13]

From the perspective of this paper's core argument, the War on Terror Era represents the culmination—and beginning of the end—of the "internal normative legitimacy" model. Like the 1990s, this was a phase where NATO did not derive legitimacy from a clear adversary, but from its own interpretation of values. However, unlike in the Peacekeeping Era, these values were now challenged from within. The more NATO justified itself through ideals, the more vulnerable it became to critiques of hypocrisy, overreach, and failure.

During the Cold War, NATO's legitimacy was anchored in countering a tangible external threat—the Soviet Union.

This stands in stark contrast to the Cold War period, where legitimacy was rooted in the response to a clearly identifiable external threat. During the Cold War, NATO's legitimacy was anchored in countering a tangible external threat—the Soviet Union. This clear adversary fostered internal cohesion and a unified strategic direction among member states. In contrast, the War on Terror era saw NATO pivot towards promoting internal values such as democracy and human rights as the foundation for its missions. However, these values are inherently more subjective and open to interpretation than a concrete external enemy. This subjectivity led to internal debates and public scrutiny, as member nations and their populations grappled with differing perspectives on the definition and implementation of these values. Consequently, NATO faced challenges in maintaining internal unity and articulating a coherent strategic vision, highlighting the complexities of deriving legitimacy from internal ideologies rather than external threats.

The Ukraine Era (2022–Present): Return to External Structuring

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 produced not only a military and political response but also a communicative rupture. For the first time in decades, NATO confronted a visible adversary and a shared threat perception, enabling legitimacy to be rebuilt around collective defense. The 2022 Strategic Concept identified Russia as "the most significant and direct threat" and named China a "strategic challenge."[14] Unlike earlier documents that stressed crisis management or partnerships, it re-centered deterrence, resilience, and defense as NATO's core tasks. This was matched by rapid shifts in resources, an expanded presence on the eastern flank, and the accession of Finland and Sweden. Public diplomacy highlighted unity, resolve, and readiness—keywords absent for years.

This clarity distinguished the Ukraine Era from the War on Terror. Legitimacy no longer had to be constructed around abstract ideals but around visible threats like tanks crossing borders, missiles hitting cities, populations under siege. Such images simplified messaging and reduced internal contestation, as the logic of deterrence resonated more naturally with publics.

Yet limits remain. The return to external structuring provides cohesion but narrows rhetorical flexibility. Questions of double standards, democratic backsliding, and ambivalence in the Global South remain unresolved. Moreover, today's environment is not the Cold War—trust in institutions is weaker, societies are more polarized, the media landscape is fragmented, and global order is multipolar.

NATO's public diplomacy thus faces a

dual challenge—retaining unity against Russia while operating in an environment of skepticism and contestation. Whether this new phase can maintain cohesion without slipping into rigidity or communicative inertia will define the trajectory of NATO's public diplomacy in the post-2022 era.

Conclusion: Structuring Logics of Public Diplomacy

The traced evolution of NATO's public diplomacy across four distinct historical phases. These were not merely chronological shifts, but structural transformations in how the Alliance generates legitimacy and organizes its communicative identity. Rather than responding reactively to each crisis, NATO consistently restructured its public messaging around deeper strategic imperatives. These imperatives followed two fundamental logics: either organizing in response to an external threat or projecting internally defined values outward as a source of legitimacy.

This paper conceptualizes these two logics as distinct modes of strategic self-structuring. First, in periods of *external threat-based structuring*, NATO's legitimacy emerges from the need to respond to a clear external adversary. The Cold War and the post-2022 Ukraine era are shaped by this logic. In both cases, NATO's public diplomacy emphasizes cohesion, deterrence, and defense. The presence of a visible, hostile actor enables clear messaging and fosters internal unity. A structure that is less of interpretation and more unifying by its nature. The attitudes of the individual members are generally more homogeneous here because it is less about national interpretations of rigid concepts.

Second, in periods of *internal identity-based structuring*, NATO does not rely on an external enemy to justify its actions. Instead, it seeks legitimacy through the articulation and projection of its own values—democracy, human rights, and liberal order. This logic defined the Peacekeeping Era of the 1990s and the War on Terror Era of the 2000s and 2010s. Public diplomacy during these years was aspirational, globally oriented, and often internally contested. A structure that is more of interpretation and less unifying by its nature. The attitudes of the individual members are generally less homogeneous here because it is more about national interpretations of rigid concepts.

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Transitions between these phases tend to follow major historical ruptures: the collapse of the Soviet Union, the terrorist attacks of 9/11, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Each of these events reshaped NATO's strategic environment, redirected its institutional focus, and triggered a shift in how legitimacy was constructed. In threat-based phases, NATO speaks with greater clarity and coherence, but at the cost of normative nuance. In identity-based phases, the Alliance aspires to moral leadership, but risks fragmentation and public disillusionment when ideals clash with outcomes. The current Ukraine era signals a return to strategic clarity—but it also marks the narrowing of communicative space. Whether NATO can maintain internal unity while engaging with the complexities of modern publics will determine the future of its public diplomacy.

The Growing Gap Between Geopolitical Reality and Public Expectations

While NATO has recalibrated its posture in response to Russia's 2022 invasion—emphasizing deterrence, great power competition, and systemic rivalry—public

expectations have not shifted accordingly. Many Western societies, and much of the Global South, remain shaped by post-Cold War assumptions of a peace dividend, normative dominance, and strategic disengagement. This creates a widening gap: on one side, a hardened geopolitical reality; on the other, publics whose perceptions are anchored in a different era. The dissonance is particularly evident among younger generations and in societies without a strong historical identification with NATO. More than a rhetorical problem, this divergence exposes a structural challenge for NATO's public diplomacy: its strategic imperatives and societal imagination no longer move in tandem, a novel situation in the Alliance's history.

The "liberal peace dividend" after the Cold War deprioritized defense in favor of economic growth, development, and cultural diplomacy.

The post-2022 era reintroduced deterrence, forward defense, and the language of systemic threats. NATO's Strategic Concept names Russia as its primary adversary and China as a strategic challenge. Yet many Western publics still operate under the ideological residue of the 1990s and early 2000s—belief in perpetual peace, the superiority of liberal values, and the dominance of soft power. As Repnikova,[15] Kaneva, and Manor[16] argue, much of the West remains bound to a normative self-image that is increasingly difficult to sustain. The "liberal peace dividend" after the Cold War deprioritized defense in favor of economic growth, development, and cultural diplomacy.

In Germany, this took shape through deep defense cuts, the suspension of compulsory military service in 2011, and a reluctance to view war as political reality. These choices did not just reduce budgets—they shaped public consciousness. Against this backdrop, NATO's return to threat-based rhetoric risks colliding with societies unprepared to receive it. Shaped by Nye's concept of soft power, Western publics often view hard power as not only unpopular but morally suspect. While NATO in 2022 spoke the language of deterrence, publics still expected diplomacy, humanitarianism, and normative leadership. This dissonance fuels mistrust and disengagement. For many, a return to Cold War-style structuring appears as a moral regression. The Cold War victory symbolized the triumph of democratic values; to revert to pre-1991 logics risks undermining that achievement.

Schuette further highlights how institutional overlaps between NATO and the European Union complicate the picture.[17] NATO's security-first orientation contrasts with the EU's normative identity, producing a "split personality" in Europe's strategic architecture. This ambiguity confuses audiences and weakens public diplomacy, especially among younger generations, who know NATO less as a protector and more as a distant, bureaucratic institution tied to controversial interventions.

The gap between NATO's messaging and public expectations extends beyond member states. In the Global South, NATO is often viewed through the lens of historical grievance, double standards, and cultural distance. While NATO frames its actions as defensive, publics in Asia, Africa, and Latin America frequently see continuity with imperial legacies and coercive Western power. Interventions in Libya, Iraq, and Afghanistan have become symbols in anti-Western discourse, undermining NATO's credibility when it appeals to values.[18]

The war in Ukraine has accelerated a shift in how soft power operates. It is no longer enough to project ideals; those ideals must be perceived as legitimate and inclusive. NATO's public diplomacy now functions within a contested and often hostile communicative space, reflecting the decline of Western narrative authority. What

once appeared as universal values, freedom, democracy, and human rights are increasingly seen as the rhetoric of a fading hegemony. This can be understood through the concept of *narrative hegemony*, which is the ability to define legitimacy and marginalize alternatives, rooted in geopolitical dominance. For decades, the West enjoyed this privilege.

Today, competing actors—especially Russia and China—shape global discourse, casting NATO not as a defensive alliance but as an instrument of Western imperial continuity. The breakdown of this position brings NATO and the broader West into what can be defined as the audience dilemma. Western societies expect moral consistency, while the Global South, shaped by colonial histories and selective interventions, views NATO's values with suspicion. In the past, divergent perspectives from smaller actors outside the Western hemisphere could largely be ignored. With the erosion of NATO's status as a narrative hegemon, this is no longer possible. The Alliance must now address two very different publics that demand conflicting behaviors and identities. At the same time, neither audience can be dismissed, as both have gained agency—military, political, and discursive—within the shifting geopolitical landscape and thus exert legitimate influence over the Alliance. Public diplomacy is therefore no longer about broadcasting ideals from a position of authority. It is about defending NATO's right to define meaning itself. In this fractured environment, legitimacy must be re-earned through adaptive, dialogical engagement with multiple publics, each capable and determined to contest the Alliance's message.

The growing gap between NATO's geopolitical logic and public expectations is no longer a matter of miscommunication—it reflects a fundamental structural misalignment between strategic necessity and societal resonance. As NATO reorients itself back toward deterrence, defense, and great power competition, many publics continue to operate within an expectation framework shaped by moral aspiration, historical skepticism, and normative disillusionment. This tension is compounded by the collapse of narrative hegemony. NATO can no longer assume control over the discursive terrain. Its narratives are now contested, reframed, and politicized by actors who reject its claim to moral and strategic authority. Public diplomacy has thus shifted from being a platform of persuasion to a site of struggle over meaning, recognition, and legitimacy.

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At the heart of this transformation lies a revived and unresolved dilemma, which I will name the *audience dilemma*: NATO must simultaneously address internal publics who demand moral coherence and external publics who view moral appeals as instruments of power. What used to be managed through selective engagement can no longer be ignored. In a fragmented and digitalized communicative environment, all audiences now talk back, and since they have gained agency, they expect to be heard.

For NATO, the challenge is existentially communicative. It must preserve strategic clarity in a volatile world while reestablishing legitimacy among publics that no longer grant it by default. Bridging this gap requires not only new messages, but new modes of engagement—dialogical, reflexive, and empirically grounded in the lived realities of diverse societies. Public diplomacy is no longer about promoting consensus; it is about surviving in pluralism.

Fractures in an Era of Re-Nationalization

The re-election of Donald Trump in January 2025 has reignited structural tensions within NATO that go beyond policy disputes—they strike at the Alliance's communicative coherence. While the Russian invasion of Ukraine marked a return to threat-based structuring, the cohesion this provided is now under renewed strain. Trump's unilateral rhetoric, his expansive geopolitical ambitions—such as the revived interest in acquiring Greenland or reclaiming control over the Panama Canal—and his demands for a five-percent GDP military spending threshold introduce an internal dynamic that severely complicates NATO's public diplomacy efforts. These demands are not merely operational—they challenge the Alliance's ability to speak with one voice.

Public diplomacy, by its very nature, depends on internal alignment.

Public diplomacy, by its very nature, depends on internal alignment. Yet under Trump's renewed leadership, NATO faces a paradox: while it ostensibly returns to a logic of deterrence and strategic clarity, its internal political climate becomes increasingly fragmented. The Ukraine war had offered NATO a rare moment of unity—a visible adversary, a shared threat perception, and a cohesive moral narrative. Trump's rhetoric undermines this coherence by introducing aggressive, national-interest-based claims that alienate allies and fracture the communicative front. This has the potential to not only weaken NATO's ability to engage external publics, but it can also create confusion and disillusionment within its own societies.

While all this has a real world impact on the abilities of NATO, and mainly the security-architecture in Europe, for NATO'S public diplomacy this is predominantly a messaging crisis. It is a breakdown of the Alliance's communicative structure. Trump's foreign policy does not operate within the framework of collective defense, but rather within a transactional logic of strategic dominance. By asserting claims such as the acquisition of Greenland or the unilateral decision to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Alaska to discuss the war in Ukraine, the United States no longer anchors the Alliance in shared values or common threat, but in unilateral ambition.

For the European members of NATO, this poses a dilemma: close ties with the United States are essential for the credibility of deterrence. But how can this credibility, and the strength of transatlantic ties, be ensured and convincingly projected outward when conflicts between the United States and its European allies repeatedly surface? Examples include the debate over the two-percent defense spending target or, more recently, the American condition for further sanctions against Russia that required European partners to first end all purchases of Russian gas and oil. The public airing of such internal disputes undermines the credibility of NATO's collective defense—and with it the very foundation on which effective public diplomacy, both toward allies and adversaries, depends.

Indeed, these developments reawaken the audience dilemma discussed earlier. When internal publics observe erratic leadership and discordant messaging, their trust in NATO diminishes. When external publics witness the Alliance struggling to articulate coherent values, its claim to legitimacy weakens. And when adversaries exploit both, public diplomacy becomes reactive, defensive, and increasingly ineffectual.

What emerges, then, is a structural fracture. Trump's leadership does not merely disrupt policy coordination—it ruptures the communicative

scaffolding on which NATO's public diplomacy has depended. The era that began in 2022 with renewed clarity and external cohesion now risks devolving into internal contradiction and strategic ambiguity. Whether NATO can preserve its post-Ukraine communicative gains or whether the Alliance will lose its most effective mechanism for deterrence—credibility in its collective willingness to defend each other—has become the central question for both its geopolitical future and the effectiveness of its public diplomacy.

One thing is clear—Public diplomacy in this environment cannot fall back on Cold War templates or soft power platitudes. It must directly confront the internal contradictions of an Alliance in which its most powerful member challenges the very traditions by which NATO has narrated itself. If this moment marks another discursive rupture, NATO will require not only new military strategies, but also a new way to narrate them.

Conclusion: Legitimacy in Transition

NATO's public diplomacy has undergone four distinct transformations, each tied to broader shifts in the Alliance's strategic identity. These eras follow two structural logics: legitimacy derived from an external threat (Cold War, Ukraine Era) or constructed through the projection of internally held values (Peacekeeping Era, War on Terror Era). The first logic generated cohesion and communicative clarity around a visible adversary; the second aspired to normative leadership but often produced fragmentation, disillusionment, and contested interpretations of "Western values."

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 seemed to mark a return to the threat-based model. With a visible enemy, NATO regained a communicative anchor absent for decades. Yet this does not recreate the clarity of 1949. Trust in institutions has eroded, societies are fragmented and digitalized, and the West no longer holds uncontested narrative hegemony—the ability to define legitimacy and marginalize alternatives.

The Alliance now faces a double strain: its geopolitical logic demands renewed deterrence, while its communicative structure is fractured. This has become stark since the re-election of Donald Trump in 2025, whose unilateralism and transactional rhetoric reopened structural fissures just as NATO had rediscovered external cohesion. The result is the revival of the audience dilemma: internal publics demand moral coherence, while external publics, shaped by colonial legacies and selective interventions, view NATO's values with suspicion. Unlike in the past, neither audience can be ignored.

...Public diplomacy in this environment cannot fall back on Cold War templates or soft power platitudes.

From this analysis, three conclusions emerge. First, the collapse of narrative hegemony has turned communication from projection into a contested battlefield of meaning. Second, the audience dilemma has become unmanageable through traditional messaging. Third, the re-nationalization of strategic priorities threatens to fracture the core of the Alliance communicative coherence.

NATO's public diplomacy must therefore evolve. It can no longer rely on Cold War templates, soft power abstractions, or centralized narratives. Instead, it must become dialogical, reflexive, and grounded in the realities of multiple publics. This requires operating not from assumed legitimacy, but from negotiated authority. NATO's public diplomacy stands at a crossroads. Whether it fractures under incoherence or evolves into a new paradigm of communicative legitimacy will define the Alliance's role in the decades ahead. ***IAJ***

Notes

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Addressing Politicization in Intelligence

by Matthew V. Tompkins

Both Sides Agree We're in an Intelligence Politicization Crisis. What Next?

We find ourselves in an epoch of intelligence politicization that should have every intelligence professional, leader, and consumer considering potential scenarios and how they might respond. Already, 2025 has brought a steady drip of incidents that may indicate or induce a growing lack of faith that the products and processes of intelligence are free from political bias:

May 2025. Removal of senior leaders at the National Intelligence Council (NIC) over Venezuelan gang assessment. Public statements from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) indicate that the dismissals were necessary "to end the weaponization and politicization of the intelligence community."[1] Veteran Intelligence Community (IC) leaders have argued that when the NIC "refused a nakedly political request" to "relook" analysis that contradicted public administration assessments, "it cost them their jobs."[2]

June 2025. Public disavowal of Iran nuclear program assessment, followed by new public conclusions. After the President rejected the IC's March assessment that Iran was not currently attempting to build a nuclear weapon[3], the DNI responded publicly that the earlier assessment was taken "out of context" and she agreed with the president that "America has intelligence that Iran is at the point that it can produce a nuclear weapon within weeks to months."[4] Responding to how "the administration change[d] its position,"[5] the Ranking Member of the Senate intelligence committee noted that he was "hugely concerned" about political interference.[6]

July 2025. Declassification of internal tradecraft review of the 2016 Election Intelligence Community Assessment (ICA). Upon release of the ICA tradecraft review[7], the Director of Central Intelligence stated that "agency heads at the time created a politically charged environment that

Matthew V. Tompkins is the Federal Senior Intelligence Coordinator at the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC). In that role, he leads a team that engages with the intelligence community and other information partners to ensure that Commission rule-makings and energy sector engagements are informed by current and comprehensive threat intelligence. He has previously served in intelligence, policy, operations, and logistics positions in the State Department, Federal Bureau of Investigation, and U.S. Army. Views expressed here are his own, and do not reflect those of FERC, its Commissioners, or the U.S. Government.

triggered an atypical analytic process."[8] The now retired principal author of that report argues that there was no interference from above on Russia findings, and that it is "100 percent a political move designed to placate President Trump."[9]

These are only select highlights, leaving out items like ODNI's further declassifications and accusations of politicization around the 2016 ICA, publicly conflicting damage assessments after the strike on Iran's nuclear sites, and any number of disputes that haven't made it into the public eye.

...we are in a period of intelligence politicization with little precedent...

This article takes no position on any of these incidents or disputes. I don't know enough about the decisions or the substantive content to have an opinion on their merits, and I am too committed to apolitical service to share one if I did. Besides, plenty of commentary exists on both sides of each of these incidents for anyone seeking to understand the arguments from one perspective or the other.

Regardless of which side you agree with in any of these incidents, there is one thing that both sides agree on: we are in a period of intelligence politicization with little precedent for a generation of analysts and processes developed in the era of post-9/11 intelligence reforms. When intelligence professionals are being dismissed or agencies' analysis publicly disparaged and disavowed (all based on the content of their analysis) that fact alone means we have crossed the Rubicon, either because the criticism is warranted or because it is not.

Implications of Politicization

The implications of these developments can affect every part of the intelligence cycle: from skepticism of the raw reporting particular agencies are disseminating to consumers seeing bias in any product they disagree with, and every step in between collection and the consumer. And this is not a one-sided problem: if intelligence loses the presumption of freedom from political bias, then content any consumer finds unwelcome will invite skepticism that it either reflects bias in the IC or has been corrupted by external bias.

Intelligence politicization and the reactions to it can disrupt **intelligence processes and relationships** in multiple distinct (but sometimes overlapping) ways:

First, pressure to skew intelligence content in response to the politicized environment—whether that pressure is external or self-editing, conscious or not, and supporting or undermining a particular policy preference.

Second, personal opinions or media silos that subconsciously affect "day job" judgments (always a concern, but one amplified by the specters of politicization and elevated outrage shadowing every incident and topic).

Third, the potential in response to these developments to either overcorrect or to miss detecting a novel source of bias.

To some extent, these dynamics reflect concerns about bias that are inherent to any human endeavor, and intelligence professionals have been working to understand and address ever since the earliest efforts to professionalize the field. But this contemporary reemergence of bias as a concern goes beyond human fallibility to disrupted institutions and counterproductive environments.

Once politicized dynamics start resulting in skewed reporting or analysis, there are multiple trickle-down **implications for the reporting and analysis produced**:

Disseminated reporting or analysis that results from political bias and seems to show it: Materials may clearly reflect poor quality, such as unreliable sources given undue credence or conclusions that reflect faulty logic or a preferred

hypothesis.

Biased material appears objective: A politically-influenced process may not be apparent in the final disseminated result, as when an unfavored hypothesis and supporting points are omitted, dissenting sources go uncollected, or indications of a source's unreliability are ignored.

Reporting is objective but unexpected and misidentified as biased: When something deviates from the established analytic line in an environment tainted by bias, it can be difficult to discern whether it is accurately-reported surprise or a motivated divergence from existing conclusions.

Bias through omission: We will never know the reporting or analysis that goes unseen because it is not collected, drafted, or approved for politically skewed reasons.

Errant assumption of bias through omission: "We will never know," so the absence of evidence for a particular hypothesis invites skepticism about the reporting "they" are withholding.

Low-confidence intelligence withheld to avoid misuse: Dutiful dissemination of relevant reporting from a source with low or unknown reliability is an important building block of intelligence, inviting further reporting and analysis to help validate it, refute it, or place it in context. But if a reporting officer or their leadership is constrained by worries over how it might be misused, it could seem safer to withhold it.

Of course, the overwhelming majority of reporting and analysis is unlikely to suffer from any of these shortcomings, particularly the farther you get from the most politically-charged topics. But with or without tainted materials, the politicized environment and processes I described above means that these dynamics can always justify confirmation bias: skeptical consumers can speculate that one of these flaws must be affecting material that diverges from their strongly held beliefs.

That last dynamic—confirmation bias being amplified by the mere possibility of politicization—makes intelligence politicization a bit like inflation: it can result from external causes, but expectations of politicization can also be self-fulfilling. Even if intelligence content has not actually been politicized and does not become politicized, the expectation of biased output can itself produce a politicized lens through which consumers view intelligence. So, it is imperative that we work to address politicization in every way we can.

Even if intelligence content has not actually been politicized and does not become politicized, the expectation of biased output can itself produce a politicized lens through which consumers view intelligence.

Addressing Politicization: How to Begin

These initial thoughts are only a start—it will take many perspectives and real-time lessons-learned to reach an effective path forward and this is a conversation to which anyone producing or consuming intelligence needs to be contributing.

ICD 203 is Essential, but Insufficient

For any intelligence professional trained in the last twenty years, the first answer on addressing bias—for many the only answer—is Intelligence Community Directive (ICD) 203, "Analytic Standards."[10] ICD 203 does provide an essential starting point.

ICD 203 is Still the Modern Foundation of Rigorous, Unbiased Intelligence

ICD 203 was the intelligence community's reaction to two epochal intelligence failures: the 9/11 attacks and assessment of Iraq's WMD. The

starting point for addressing politicization should be renewed attention to the baseline requirements it establishes for unbiased intelligence processes and products: material that is objective, independent of political consideration, timely, based on all available sources, and employs analytic tradecraft standards.

...when it comes to conscious political bias, output has always remained sensitive to policy priorities despite the best intentions of ICD 203...

ICD 203 was Never Sufficient to Address Political Bias

Structured analytic techniques and the other hallmarks of ICD 203 standards are well-conceived to address implicit and subconscious bias—the type that otherwise persists in even the most well-intended analysts. But when it comes to conscious political bias, output has always remained sensitive to policy priorities despite the best intentions of ICD 203 and those faithfully implementing it. To take an oversimplified and anecdotal data point, one can review the prominence of certain topics like climate change or immigration in the IC's annual threat assessments (ATA) for the last fifteen years. You won't see complete 180-degree reversals on these topics, but in each year's ATA there is a clear sensitivity to which topics will find receptive consumers and which will invite skepticism or disinterest.

Sensitivity to political considerations is probably more inevitable and appropriate than ICD 203 enables

This is a controversial position to take, but something like molding the ATA to consumers' policy priorities is not necessarily undue. Modern intelligence processes already address this reality to some degree, with things like the regular reorientation of IC work around updated President's Intelligence Priorities (PIP)[11] that are inevitably informed by administration policy priorities. There is not actually a bright line in law or policy between appropriate responsiveness to intelligence consumers' priorities and inappropriate political influence. There are extremes that are obviously acceptable or not, but the middle is a grey zone rather than a line, with clarity to be found only in the details of context and process. ICD 203's bright line standard of material "independent from political considerations" simply doesn't allow for enough nuance to sufficiently account for this.

The intelligence failures that resulted in the creation of ODNI and promulgation of ICD 203 created relative consensus around the importance of intelligence that was politically objective even when it failed to support policy preferences. That consensus has eroded as people across the entire partisan spectrum have developed a reflex to doubt not just the accuracy of materials they disagree with, but the honesty and motives of their sources—a dynamic that can affect not only consumers but also intelligence professionals.

Intelligence represents a lattice of content and processes, and as segments of that lattice are embrittled by both actual bias and suspicions of bias, ICD 203 as a mere policy framework is proving insufficient. Intelligence professionals, leaders, and consumers need to be actively engaged in confronting the effects intelligence politicization, not behaving as if we are in a sanctified process that is immutably free of it. The remainder of this article propose some initial new adaptions to that end.

Fewer Grand Judgments (1) – Publish on All Competing Hypotheses

One approach to addressing a politicized intelligence environment is for analysis to make fewer grand judgments in published analysis by articulating evidence supporting and refuting all hypotheses competing to answer a question.

One of the structured analytic techniques used to implement quality tradecraft under ICD 203 is the formal analysis of competing hypotheses, or ACH. This tool is meant to ensure that we do not become so focused on prevailing judgments (regime survival imperatives will ensure the USSR's persistence as an adversary, or Al Qaeda lacks the capacity to attack the U.S. homeland) that analysis is blinded to the evidence supporting alternative conclusions.

In practice, the intent is to review in good faith all potential conclusions on the path to identifying the one which is most likely correct, and publishing only that analysis. If an ACH exercise is indeterminate it might result in a more rounded product that presents the competing theories and their supporting evidence for consumers, but that is not the norm. If the evidence and analytic consensus identify a conclusion that is most likely the right answer, standards of clarity and brevity discourage us from devoting much page space to answers likely to be wrong beyond a brief acknowledgement of a most likely or consequential alternative.

The problem at the heart of intelligence politicization is essentially willful confirmation bias: information that aligns with preexisting beliefs or priorities is welcomed and trumpeted, and material that does not is ignored, buried, or discredited. Depending on the nature of politicization, this can be happening with intelligence producers or consumers.

When that cherry-picking is done by consumers on either side of a policy debate, it is mostly a fait accompli that producers of intelligence cannot do anything about. But if everything is presented together, the conclusion to be credited by one side and ignored by the other will appear, with its supporting evidence, alongside the competing interpretation.

That approach may not do much to address individuals' politicized bias, since the need to address it in the first place means that it is either conscious and willful or a 'personal truth' tied to identity. But the published ACH could do for the collective body politic what it does for the subconscious bias of analysts: prompt a fair consideration of all possibilities on a level informational playing field, where either a clear winner can become a little more apparent or the merits and faults of reasonably divergent conclusions can be spelled out.

The goal of intelligence professionals and processes should not be to "be right"... It should be to inform policy decisions with the most effective and comprehensive approaches available.

It may seem like a cop-out to go through analyzing competing hypotheses and identify a clear winner, but then still present them all side-by-side and leave it to the consumer to draw that conclusion. But any intelligence approach that is constrained by politicization is going to end up suboptimal (a theme that will be relevant for many recommendations and accommodations below). The goal of intelligence professionals and processes should not be to "be right" and need not be to produce products that are pristine by schoolhouse analytic standards. It should be to inform policy decisions with the most effective and comprehensive approaches available.

Fewer Grand Judgments (2) – Publish Smaller Building Blocks of Analysis

In a politicized intelligence environment, "small ball" judgments that draw tightly-focused conclusions in response to narrow questions are less likely to invite biased engagement than grand judgments with more direct policy implications.

It is common for major assessments to include multiple subordinate judgments in

support of an overarching conclusion. Often, the most politically contentious portions of those products are the ultimate grand conclusions; the individual supporting judgments may be simpler matters of fact or straightforward analysis that 2 + 2 = 4, without major policy implications themselves. Such judgments can likely be published separately as stand-alone items with less friction than the grand conclusion they may eventually support.

Intelligence analysis in a politicized environment may need to trade brevity for exhaustive documentation.

To put it in terms of another era's politicized intelligence, judgments of whether Iraq was trying to procure uranium yellowcake from Niger, or had ongoing nuclear research and development efforts, or was purchasing high-strength aluminum tubes for use in centrifuges, or was making dual-use procurements in support of nuclear enrichment, could each be published as stand-alone products wholly independent of an assessment of the overarching question of whether Iraq was trying to restart their nuclear program.[12]

Those separate small judgments can then either stand as they are with policy consumers left to ultimately do the final step of assembling them into a conclusion supporting policy action, or a more circumscribed effort can attempt to publish a "pull it all together" assessment once supporting items are published and in circulation.

Of course, either of those final outcomes could still be prone to political bias—whether subconscious and implicit, or knowing, deliberate, and explicit. But the independent publication of smaller judgments allows competing interpretations to draw from the same underlying materials. It also increases the prospects for those materials to see the light of day without undue filtering, amplification, or modification from someone thinking more about the policy outcome than the intelligence content.

Show Your Work

Intelligence analysis in a politicized environment may need to trade brevity for exhaustive documentation. Whether piecemeal or still in larger assessments, intelligence analysis will be more durable in the face of biased skepticism the more that editorial and analytic processes are clearly documented and explained. ICD 203 already includes a requirement that credible intelligence not only implement, but also *exhibit* analytic tradecraft standards. But the current environment makes it time to take that farther.

Something like reporting from a source with low reliability or content that is only tangentially-relevant might reasonably be omitted from an analysis when plentiful better sources addressing the same point are available. But it is no longer sufficient to leave that detritus on the cutting room floor in the name of clarity or brevity. We need to memorialize each of those subordinate judgments in the drafting and analytic processes.

In a criminal investigation, there's no need to give weight to the unfounded conjecture of a true crime podcaster when there is solid forensic evidence available.[13] But if investigators do not want that wild theory to become the seed of reasonable doubt, it is worth the effort to consider every possibility with due diligence and provide explicit context and assessment. The same duly diligent coverage of all bases applies here.

Of course, it is possible that the dodgy reporting will be cherry-picked and over-indexed on, with the principal analysis ignored. But in an environment of extreme politicization that risk is present whether the cherry is picked off the cutting room floor or from within the analysis. At least within the analysis it can be presented with context and hopefully provide some inoculation

against accusations of withholding the material in a way that discredits entire processes, offices, or lines of analysis.

More Published Signposts and Indicators

When analysis results in unwelcomed conclusions, presenting it in conditional terms, focused on articulating indicators and signposts in lieu of explicit conclusions, can make it palatable enough to survive publication and consumption. Suppose that you are convinced that your friend's spouse is cheating, but they just cannot bring themselves to see it. Not only do they believe in their relationship and their partner, but they also want so badly to believe that they just get angry at you the more you try to convince them.

Instead of futile efforts to force them to see, you might try to just equip them with the right questions and considerations to be able to see it themselves when they are ready:

- Does he spend inexplicable or unexplained time away?
- Is she suddenly investing less time or effort in the marriage?
- Are explanations for odd behavior increasingly convoluted or unbelievable?

In exploratory analysis, this kind of indicators list is well-established common practice. "If the spouse is cheating, we would expect to see the following indicators:…" usually then listed with a related topical icon—maybe a broken heart—for *observed*, *partially observed*, and *not observed*. But if there is enough solid reporting to conclude with a reasonable degree of confidence that the spouse is cheating, it is typically presented as such with a clear analytic judgment.

It does not have to be, though. Analysis on politically-sensitive subjects can take an approach that acknowledges the question, considers potential answers, and presents the deduced indicators (for both the politically-desired answer and the unwelcomed one) rather than identifying only the indicators that have been observed and proceeding all the way to conclusion.

When analysis results in unwelcomed conclusions, presenting it in conditional terms…can make it palatable enough to survive publication and consumption.

From there, perhaps future analysis can review observed activity against the previously published list. But when the environment or topic is so intensely politicized that publishing the conclusion is simply untenable, the list of indicators and signposts can be combined with the flow of reporting to arm consumers to see what they need to when they are ready.

Explicit versus Implicit Political Bias

The suggestions above have so far addressed the nebulous disruption of an environment of political bias, but what about when undue influence is direct and pointed? Some of us, at least sometimes in some situations, may encounter and have to respond to political bias that is explicit rather than implicit.

- It could be the leader that says, "we can't publish that," even if it's analytically sound.
- It could be the consumer saying, "Find me evidence of this," even when such evidence is lacking or uncredible.

In some quarters, there may be a temptation to meet a political problem with a political response: to "work from within" to "balance out" the undue influence, so I want to at least acknowledge and address that temptation. It

could mean pulling in coordinating agencies or offices where countervailing bias is known to exist, in the hopes of overwhelming or outranking the undue influence. It might mean leaking what's being suppressed or ignored, or suppressing what's being exaggerated.

That balancing approach is a mistake. No matter what form it takes, a political response to politicization cannot be the way. The only answer to an unduly politicized environment is to double-down on apolitical service, not to compound it. Yet, that entreaty to remain apolitical leaves unanswered what to do when directed to publish what lacks credibility or dismiss what merits publishing – or any other inappropriate intervention.

That dilemma simply cannot be answered with hypothetical scenarios or a generalized answer. When directed to do something you consider wrong, the only appropriate choices for an apolitical professional are refusal with full transparency and acceptance of the consequences, or faithful implementation of established policies despite your disagreement. And every person in each individual instance must make their own judgment what undue request is beyond the pale and justifies refusal.

When directed to do something you consider wrong, the only appropriate choices for an apolitical professional are refusal with full transparency and acceptance of the consequences, or faithful implementation of established policies despite your disagreement.

When writing previously about the importance of faithful implementation of policies even when you disagree with them, I have argued that "after the Nazis came to power, the police chief in Dachau likely reached a point of personal moral responsibility for regime actions long before the postman did."[14] The same concept applies here: the specific context of each situation and each participant will be essential determinants between dutiful implementation and declared refusal. Moreover, factors deciding what breach is "too far" don't only include big questions like the nature of the inappropriate requirement or content manipulated, but practical personal matters like how much a given individual can afford something like a punitive reassignment or conscientious resignation.

If the sum of those factors is that the breach of standards doesn't meet an individual's "refusal threshold," what remains is compliance and faithful implementation. This dynamic—having to accept politicization and being party to it—is why the other recommendations above have focused on oblique responses that emphasize avoiding direct interference or confrontation while minimizing deleterious effects of politicization.

Sophistry and Disingenuous Skepticism as Competing Hypotheses

With those most pointed and direct politically-skewed actors, sophistry and disingenuous skepticism may be the theories that intelligence is competing with. It is not new to note that much of the nation's partisan debate now exists in a post-fact era. Each side—particularly at the extremes—has their "truths," and facts that challenge those truths are unwelcome. What is more recent is the intrusion of that epistemological approach into the national security questions intelligence is trying to answer.

When addressing actors operating from that perspective—whether intelligence professionals, leaders, or consumers—marshaling facts and logic in support of an analytic conclusion works differently.

- Assertions that are completely un-credible or even disingenuous need to be given equal

consideration alongside other competing hypotheses.

- Skepticism may come at an unreasonable extreme where all sources are viewed as equally deserving of either credulity or doubt.

It is like a murder trial defense witness presenting a very detailed theory about alien perpetrators that the prosecutor would typically object to. But then the prosecutor learns that one of the jurors runs an Area 51 "The Truth is Out There" website and the judge is her number one reader. Suddenly something too absurd to even acknowledge is a competing–or even leading–theory of the crime that has to be considered and disproven.

To some extent, the only thing to do in the face of this kind of reasoning is accept that this is our current information environment and respond accordingly with the evidence and analysis that considers the full range of theories.

But in some instances, there could be an opportunity to take an Aikido-like approach that redirects the momentum of bad faith or crackpot theories towards productive judgments. Disingenuous or absolutist skepticism can be aimed at dubious sources and theories too. The nuggets of credibility that make a conspiracy theory plausible can be emphasized in analysis that uses them to ultimately reach a more credible conclusion.

Make Intelligence Boring Again

This article has focused politicization because it is a challenge worth addressing, but it almost certainly is not yet common, let alone widespread or endemic. Most intelligence topics and processes are still too mundane and technocratic to be worth politicizing. We need to keep it that way and make the rest of intelligence boring again as well.

In between career stints as an FBI Supervisory Intelligence Analyst and currently as senior intelligence coordinator at a non-Title 50 agency, this author spent seven years as a Foreign Service Officer (FSO). Every generalist FSO serves one Consular assignment, either assisting Americans overseas or adjudicating the visas of foreign nationals seeking to travel or emigrate to the U.S.

I was in the middle of my Consular tour in 2017 when a series of Executive Orders proposed different types of foreign national travel bans, each prompting energetic political response in the media, Congress, and the courts either in support or opposition. Those highest profile policy debates over visa and travel policy presented the appearance of a process in deep turmoil.

Yet for most visa adjudications for most applicants in most parts of the world, things proceeded largely unchanged. Students and tourists and journalists and skilled workers and immigrating fiancés and seasonal laborers who met basic qualifications still applied for and received visas as normal. The same is almost certainly true of intelligence processes and products now. Despite a disconcertingly consistent trickle of high-profile reciprocal accusations of politicization, most of the work of the intelligence community likely remains routine practices being implemented routinely.

Most intelligence topics and processes are still too mundane and technocratic to be worth politicizing.

Policy preferences or disputes obviously extend to just about any national security question intelligence might be seeking to answer. But when it comes to most routine work of gathering and assessing information on adversary capabilities, infrastructure protection, foreign actors' intent, or ongoing threat activities, only a limited number of topics at any time rise to the

level of generating controversy, headlines, or pressure. Most other work can continue on as it has.

That fact does not undermine the danger posed by the politicization that has occurred, nor its potential to spread if left unchecked. But it is an important reminder that what we are talking about here is responding to the beachhead of politicization in institutions where much remains unaffected.

Politicization as a Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

Intelligence politicization can be like price inflation: expectation or worry (or confidence) can sometimes be self-fulfilling. I made a passing comparison above between politicization and inflation, and I am closing with it here even without a specific recommended action because it is an important dynamic of the politicized environment that can play out for good or ill.

When inflation warnings are widespread, businesses might raise prices anticipating the increased costs of supply and labor, and their customers may then seek higher wages in response to increased prices. Eventually, the compound aggregation of that activity can create the very inflation that was predicted—all driven by anticipatory responses to expectations rather than concrete macroeconomic disruptions.

Similarly, if intelligence consumers are anticipating bias in the material they receive, or intelligence professionals or leaders fear it from peers or senior leadership, the amplified skepticism can produce unfounded doubt in products and processes. This dynamic is especially likely to be triggered in response to intelligence on politically charged topics where bias is most expected, or on material that undermines your particular priorities or beliefs since confirmation bias will already make countervailing content 'feel wrong.'

In the aggregate, these responses can create the politicization they fear: as collectors, analysts, leaders, and consumers each adjust in response to the bias they anticipate from the other parties, the content and processes can be skewed by those adjustments and responses.

From one perspective, this is the pernicious hopelessness of politicized intelligence. Even if the process is mostly still functioning as it should and the products still mostly reflecting sound tradecraft, the more that consumers, practitioners, and observers expect or fear politicization the more likely those expectations themselves will distort intelligence production and consumption.

But the power of expectations to become self-fulfilling is also why addressing intelligence politicization matters even if it seems like no single person or action is sufficient.

The more that collective efforts are openly working to address politicization, the more that participants in and consumers and observers of the process might start expecting not to see it and responding accordingly. Positive expectations can be hard to come by in a time of such public discord, but collective efforts can start working to build them. ***IAJ***

Notes

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13 I include a number of hypothetical examples like this one–true crime podcasters, cheating spouses, and murderous aliens–that are somewhat farcical and completely removed from national security intelligence. This is deliberate to avoid any possibility of touching on either classified materials or the topics currently drawing the most partisan responses.

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National Security and Climate Change: A Strategic Imperative for the 21st Century

by John L. Craig

The climate crisis presents a major challenge to modern governance and security systems. Traditionally, national security has focused on kinetic threats such as terrorism, armed conflict, and cyberwarfare, but the 21st century requires redefining what constitutes a national threat. Climate change introduces a new array of risks that are borderless, slow to develop, yet increasingly severe, and deeply linked to economic and social vulnerabilities. Recently, the International Court of Justice recognized climate change as an urgent and existential crisis threat.[1]

It has been challenging to find and reconcile sources to provide a balanced and objective overview of climate change and national security within our highly complex planetary system.

This article explores the connection between climate change and national security from multiple perspectives, demonstrating that responding to climate change is not merely an economic and environmental issue—it is a strategic imperative.

Background

To put this article into context, we are living in unusual times, and it is easy to become distracted from critical issues, including climate change, by the ongoing chaos and slashing of norms, and for good reasons.[2] These are not the traits of a strong and viable democracy led by rational and ethical leadership.[3] Others fear that the United States is dangerously close to normalizing autocracy.[4] In short, the world is experiencing a far-right trend and a lack of strong ethical leadership.[5] General (Retired) Vincent Brooks explains this differently in his top strategic concerns for our nation: the first is the absence of domestic tranquility, and the second is the lack of empathy in U.S. policy and the American body politic.[6] General (Retired) Barry McCaffrey describes what keeps him awake at night as a loss of the rule of law and democracy.[7] Noted journalist David Brooks states that we are

A retired U.S. Army engineer lieutenant colonel, John L. Craig, has been a civil engineering executive in the public and private sectors, leading award-winning multibillion-dollar programs and projects. He served in command and staff assignments around the world before retiring. He holds degrees from the University of Central Missouri, the University of Alaska-Fairbanks, and consults and writes on various aspects of the natural-built environment.

living in a society without a shared moral order.[8] These echo the prescient *It Can't Happen Here* by Sinclair Lewis, published in 1935.[9] While the absence of domestic tranquility or a shared moral order may be our biggest strategic threat, climate change—beyond natural variability—stands as perhaps the most significant existential risk to the health and welfare of our planet and all life on it, including humans. Societies tend to prioritize short-term gains and our world remains fragmented. Consequently, the focus on climate change is suffering. In this context, national security and climate change are deeply intertwined for many reasons. Climate change is a growing and urgent threat to our national security—contributing to natural disasters, increased refugee flows, and conflicts over essential human needs.[10]

In 2015, the U.S. National Security Strategy included, for the first time, that climate change was a threat to the safety and security of the home of one of the world's most powerful militaries.[11] Later that year, the implications of climate change on national security were expanded upon.[12] This recognition has continued for more than 10 years. By contrast, the 2025 Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community is the first in over a decade to omit climate change.[13] The U.S. Intelligence Community is now likely operating with a blind spot that could jeopardize national security.[14] National security and climate change are subjects on the national defense agenda for many countries today. Generally, climate change acts as a threat multiplier in national security, almost always indirectly and through complex mechanisms.[15] Additionally, national security and climate change are intergenerational issues tied to the global economy, making it a more complex and interconnected challenge for the U.S. and other nations.

In 2024, Planet Earth surpassed 1.5°C (2.7°F) above pre-industrial levels for the first time—a troubling milestone in global climate change.[16] If the warming trend persists,[17] and without significant cuts in greenhouse gas emissions, global temperatures are expected to exceed 2°C (3.6°F) before 2050.[18] Some estimates predict a rise of 2.5°C (4.5°F) by mid-century, while more extreme forecasts suggest an increase of nearly 3°C (5.4°F) by 2100 if urgent action is not taken. A recent study led by physicist and climatologist James E. Hansen provides a detailed analysis supporting these trends.[19] It warns that the shutdown of the Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation could happen within the next 20 to 30 years unless global warming is reduced. This situation is referred to as the "point of no return," as it could cause significant problems, including sea level rise of several meters over the next 50 to 150 years. The goals set in Paris are not just targets—they are a fragile path through systemic chaos.

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Although these projections involve some uncertainty, the potential impacts of climate change are well-documented,[20] and many scenarios forecast catastrophic outcomes.[21] Ongoing geopolitical instability,[22] competing policy proposals,[23] and other existential crises further complicate the global response,[24] making effective action more difficult. Merely focusing on traditional warfighting capabilities is insufficient and recent efforts by our government appear to be aimed at dismantling climate action[25] and resilience. The National Security Strategy must address numerous threats to national security, including climate change.

The complexity and interconnection of Earth's functions make precise forecasting difficult. However, the scale of the climate change challenge is so vast, the risks so complex,

and so many actors involved, that we have never dealt with such a multifaceted risk before.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) warns that continued increases in global temperatures will cause rising sea levels, more frequent heatwaves, droughts, and extreme weather events.[26] The resulting decline in agricultural productivity, water shortages, and increased disaster frequency weaken public health, destabilize economies, and heighten social tensions, especially in regions with weak governance. If the post-emissions plateau were achieved (i.e., zeroing out greenhouse gas emissions and flatlining global warming), it would almost certainly not limit global warming to 1.5°C. Further, reaching that plateau is not realistic.[27]

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Examples of Climate Change and Increasing Risks

Some scientists place the effects of climate change into three categories: settled and certain, limited evidence and low agreement, and uncertain. The current scientific evidence is settled and certain that CO2, global temperatures, land warming, heat waves, and sea level rise are increasing as a result of climate change. There is limited evidence and low agreement that heavy rain, floods, droughts, and wildfires have increased due to climate change. It is uncertain and unknown whether the likelihood of tornadoes, ice sheet collapse, and a permafrost carbon bomb have increased as a result of climate change.[28] It is important to note that while some impacts remain uncertain or not fully settled, this does not mean they are unaffected by climate change. Ongoing research continues to clarify and quantify these potential influences.

The Office of Management and Budget released a 2024 report on the federal government's financial exposure to climate change risks.[29] Although pinpointing the exact financial risk was challenging, it was clear that the risk is significant and growing, including for the Department of Defense and national security. Some of these risks include:

- Sea-level rise: According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in 2023, the global average sea level has risen by eight to nine inches since 1880, more than doubling from 2006 to 2015.[30] High tide flooding is now 300 to 900 percent more common than it was fifty years ago. This increase is attributed to the melting of glaciers and ice sheets, as well as thermal expansion. Nearly thirty percent of the U.S. population lives in coastal areas, where sea level rise contributes to flooding, shoreline erosion, and storm damage. Additionally, sea level rise can create stronger storms, alters ocean currents, contaminates freshwater aquifers, causes land rebound, and results from increasingly heated seas and atmosphere both locally and regionally.

- Melting ice sheets: Ice sheets, such as the Arctic and Antarctic sea ice,[31] the Greenland Ice Cap,[32] as well as ice fields[33] and glaciers,[34] are melting at an unprecedented rate. The ice sheets of Antarctica and Greenland alone hold about two-thirds of the Earth's freshwater and have contributed to roughly one-third of the global sea level rise since 1993.[35]

- Extreme weather events:[36] These include heatwaves, droughts, wildfires, flooding, stronger storms such as hurricanes, heavy rainfall, winter storms, and rising sea levels, which lead to increased frequency, intensity, and impacts.[37]

- Water scarcity[38] and insecurity:[39] These

worsen due to extreme weather events like droughts and floods, which disrupt precipitation and the entire water cycle. This is one aspect of a highly complex planetary system affected by climate change, including in the United States.

- Food insecurity: Extreme weather events damage crops and livestock, including land, sea, and freshwater foods. These disruptions can also lead to higher food prices, lower yields, and reduced availability. Like many aspects of climate change, vulnerable populations are the most affected.[40]

- Displacement: Climate change worsens existing human displacement and increasingly acts as a driver, interacting with other impacts of climate change.[41]

Climate change should not be viewed solely through a U.S. national security lens because it is a global issue, and the risks are varied and extensive.[42] Likely climate-change–exacerbated extreme weather events were ranked by the World Economic Forum as the second and first risks over the next two and ten years, respectively. Major changes to Earth systems driven by global warming are also considered the number three risk in the next ten years.

While the United States has faced the largest overall economic losses from climate-related disasters, the most severe impacts disproportionately affect the most vulnerable populations.[43] There is evidence that six of nine tipping points have already been crossed.[44] Much of this data is over two years old, so these estimates may be underestimating the speed and severity of the change.

Climate Change Impacts on U.S. National Security

In 2021, the U.S. Department of Defense released a Climate Risk Analysis, highlighting that climate change poses systemic risks to U.S. national security, defense infrastructure, and force readiness. Similar concerns have been echoed by NATO, the UN Security Council, and governments across Europe and Asia. Climate change is no longer a distant threat; it is happening now, with its impacts already evident in conflict zones, refugee emergencies, and domestic disaster response efforts. At the NATO 2021 Summit in Brussels, allies agreed to prioritize climate change, referring to it as "a crisis and threat-multiplier" in their 2022 Strategic Concept.[45] In this report, NATO stated:

> Climate change is a defining challenge of our time, with a profound impact on Allied security. It is a crisis and threat multiplier. It can exacerbate conflict, fragility, and geopolitical competition. Increasing temperatures cause rising sea levels, wildfires, and more frequent and extreme weather events, disrupting our societies, undermining our security, and threatening the lives and livelihoods of our citizens. Climate change also affects the way our armed forces operate. Our infrastructure, assets, and bases are vulnerable to its effects. Our forces need to operate in more extreme climate conditions, and our militaries are more frequently called upon to assist in disaster relief.

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The 2021 National Intelligence Council report on Climate Change and International Responses highlights the increasing challenges to U.S. national security through 2024, illustrating the risks and potential impacts caused by climate change.[46] This information is somewhat outdated, as we have already surpassed 1.5°C of warming above pre-industrial levels. The connection between national security and climate change also impacts multiple generations.

Climate Change as a National Security Threat

That climate change threatens national security gained attention in the mid-2000s after the 2007 CNA Military Advisory Board report called climate change a "threat multiplier."[47] It emphasized that climate stress does not directly cause conflict, but worsens existing social, economic, and political vulnerabilities.

Climate change threatens the stability of already vulnerable regions. Countries in the Sahel, for example, face intensified droughts, lower agricultural yields, and shrinking water supplies.[48] These environmental pressures increase competition among communities, raise interethnic tensions, and create opportunities for recruitment by extremist groups.[49] Similar patterns occur in parts of South Asia, where decreasing water access escalates tensions between nuclear-armed neighbors India and Pakistan.[50]

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The economic costs of climate-related disasters further weaken a country's resilience.[51] In 2023 alone, the United States faced at least $92.9 billion in weather and climate disasters, disrupting essential supply chains and diverting funds from other national priorities.[52]

The U.S. National Intelligence Estimate on Climate Change (2021) warned of increasing geopolitical tensions due to the global shift away from fossil fuels, competition over critical minerals, and the militarization of the Arctic.[53] Climate change is, therefore, not just a background factor, but a catalyst for strategic competition.

It is imperative to analyze climate change as a national security threat within the existing national security strategy development process. It can then be considered along with other security threats in a whole-of-government analysis.[54]

Climate Change and Military Readiness

Military readiness, or the ability of armed forces to effectively perform their assigned missions, is directly impacted by climate change. As environmental conditions become more unpredictable and severe, military infrastructure, personnel, and operations face increasing strain.

U.S. military bases serve as a clear example. Coastal installations like Naval Station Norfolk, the world's largest naval base, face frequent flooding and rising sea levels, threatening not only facilities but also deployment capabilities.[55] A 2019 Pentagon report[56] found that over fifty percent of U.S. military bases, including operational bases abroad, are at serious risk from flooding, extreme temperatures, wind, drought, and wildfire.[57]

In training environments, extreme heat limits exercises and endangers troops. At Fort Irwin, California, temperatures can exceed 110° F, creating unsafe conditions for prolonged outdoor operations.[58] These problems are also seen internationally.[59] In Australia,[60] record-setting bushfires have damaged bases and disrupted exercises, while in Europe,[61] melting permafrost[62] destabilize infrastructure in Arctic military zones.

Climate change also presents new operational challenges for militaries.[63] Humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) missions have become more frequent and extensive. After Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines in 2013, the U.S. military deployed aircraft carriers and thousands of personnel.[64] Although these missions are vital, they divert resources from primary defense objectives and highlight the need for climate preparedness.

Furthermore, logistical networks are at risk from climate change. Rising sea levels and severe storms damage key ports, airfields, and supply routes. In conflict zones, climate-related disruptions to local food and water systems can jeopardize operational effectiveness and troop support.

Recognizing these risks, several militaries have begun to integrate climate resilience into their strategic planning. The U.S. Department of Defense developed the Climate Adaptation Plan to enhance installation resilience, promote low-carbon operations, and reinforce supply chain robustness.[65] NATO has established a Climate and Security Centre of Excellence to address the impacts of climate change on defense policy.[66] However, significant gaps still exist in forecasting, resource planning, and interagency coordination.[67] Military planners need to incorporate long-term climate projections into basing decisions, procurement, and force posture.[68]

Resource Scarcity, Conflict, and Governance

One of the clearest ways climate change affects national security is by increasing competition for vital resources—water, food, and arable land. As these resources become scarcer due to changing climate patterns, societies under stress are more prone to conflict, insurgency, and government collapse.[69]

Water scarcity is a major source of tension. Currently, over two billion people live in water-stressed areas, and climate change is expected to worsen this situation.[70] Decreasing freshwater supplies can lead to domestic conflicts and heighten international tensions, especially where rival nations share transboundary rivers. The Nile River Basin,[71] used by Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia, has long been a source of conflict, with the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD)[72] raising concerns about the water supply in downstream countries.

Similarly, in the Middle East, the Tigris and Euphrates rivers have long been sources of conflict among Turkey, Syria, and Iraq.[73] Changes in precipitation caused by climate change, along with rising water demand and dam construction, have reduced flow and water quality, leading to agricultural failure and displacement of rural populations—factors that can incite radicalization and unrest.

Food insecurity persists. In the Horn of Africa, prolonged droughts have destroyed crops and livestock, resulting in widespread hunger and economic hardship.[74] These conditions have created recruitment opportunities for extremist groups like al-Shabaab, which exploit local grievances to grow their influence.[75]

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Climate change also weakens governance by overloading public institutions that are often ill-equipped for environmental crises.[76] In fragile states, climate-related shocks can reduce trust in government, expose corruption, and restrict the government's ability to provide basic services. When institutional capacity is limited, local conflicts over land and resources can quickly escalate and spill over borders, affecting regional stability.

Rivalry over resources could lead to interstate conflict. India and China, for example, have long argued over their Himalayan border, which also serves as a vital water source for both nations.[77] Melting glaciers, shifting monsoon patterns, and decreased snowpack generate strategic uncertainty about water availability—adding new complexities to already sensitive geopolitical issues. Addressing climate-driven resource insecurity requires coordinated efforts that extend beyond security measures. It

includes investing in development, diplomacy, environmental sustainability, and governance.[78]

Climate-Induced Migration and Border Pressures

Climate-induced migration[79] is an increasing concern for national security agencies worldwide.[80] As climate effects make certain areas less livable due to extreme heat, rising sea levels, or ongoing droughts, millions may be forced to relocate, putting pressure on political systems, infrastructure, and social cohesion.

Unmanaged, migration can strain governments and pose security challenges.

According to the World Bank, climate change could displace over 200 million people worldwide by 2050 if urgent action is not taken.[81] The most vulnerable regions include Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America—areas where internal migration might lead to urban overcrowding, unemployment, and heightened political instability.

In the United States, rising sea levels threaten coastal communities, especially in low-lying states like Florida and Louisiana.[82] Recurrent hurricanes have already displaced thousands, with "climate refugees" seeking permanent inland resettlement. In Alaska, melting permafrost is forcing the relocation of entire Indigenous villages—creating challenges for federal and state coordination.[83]

International migration connected to climate change is even more destabilizing. The 2015 European migration crisis,[84] although mainly caused by conflict in Syria and other Middle Eastern countries, was also indirectly influenced by long-term droughts that led to food insecurity and rural displacement in Syria. The resulting surge of refugees into Europe increased political polarization, boosted far-right movements, and altered the continent's internal and external policies.[85]

Migration flows often connect with smuggling, trafficking, and other transnational crimes, making response strategies more complex.[86] Meanwhile, public opinion in receiving countries may turn hostile, raising the risk of domestic unrest and xenophobia. Unmanaged, migration can strain governments and pose security challenges. Policymakers need to focus on proactive adaptation and relocation strategies, invest in resilient infrastructure, and support international frameworks for handling climate displacement.[87] Legal frameworks also require modernization.[88] Under current international law, the term "refugee" does not include those displaced by environmental factors, leaving climate migrants in legal limbo.[89]

Geopolitical Implications of a Changing Climate

Climate change is transforming the geopolitical landscape in significant and sometimes unexpected ways.[90] As natural resources shift, new trade routes develop, and environmental pressures change power dynamics, nations must adapt their strategic postures accordingly.[91] Nowhere is this clearer than in the Arctic.[92] Climate change is quickly transforming the region, melting sea ice and opening previously inaccessible maritime routes. The Northern Sea Route, for example, has become more navigable, offering a shorter path between Europe and Asia. This change has significant implications for global trade, energy exploration, and military presence.

Russia, the largest Arctic country, has significantly expanded its military presence in the region by reopening Cold War-era bases and deploying icebreakers, submarines, and long-range bombers.[93] China, although not an Arctic country, has declared itself a "near-Arctic state" and is investing heavily in Arctic shipping and research.[94] These actions have raised concerns

among NATO members, leading to increased surveillance and deployments by Canada, the U.S., and Nordic countries.

As countries move away from fossil fuels, traditional petrostates might face economic decline and instability.[95] This is especially concerning in regions like the Middle East and Central Asia, where governments depend heavily on oil revenues to fund public services and maintain political control. An unorganized transition could create new fault lines and conflict zones.

At the same time, climate diplomacy has,[96] until recently,[97] been emerging as a new arena for international influence. Nations leading in green technology and climate finance (such as the EU) can exert soft power through environmental leadership. Conversely, countries perceived as climate laggards may face diplomatic isolation or trade penalties.

For national security strategists, these trends call for a reassessment of priorities.[98] Intelligence agencies need to monitor environmental factors alongside traditional indicators. Defense planners must anticipate how changing geography and resource distribution will influence alliances, military logistics, and economic security.[99]

These are highlights of impacts that affect U.S. National Security, directly, indirectly, or through a combination.

Threat multiplier[100]

There is probably no aspect of national security that climate change does not amplify. Climate change is pervasive and affects nearly everything on Earth, including national security.

Renders military installations and infrastructure vulnerable

The National Security Council has identified more than thirty U.S. military installations at risk from rising sea levels.[101] A 2019 Pentagon Report found that more than fifty percent of military bases, including operational bases abroad, are at severe risk from flooding, extreme temperatures, wind, drought, and wildfire.[102]

Disrupts national103 and military equipment/ vehicle (Part 1104 and Part 2105) initiatives

This includes such as electric vehicles. According to the latest data from the Environmental Protection Agency, in 2022, transportation was the largest source, twenty-eight percent, of emissions in the U.S.

Conversely, countries perceived as climate laggards may face diplomatic isolation or trade penalties.

Disrupts infrastructure and military operations

Detecting submarines may be more difficult due to changes in seawater.[106] Submarine detection relies heavily on acoustic signals, which are affected by the temperature, pressure, and salinity of seawater. As climate change warms the oceans and alters their structure, these changes interfere with sonar performance, which is a key tool in naval surveillance and warfare. Increases in ocean acidification and sea surface temperature changes may lead to maritime vessels needing more frequent maintenance.[107] Increasing heat could also negatively affect land and air operations, while sea level rise in low-lying coastal areas may impact space operations.[108] Infrastructure such as roads,[109] bridges, airports and runways, and rail lines[110] are impacted by high temperatures, mainly due to stress and buckling from expansion, as well as melting and softening. Resilience and civil preparedness operations[111] involve preparing for and responding to extreme weather and climate changes. This increasingly requires military-civilian partnerships, as neither side typically has all the necessary resources. While strengthening resilience is primarily a national responsibility, it

also enhances NATO's strength.[112] The scarcity of water and the rise in dust storms further threaten operational capabilities.[113]

Exacerbates existing conflicts

Like other aspects of national security, climate change acts as a threat multiplier, heightening geopolitical tensions as countries pursue and defend their interests, along with societal, economic, and environmental pressures that can worsen or trigger conflicts.[114] These pressures can include competition for scarce resources, water shortages, increased migration and displacement, environmental harm, disrupted livelihoods, social and political unrest, and ripple effects across local, regional, or national boundaries due to one or more of these factors.[115]

The Arctic is affected more and warming faster than anywhere else on Earth.

Geopolitics create new challenges

This is especially true in the Arctic, as previously cited.[81] The Arctic is affected more and warming faster than anywhere else on Earth. As the Northwest Passage becomes more ice-free, competition for access, transit, and resources increases. This growing activity in the Arctic is shown by the establishment of the Army's 11th Airborne Division in Alaska and the increasing presence of the U.S. Navy.[116]

Refugees and migration

The U.S. currently lacks a legal protection system to offer a permanent safe haven for those displaced by climate change. Migration has increased substantially since 2000, reaching a record high of 2.3 million crossing the southern border, many of whom are climate refugees.[117]

Increases the risk of disease outbreaks

Climate change threatens public health by causing more cardiovascular deaths and respiratory illnesses due to heat waves, altering infectious disease transmission, boosting pathogens and vectors, and leading to malnutrition from crop failures.[118] Recent outbreaks of several emerging infectious diseases have caused significant death and illness, and the frequency of these outbreaks is expected to rise because of pathogen, environmental, and population factors influenced by climate change.[119]

Food and water insecurity

Food and water insecurity is another aspect of climate change that acts as a threat multiplier. Climate change impacts global, regional, and local food security by disrupting food availability, reducing access to food, complicating utilization, and leading to increasingly damaging outcomes from 2050 to 2100, driven by higher global warming scenarios.[120] Risks extend beyond agricultural production to other parts of the global food system, including processing, storage, transportation, and consumption. Similarly, increased water scarcity, altered precipitation patterns, and extreme weather events can disrupt water availability, quality, and infrastructure.

Policy and Strategic Recommendations

Former Secretary of Defense Austin wrote, "climate change fundamentally alters the conditions that shape military operations at home and around the world," and the Defense Department must "both understand and adapt to the ways in which extreme weather and climate change affect our readiness and capabilities."[121] The U.S. Department of Defense, Department of State,[122] and all other federal agencies[123] have plans to address climate change within the context of national security and beyond. It's essentially a whole-of-government approach, as well as a whole-of-society approach.[124] The U.S.

has had a Framework for Climate Resilience and Security.[125]

Now, the current U.S. Administration is not engaging in climate science, as well as dismantling capabilities and programs. Further, climate change deniers exercise powerful influence across the government. Thus, many of these recommendations are currently moot points.[126]

Regardless, effectively addressing the intersection of climate change and national security requires comprehensive, forward-looking policies that cross traditional boundaries between environmental management, defense strategy, and international relations. While climate change cannot be solved solely through security measures, national security institutions play a crucial role in building climate resilience and preparing for emerging risks.

Integrate Climate Risk into National Security Strategy

Climate risks should be integrated into national security doctrines, defense white papers, and intelligence assessments. Governments should regularly evaluate climate risks related to military installations, supply chains, and operational environments. These evaluations should guide procurement decisions, force posture, and strategic planning at the highest levels.

Climate-Resilient Infrastructure Investments

Military and civilian infrastructure must be made resilient against rising sea levels, flooding, wildfires, and heatwaves. This includes strengthening coastal bases, upgrading energy systems with microgrids and renewable sources, and investing in sustainable building materials and practices. The U.S. and allied nations should implement climate adaptation plans for all new and existing defense infrastructure.

Strengthen Interagency and International Collaboration

Climate security challenges are inherently cross-border. Tackling them requires coordination among defense, intelligence, diplomatic, environmental, and development agencies. Internationally, mechanisms such as the NATO Climate and Security Centre of Excellence, the UN Security Council's climate security agenda, and regional frameworks (e.g., the African Union's climate and conflict initiatives) should be strengthened and supported.

Expand Humanitarian and Disaster Relief Capabilities

As climate-related disasters become more frequent and severe, militaries and civilian emergency services must be equipped and trained for swift deployment. This involves stockpiling supplies, improving logistics networks, and building cooperative response frameworks with international partners. Civil-military cooperation is essential for a quick and effective disaster response.

Governments should establish legal and policy frameworks to manage climate-induced migration.

Address Climate-Driven Migration Proactively

Governments should establish legal and policy frameworks to manage climate-induced migration. This involves creating relocation pathways, investing in adaptation efforts for vulnerable communities, and updating asylum policies to account for environmental displacement. Regional collaboration is crucial to prevent unilateral border closures or humanitarian crises.

Foster Climate Intelligence and Early Warning Systems

National security agencies should invest in climate-aware intelligence gathering and

risk assessment. Satellite monitoring, AI-powered predictive analytics, and scenario planning can enhance situational awareness and support preemptive measures. Early warning systems should be shared with allies and international organizations.

Lead in Green Defense and Decarbonization

Defense institutions are significant energy users and primary sources of national emissions. Shifting to cleaner energy sources—such as hybrid military vehicles, biofuels, and solar energy—can lower operational vulnerabilities and demonstrate leadership on climate action. Countries like the UK and Germany have already committed to green defense initiatives, and others should follow.

Promote Climate-Sensitive Development in Fragile States

To prevent climate-related instability, development assistance should focus on building resilience in vulnerable countries. This involves investing in water management, sustainable agriculture, conflict resolution mechanisms, and community-based adaptation. These efforts help lower the risk of state failure and reduce the need for military intervention.

U.S. Science Leadership

Perhaps more than anything else, we must continue to be global leaders in science. As the President of the National Academies recently stated, there is a pessimistic scenario developing, a worst-case situation where U.S. science falls behind other nations.[127] Science is the very foundation of our national security, defense, understanding, and addressing climate change. Without it, we are adrift, posing increased risks to national security and climate efforts. It has recently been reported that seventy-five percent of U.S. scientists are looking for jobs outside of the U.S.[128]

Conclusion

Climate change is no longer just a peripheral environmental concern – it has become a critical national security issue with significant implications for global stability, sovereignty of states, and military readiness. As temperatures rise, sea levels climb, and extreme weather events become more frequent, these phenomena serve as threat multipliers, exacerbating vulnerabilities in fragile nations, accelerating mass migrations, increasing the risk of conflicts over resources, military infrastructure, strategic resources, human displacement, and domestic and global security.[129]

This calls for ethical and moral leadership in conjunction with a comprehensive, proactive, cross-sectoral, inter-generational, whole-of-government, and whole-of-society strategy that integrates climate resilience into national security planning, emphasizing the importance of adaptable defense strategies, diplomacy, regional collaboration, and climate aware intelligence at local, national, and global levels. ***IAJ***

Notes

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Professional Duty:
A Civil-Military Relations Perspective

by Michael J. Forsyth

Over the course of the most recent presidential administrations, including the current one, some disturbing incidents occurred whereby senior field grade military leaders stepped over or allegedly crossed a line with their public criticism of elected officials. Their actions indicate a lack of professionalism and demonstrate a troubling misunderstanding of an officer's proper role in the civil-military relationship. The bedrock of civil-military relations in the United States is subordination of the military to legally constituted civilian authority. When military officers, and in particular, senior leaders, act in an insubordinate manner it weakens the civil-military relationship and breaks trust between the government, the populace, and the military. Therefore, the most critical aspect of military professionalism is the discipline to subordinate oneself to civilian authority. This article discusses what has happened, the theoretical concepts informing civil-military relations in the U.S., and the obligations of serving military officers. The purpose of this essay is to remind serving leaders that to maintain the trust of the people and the political leaders elected by the people, military officers must understand and fulfill their professional obligations.

Surveys of military officers conducted across two presidential administrations in 2015-2016 and 2017-2020 revealed that about a third of those surveyed observed disdainful or critical comments against the president or other elected officials by their friends shared on social media.[1] A recent example of critical commentary by a senior military officer occurred in April 2025, during the current administration, when the vice president of the U.S. visited Greenland, a territory of Denmark, and the U.S. base situated on the island. During the vice president's visit, he made several statements with reference to the status of the territory. After the visit, the commander at Pituffik sent an email message to all base personnel and "to the Canadians, Danes, and Greenlanders who work there." In the email the commander stated that "I do not presume to understand the current politics, but what I do know is the concerns of the U.S. administration discussed by the vice president on Friday

Michael J. Forsyth is the director of the Department of Command and Leadership and an associate professor at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College. He is a retired U.S. Army colonel having served thirty years and holds a Ph.D. in war studies from the Royal Military College of Canada. He teaches an elective course on civil-military relations at CGSC.

are not reflective of the Pituffik Space Base."[2] This statement represents an egregious violation of protocol in which the commander disavowed a civilian political leader in what one could perceive is a partisan statement. This is a clear violation of the military officer's professional ethic for non-partisan behavior.

Implications

There are three serious implications associated with senior military leaders acting in a manner that appears to show partisanship or disrespect to the executive authority. The first, and arguably most, serious consequence is the breaking of trust in the civil-military relationship between civilian and military leaders, within units, and between the military and society. Every military officer swears an oath to the Constitution of the United States to execute their duties. A clause in the oath notes that officers, in accepting their commission are obligated to "faithfully discharge the duties of the office."[3] Among the most basic expectations of a commander is they will faithfully carry out their duties and orders as servants of the constitution. By expressing a partisan opinion, the leaders publicly disobey a fundamental norm associated with their duties, which has far-reaching effects.

When a senior military leader disobeys an order or disavows a policy publicly, they telegraph to the organization that obedience is a selective and personal choice. Discipline is a critical component that ensures the effectiveness of military organizations. Discipline facilitates adherence to established standards so that members do not cut corners on safety, maintenance of equipment, safeguarding of information, or physical security to name just a few critical functions within units. Further, discipline ensures compliance with both written and verbal orders. Failure to follow orders can prove detrimental to a military organization, including its very survival in combat. Selective obedience to orders can weaken the sinews that keep an organization tight knit and effective with a strong moral culture. Therefore, when a commander or senior leader of an organization publicly decides not to follow a regulation, standard, norm, or order or publicly criticizes or disavows a decision or policy, the action weakens the discipline of the organization. This is because subordinates within the organization could now decide for themselves what regulations to follow or not. If this happens, the commander can lose control of the unit resulting in a lower level of readiness, effectiveness, and morale. Thus, a decision to disregard standards due to political disagreement can weaken the organization since subordinates tend to emulate the behavior of their leaders.

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Third, public actions expressing disagreement with political leaders strains the "civil-military bargain" between the military and civilian leaders, and between the military and society.[4] Theorist Carl von Clausewitz introduced the concept of the trinity characterized by the people, the government, and the military of a state (see Figure 1, page 50).

According to Clausewitz, "[T]hese three tendencies [entities] are like three different codes of law, deep-rooted in their subject and yet variable in their relationship to one another." He further states that they "maintain[s] a balance between these three tendencies, like an object suspended between three magnets."[5] In other words, there is a certain balance among the three actors to ensure sound civil-military relations. Modern day scholar of civil-military relations, Mackubin Thomas Owens identifies the

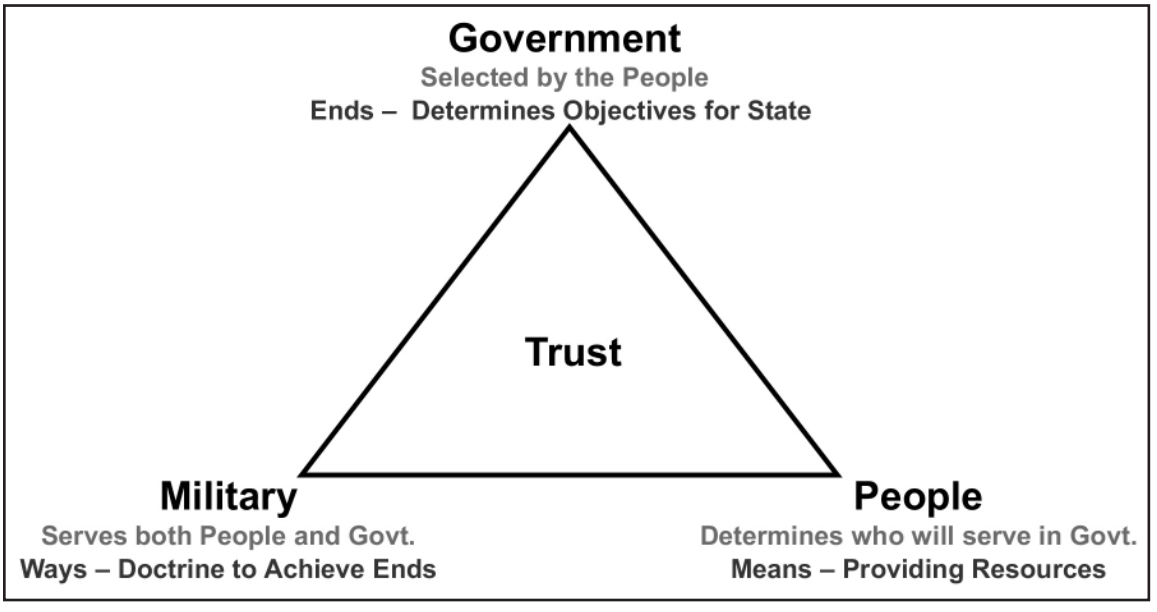

Figure 1. Clausewitz' Trinity

This figure provides a graphic depiction of Clausewitz' discussion of the civil-military relationship. All three participants in civil-military discourse act in relation to the others. While the people select the government, it must in turn act on behalf of the people and the military serves at the behest of both. Further, the military draws its members from people, and the government controls the military to protect the people. Trust between the actors is the critical component that balances the triangle. Good faith among all three develops the trust relationship.

relationship between the entities as a "bargain."[6] The people, the government, and the military must maintain a relationship of trust to ensure the security of the state. When trust is broken, the dialogue about national security becomes potentially acrimonious making it difficult to agree about what ends to pursue, how to secure those ends, and how to allocate resources.[7]

When military leaders publicly disavow or show disrespect to political leaders, they weaken the civil-military bargain. Here is why—in the U.S. the people elect the political leaders. The political leaders appoint the military leaders, and the military leaders provide security for the people at the behest of the political leaders. Since the people elect their political leaders, it constitutes an act of repudiation of the will of the people in a democracy when military leaders disobey or disrespect the political leadership. This breaks the bond of trust between the majority of the people and the military. It further breaks trust between the political leaders and the military who must deliberate on policy for securing the state through a candid and rigorous dialogue. It is hard to conduct this dialogue when military leaders go public with disagreement or fail to uphold visible standards within a unit. Therefore, military leaders who act in such a manner can ultimately weaken the security of the state because they poison the dialogue by breaking trust. This is why discipline and obedience to regulations and orders is sacrosanct. Failure to uphold the standards destroys the civil-military relations bargain identified by Owens.[8]

Theory Upon Which the U.S. Bases the Civil-Military Relationship

Samuel Huntington, Morris Janowitz, and Peter Feaver provide foundational thought on the basis and maintenance of a sound civil-military relationship. Huntington's work in *The Soldier and the State* establishes an institutional foundation for the civil-military relationship. Central to his theory is the premise that civil

control is optimal when the military leader exercises professionalism whereby, he or she serves the state in a non-partisan manner. This means that, regardless of the political party in control of the executive branch, the military leader serves the state to protect it from external threats. In return, the civilian leaders provide autonomy to the military to exercise its professional ethos. The purpose of this autonomy is to build a level of proficiency so that it is capable of effectively defending the state and its people. Further, professional autonomy, according to Huntington, would abate military leaders' interest in politics because their primary focus would be generation of ready and effective forces. Huntington labels this concept objective civilian control, and it is the foundational organizing principle for U.S. civil-military relations today.[9] Central to this concept is the military professional who shuns partisan politics for the sake of service to the state and the Constitution on behalf of the people.

Janowitz wrote his treatise, *The Professional Soldier*, nearly simultaneously to Huntington's work. In contrast to Huntington, Janowitz's work is one of sociology as he took a scholarly focus. In his work, Janowitz emphasizes that the military leader has a civic duty to carry out his/her functions in a professional manner. In carrying out this duty to the Republic, the citizen soldier serves to defend the people and what it represents. Therefore, since the professional military leader's interest is in defending the society and the government constructed by that society, it obviates the motivation for military leaders to wade into partisan politics.[10] In other words, the military leader's priority is on how to develop a sound defense for the Republic established by the Constitution and its people—and this is a sacred duty.

In his book *Armed Servants,* Peter Feaver famously stated that civilian political leaders have the "right to be wrong." What he meant by this statement is that, as the legally constituted political authority, the civilian leaders have the right to make decisions for the state. In a democracy, such as the U.S., the populace places civilian political leaders in office through the agency of their vote. The military leaders receive their appointments and serve at the pleasure of the civilian political authorities. As military leaders go about the performance of their duties, they will inevitably come into disagreement with those civilian authorities. This, as Feaver notes, "imposes a serious burden on military professionalism."[11] The reason for this is it takes a great deal of discipline to carry out one's duty when the military leader may disagree with the policy promulgated by the political leadership. Yet this is precisely the essence of military professionalism. It is the realization and acceptance of the fact that political leaders have the right to be wrong and the military leaders have the obligation to carry out their duties without public protest. Engaging in such protest constitutes a political act on the part of the military leader and is a violation of professional ethos and the oath of office.

As military leaders go about the performance of their duties, they will inevitably come into disagreement with those civilian authorities.

Additionally, from his book, Feaver embraces agency theory to describe the civilian principal-military agent relationship. When military leaders choose to not follow direction from the civilian principals, or even drag their feet, he calls this behavior "shirking."[12] According to Feaver, a military leader might shirk when there is a disagreement on policy. In shirking, the military leader may choose not to act on the implementation of policy when there is an expectation of support and action by the political leader. Since political leaders have the

authority as the principal to promulgate policy, it is the military's duty as the agent to implement the policy. When military leaders fail to do so or speak out publicly on the policy in a negative manner, it represents a lack of discipline and professionalism as previously discussed.[13]

...the Constitution establishes the legal authority to elect the chief executive. It enumerates the power of the president to command the armed forces.

Legal Authority

The authority of political leaders derives from the Constitution. The writing and ratification of the Constitution took place over the course of two years. The failed experiment of the Articles of the Confederation demonstrated the need for a better form of government. This new government would require clear executive authority for the entire country in contrast to the lack of a strong executive established in the articles. This weakness led to disunity among the various states, and further, the weakness of the executive meant the new nation had difficulty taxing, paying debt, fixing foreign policy, and organizing for common defense. While the Constitution represented an enormous improvement in governance, the various states required convincing in order to ratify the document.

To coax the states into accepting the Constitution, three prominent men who participated in the Constitutional Convention wrote a series of essays published in four New York newspapers. These men, John Jay, James Madison, and Alexander Hamilton, wrote the essays that became known as the Federalist Papers over the course of a year. Later published in book form, their arguments convinced the state of New York to ratify the Constitution. Much of the text in their essays matched that of the articles in the Constitution. In writing, the authors were explaining the advantages of the new form of government in streamlining the efficiency of that government.

Among the concepts discussed was national defense and the role of the executive authority. In Federalist #69, Alexander Hamilton enumerates where the authority of the executive derives. He is clear in stating that the power of the president derives from the people.[14] "The executive authority . . . is to be elected for *four* years; and is to be re-eligible as often as the People of the United States shall think him worthy of their confidence," states Hamilton in the essay. Later in the essay he notes that "[T]he President is to be Commander in Chief of the army and navy of the United States and of the militia of the several states."[15] Thus, the essayist is clear. The people decide who will sit in the office of the president through a democratic election process. Then, upon assuming the office through the legally sanctioned election and certification, the president becomes the commander of the armed forces as an integral part of the office. The executive leaves office voluntarily, by failing to win reelection, or by removal through a legal process by the people's representatives in the legislature.[16]

Hamilton's argument in Federalist #69 is found in the text of the Constitution, which the states ratified in 1789. Article II of the Constitution lays out the process of electing the president in Section 1. It is through the election process that the chief executive is vested with power. Section 2 discusses the president's power to command the military. This power implies that officers commissioned and appointed by the Senate in service to the country are subject to the lawful orders of the commander-in-chief.[17] Thus, the Constitution establishes the legal authority to elect the chief executive. It enumerates the power of the president to command the armed forces. Further, the document provides for the

appointment of officers subject to the orders of the president as commander-in-chief.

When officers receive their commission, they swear an oath of office to the Constitution. This formality is symbolic of the legal requirement for the officer to serve the state at the behest of the legally constituted authority. The oath specifically states, "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 well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office upon which I am about to enter."[18] There are three critical elements contained in this short quote from the oath. First, every officer's allegiance is to the Constitution and the document describes how the government derives its authority and powers—–from the people. The Constitution states that the legally elected executive, the president, is the commander-in-chief of the armed forces. Second, the oath has the officer confirm this commitment to the Constitution, which establishes the people's ability to select the president, the authority over the armed forces, and the source of the commission the officer receives. Finally, the oath requires the officer to affirm faithful discharge of duties. Those duties arise from the direction of the executive authority and the officer is bound to carry out those duties.

Inherent in the discussion of the legal authorities is the social contract between the people, government, and the military (see Figure 1). The people elect the government. The government in turn carries out the will of the people. As agents of the government, appointed by the legislature of the people, the military has a sacred obligation to adhere to the direction and orders of the executive. The reason is that the executive derives its authority from the Constitution, which denotes how the executive is legally constituted. So, when a military officer rejects, publicly protests, or neglects to carry out their duties, the action breaks the social contract. Further, it destroys the trust between the three partners in civil-military relations. Finally, the offending officer is tacitly telling the people who elected the executive, they are wrong. Not only is this insubordinate, but it is also an act that erodes the bond of trust the must exist between the people, the government, and the military so that the military can secure the nation. How do we maintain this trust at a time of rapid change and uncertainty?

As agents of the government, appointed by the legislature of the people, the military has a sacred obligation to adhere to the direction and orders of the executive.

Serving Selflessly in a Non-Partisan Manner

The U.S. holds elections every four years and at that time the people decide who they want to represent them and who will serve as the executive authority. With each new Congress and administration change is inevitable. Since the political parties generally take a different worldview, the policies of each succeeding administration will tend to swing like a pendulum. The recent change of administration illustrates this point in real time. The question arises for serving officers, how do I react to the changes?

David Barno and Nora Bensahel offer sage advice in a recently published article. They articulate six precepts that a military leader should consider in moving forward with service. These include:

- Maintain your perspective
- Look inward
- Look deep
- Keep your political opinions private, whatever they are

- Think about your redlines in advance
- Embrace duty, mission, people, and values[19]

The authors note that crises in civil-military relations are not new and they always simmer down at some stage. Their point is change and turmoil will occur, but it is the dedicated, professional officer who weathers the storm and elevates the profession. Such leaders ensure the institution is better positioned to meet the security challenges of the future leaving the organization better than they found it. The key to this is to "embrace duty, mission, people, and values."[20] The reasons officers serve varies. However, their service ensures the nation endures while taking care of the people within the organization. Without leaders dedicated to the mission and the servicemembers in the organization, the nation will suffer. Thus, professional officers continue to serve to provide continuity of security for the country and its Constitution regardless of who occupies the executive branch. It is a calling.

To ensure military leaders adhere to their professional duty requires emphasis from the most senior leaders. There are three ways to emphasize professional duty. First, senior military leaders at the four-star level must explicitly highlight the need for the officer corps to maintain proper decorum with reference to civilian leaders. Second, senior military leaders can reinforce the message by embedding it in the professional military education system ensuring a baseline for consistent professional behavior. Finally, units in the field need to include civil-military professional ethics in their professional development programs. This will inculcate the ethical standards to the lowest level and further reinforce the message from the top and the curriculum in the education institutions.

Conclusion

In summary, military leaders encounter circumstances in which they will disagree with established policy. This, as Feaver notes, will "impose a serious burden on military professionalism."[21] Nevertheless, professionalism demands adherence to an ethic that places service to the state over personal expression of opinion. This ensures the civil-miliary bargain and the trust inherent in that bargain remain rock solid for the sake of those whom the military leaders serve, the people and their government. Behavior, real or perceived, that weakens the bond of trust breaks the bargain and can have a negative impact upon the security of the nation. Therefore, military leaders must embrace their commitment to service in a non-partisan way for the good of the people, their government, and the profession and institution they are a part of. In the end, this will strengthen the bond of trust and security of our great republic and its democratic norms. ***IAJ***

Notes

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so undermines trust between the military, government, and the people as well as within the organization.

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12 Feaver, *Armed Servants*, 2-3.

13 Ibid., p. 55-74 in Feaver's book provided a detailed discussion of the concept of "shirking" that expands on the short introduction to the concept on pages 2-3.

14 Cynthia Brantley Johnson, Ed., *The Federalist Papers* (New York: Pocket Books, a division of Simon & Schuster, 2004; originally published in 1787-1788), 491-499.

15 Ibid., 491, emphasis in original, and 493.

16 Ibid., 492.

17 Ibid., 638, 640, and 642. Section VIII of Article 1 of the Constitution gives the Senate the power to appoint officers of the armed forces.

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Complexity Leadership
in Military Command and Control

by Valiant Haller

The current military environment is complex and characterized by rapid technological change, dispersed decision-making requirements, and an increasingly interconnected battlefield. The advent of uncrewed aircraft systems (UAS), increased access to information sources, and artificial intelligence-enabled analysis tools compress commander's decision-making cycles and require the exercise of prudent initiative at the point of need. As Dr. Forsyth noted, technological advancements, such as increased drone use and artificial intelligence processing, are widely available and changing the character of warfare and shifting traditional domain boundaries.[1] The U.S. Army doctrinal approach, *Mission Command,* which is taught throughout professional military education (PME) and specialized schools such as the School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS), emphasizes adaptation and the ability to operate within uncertainty.[2] This implies the well-established professional understanding of complexity must be addressed directly in planning and execution to address the challenges presented by the current environment.

While doctrine and PME promote decentralized execution, they may not always offer a clear theoretical explanation for how commanders can structure the boundaries that enable subordinate leaders to exploit complexity without fracturing coherence. The emphasis Uhl-Bien et al.'s Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT) places on adaptive and emergent leadership within complex adaptive systems may offer a unifying framework.[3] CLT clarifies the leadership mechanisms, such as intent, authorities, limitations, and risk, that allow commanders to shape conditions, establish boundaries, and create the adaptive space needed for innovation. This results in enabling subordinate

Lieutenant Colonel Valiant Haller is a military intelligence officer currently serving as an instructor in the Department of Joint, Interagency, and Multinational Operations at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College. He is also a student in the Doctor of Executive Leadership program at the University of Charleston, West Virginia, with an expected graduation in December 2026. Haller has served in units at brigade level and above, as an active participant in exercises or operations in every combatant command with a geographic area of responsibility. Service highlights include intelligence positions (Colombia, OIF, OEF, and OUP), operational-level positions in the Republic of Korea, and capability development at the Intelligence Center of Excellence.

leaders to sense, interpret, and act on emerging opportunities.

Making sense of the environment requires careful consideration of the relevant factors and relational contexts. Research by Boulton et al., Davis, Stacey, and Yarger demonstrated the need for executive leaders to view each environment as an interconnected system that uses various processes to sense current relationships and tensions and to identify opportunities to shift toward desired goals.[4] The result of their research shows that understanding current environmental factors begins the process of identifying opportunities for actions that enable future success and must be done at each decision-making level. Contextual sensemaking empowers organizational structures to take advantage of presented opportunities at every level.

Future military successes depend on balancing organizational structures and understanding complexity in dynamic military environments. CLT sets conditions for complex adaptive systems (CAS) to mitigate the limitations of traditional military leadership models in military operations.[5] Therefore, CLT through CAS enables military leaders to adapt to changing environments and situations. Integration of CLT as an interpretive lens strengthens the Army's existing approach by explaining how decentralized action, continuous learning, and emergent problem solving occur within defined parameters and the traditionally hierarchical military structure.

Purpose of the Study

This paper aims to contribute to the body of knowledge on how applying CLT within military command and control (C2) enhances adaptability and effectiveness. In 2024, Dr. Forsyth issued the challenge to conduct a deliberate analysis, using the Doctrine, Organization, Training, Materiel, Leadership and Education, Personnel, Facilities, and Policy (DOTMLPF-P) framework, to identify the skills, behaviors, and competencies required to succeed in dynamic and complex military environments.[6] The critical components of CLT include adaptive leadership, emergent leadership, strategic thinking, data literacy, and decentralized leadership. Examination of CLT components informs the analysis within the Leadership and Education domain of the DOTMLPF-P framework.

Future military successes depend on balancing organizational structures and understanding complexity in dynamic military environments.

There is an opportunity to explore the familiarity with CLT required by military leaders to succeed in dynamic, complex environments and to build a comparative advantage on the modern battlefield. This examination of two CLT components, adaptive and emergent leadership styles, informs the discussion seeking solutions to address the complexities of military command. Consideration of ways to integrate CLT into existing leadership development programs and methods is essential for full implementation across the military.

Applying the two concepts of CLT addressed here requires integration into existing leadership development processes. The three elements of military leadership development—institutional, operational, and self-development—present unique opportunities for incorporating CLT into military leadership programs.[7] Operational-level opportunities for cultivating adaptive, decentralized, and emergent leadership exist in current training and military operations simulations, multinational security cooperation activities, and real-time exercises. Continuous development and learning empower successful military leaders to face the complexities of modern battlefields consistently.

Thesis Statement

Integrating CLT into military command and control provides a coherent framework for how commanders can set adaptive boundaries, through intent, limitations, authorities, and priorities, which enable subordinate leaders to effectively exploit complexity. While the U.S. Army's doctrine and professional military education already emphasize decentralized execution, CLT clarifies the mechanisms through which adaptive and emergent leadership enhance operational effectiveness across dynamic, technologically advanced environments.

Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT) views organizations as interconnected systems where outcomes emerge from relationships, interactions, and environmental shifts.

Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT) Overview

Defining CLT

Mary Uhl-Bien et al. describe leadership within CLT as a dynamic interaction "learning, creativity, and adaptive capacity of complex adaptive systems (CAS) in knowledge-producing organizations or organizational units."[8] Rather than relying solely on linear, prediction-based planning models, CLT views organizations as interconnected systems where outcomes emerge from relationships, interactions, and environmental shifts. This perspective aligns with the military understanding that leaders must continually make sense of evolving conditions. New or updated knowledge increases situational awareness and reveals opportunities for novel solutions adapted to the evolving environment. Integration of operational-level organizations with higher strategic goals and lower tactical-level actions creates a more cohesive military system.

A key contribution of CLT is its clear distinction between control and command. Traditional hierarchical command structures rely on deterministic cause-and-effect assumptions which expect leaders to predict future conditions, plan responses, and direct organizations to execute. The basis of the mechanical, also known as Newtonian, worldview is the assumption of control, leading to planning for known, predictable reactions to military action.[9] In contrast, CLT recognizes that uncertainty limits prediction and leaders must shape conditions rather than prescribe detailed actions.[10] These contrasts suggest that empowering subordinate commanders for distributed, situation-dependent decision-making may be possible through the establishment of boundaries within their areas of responsibility.

CLT encourages continuous learning and adaptation by focusing on how organizations and individuals respond to changing conditions. Sensing the environment and seeking a new understanding of relationships enable progress beyond managerial task-based controls.[11] In this way, CLT complements existing concepts such as Mission Command and systems thinking empowering leaders to continue examining the environment to find new understanding and create conditions for innovative solutions in dynamic and unpredictable situations. CLT enhances existing frameworks like Political, Military, Economic, Social, Information and Infrastructure (PMESII) and the Joint Planning Process, which encourage iterative sensemaking and adaptation.[12] CLT focuses on influencing directional changes in the operating environment through nonlinear approaches, in contrast to traditional strategy, which specifies the conditions required to achieve the end state or transition point.

The relationship between strategy and planning is a frequent topic of debate and

discussion. Mintzberg describes strategy as the plan, pattern, position, and perspective organizations can use to outline their methods, behaviors, relationship with others in the environment, and view of the environment.[13] Yarger describes strategy as providing the "direction for the state, seeking to maximize positive outcomes and minimize negative outcomes, as the state moves through a complex and rapidly changing environment into the future."[14]

The transition point between strategy and planning is provided by operational design step in the Joint Planning Process.[15] Additionally, Mintzberg et al. describe the need for a situation-derived effect on deliberate strategies and planning, leading to emergent strategies.[16] Generally, strategy relates to planning as an overarching approach to problem framing and options or conditions which describe a desired future condition. A risk inherent in the transition to planning is a rigid adherence to higher-level approaches which hamper innovation. Integration of CLT into military C2 strengthens strategy development and planning by providing commanders with mechanisms to integrate current information into their decision-making processes.

CLT aligns with a systems perspective understanding of the modern world. Researchers like Snowden complement military strategists like Yarger and Eikmeier in developing analytical frameworks for understanding the interrelatedness of systems within the environment.[17] The systems analysis results in an understanding of current conditions nations and militaries face and helps show the changes needed to transition toward future conditions.[18] Complicated ways of addressing these conditions at the national and strategic levels constrain lower-level leaders and organizations into rigid mechanical responses. The prescriptive responses to hierarchical situational understanding hamper innovation and centralize leadership structures.

Core Questions CLT Answers

CLT addresses two recurring challenges for military leaders: how to lead in unpredictable environments when not physically present and how to make decisions without clear direction in uncertainty. The inability to rely on traditional threat warning systems requires military organizations to function as CAS, empowered to find innovative solutions at the moment of need.[19] CLT emphasizes nonlinear interactions, reflective feedback processes, and support for emergent solutions that arise from distributed expertise.[20] In complex environments, commanders cannot rely on detailed guidance or centralized approval processes. Instead, they must cultivate organizations capable of generating solutions at the point of need.

In complex environments, commanders cannot rely on detailed guidance or centralized approval processes.

These concepts reinforce the U.S. Army's doctrinal emphasis on disciplined initiative. CLT provides the theoretical underpinnings for understanding how decentralized decision-making unfolds within coherent command structures. Clearly established boundaries empower subordinate leaders to interpret their environments, find opportunities, and act aligned with higher intent.

Distinctions from Traditional Leadership Models

Traditional hierarchical decision-making models consolidate control at upper echelons, which can inhibit innovation when used exclusively in dynamic environments. Hierarchical organizations sustain their centralized control by restricting decision-making and requiring subordinate elements to adopt leader- and task-focused processes and behaviors, as well as transactional leadership

styles.[21] This shows that rational responses limit innovation through constrained and unsustainable processes and personality-based leadership. CLT, by contrast, emphasizes the relational and adaptive processes that enable organizations to respond creatively in ambiguity thereby encouraging collaborative ownership of decision-making processes.

Transformational leadership complements CLT by strengthening the interpersonal foundations of trust, vision, and collaboration. Transformational skills equip ethical, innovative executive leaders to inspire and propel individuals and organizations beyond their previously known limits while maintaining organizational effectiveness.[22] Influential military leaders apply transformational processes, like Kotter's 8-stage change model, to improve commitment and organizational effectiveness.[23] Military executive leaders demonstrate and foster transformational leadership by learning new skills and observing behavioral responses to challenging situations that reveal observable and measurable vertical development progress. Transformational leadership styles complement CLT and shift processes toward more authorization of distributed and adaptive approaches in the face of complexity.

Executive leaders with an adaptive leadership style go beyond transactional leadership and show mental flexibility...

Adaptive Leadership in Military Operations

Definition of Adaptive Leadership

Adaptive leadership equips military leaders to quickly adapt to unforeseen challenges in modern warfare, including changing battle conditions and technological disruptions. Shortened decision-response processes, increased technological proficiencies, and distributed data-delivery systems describe the new terrain of warfare.[24] The complexities of the modern battlefield challenge traditional hierarchical models and highlight the need for decentralized leadership able to rapidly interpret new information and adjust plans. Adaptive leadership bridges the gap between conventional models and navigation of dynamic environments emphasizing doctrine's call for critical thinking, systems analysis, and iterative planning.

Adaptive leaders continually assess current conditions rather than relying on earlier successes which may limit understanding and can mask potential opportunities. Heifetz et al. and Stacey explored how adaptive leadership builds on earlier successes by continuously assessing those processes against current situational knowledge to find new ways of achieving objectives.[25] This continuous process of questioning assumptions and exploring alternative pathways demonstrates the capacity of adaptive leadership to offer new options in response to ongoing challenges to existing paradigms. Successful implementation of adaptive leadership on the modern battlefield depends on the boundaries set by commanders, including risk tolerance, intent, and priorities, which guide subordinate leaders' decisions.

Executive leaders with an adaptive leadership style go beyond transactional leadership and show mental flexibility to navigate complex, dynamic environments. Vertically developed leaders focus on collaborative achievements rather than personal ones and emphasize distributed capacities.[26] These leaders apply learned cognitive problem-solving processes to understand situations and reflect on previous experiences to determine new and flexible ways of adapting to changing, complex, and ambiguous environments.[27] The adaptive leadership style does not rely on previous knowledge to prescribe approaches to future situations. Instead, it is a process for understanding situations and determining

situation-based approaches. Adaptive leadership is critical for maintaining operational effectiveness in the modern battlefield.

Connection with Military Doctrine

Inherent in U.S. military doctrine and joint operations is the goal of effectively applying available resources to the complexities of the international system. Current doctrine requires adaptive leadership, as demonstrated by *Joint Publication (JP) 5-0: Joint Planning*, which requires staffs to test each course of action for its validity in accomplishing the desired.[28] In addition, systems thinking methodologies for environmental analysis, such as PMESII, reveal opportunities that enable the practice of adaptive leadership.[29] These two examples demonstrate current linkages between adaptive leadership and existing military doctrine, emphasizing flexibility and disciplined initiative toward common goals. Despite recent examples demonstrating military leaders' application of adaptive leadership in unpredictable environments, challenges still hinder full implementation.

Challenges in Developing Adaptive Leadership

Institutional and cultural barriers prevent the development of adaptive military organizations and leaders. Studies by Siew et al. and Singh et al. show that the institutional requirement of continual achievement prevents leaders from exercising critical thinking in high-stakes decision-making environments, reducing their willingness to innovate beyond established processes and norms.[30] These researchers show that the culture of evaluating achievement from higher levels dampens creativity and innovation, thereby preventing the full implementation of adaptive leadership.

The culture created by rigid organizational structures reduces the military's ability to reorganize effectively and challenges the full implementation of adaptive leadership. Hierarchical control is a traditional characteristic of military culture, creating structures that rely on subordinate compliance. This structure emphasizes established processes and therefore struggles to allow for innovative adaptation and experimentation with new ways of approaching complex situations due to the uncertainty of results.[31] Providing organizational military leaders with the authority to tailor organizational structures by integrating feedback mechanisms into established processes to face unique environments enables innovation. Relevant measures of effectiveness must be established to evaluate the successful implementation of adaptive leadership within military structures.

Institutional and cultural barriers prevent the development of adaptive military organizations and leaders.

Ethical Considerations for Adaptive Leadership

The future implementation of ethical adaptive leadership is essential for the military's management of emergent technologies such as autonomous systems and AI-driven warfare. Adaptive military leaders must balance decision-making and flexibility in unpredictable environments with a foundational understanding of organizational values and ethical standards.[32] This means that military leaders must clearly understand strategic goals and professional standards and temper the risk of practical adaptation to the presented circumstances. Adaptive leadership and emergent leadership, discussed in the next section, are vital components of CLT that inform the future of military operations.

Emergent Leadership in Military Operations

Definition of Emergent Leadership

Emergent leadership, characterized by its informal nature and belief that knowledge does not reside in traditional power structures, creates the conditions for complexity leadership to thrive. Emergent leadership arises when individuals or groups address challenges based on expertise rather than rank or authority enables ownership and problem solving in dynamic conditions.[33] This emphasizes the importance for learning organizations to maintain open lines of communication across the structure, encouraging collective approaches and viewpoints, and developing emergent strategies which hierarchical processes may overlook. The modern, dynamic, and interconnected world requires executive leaders to find novel approaches rather than rely on traditional methods.

Emergent leadership...creates the conditions for complexity leadership to thrive.

Emergent strategies require input from non-traditional leaders within the decision-making structure to make timely decisions at the point of need in unpredictable environments. The interconnected, complex environment creates unpredictable reactions across the system from local interactions.[34] Leaders of CAS organizations encourage collaboration that does not rely on formal leadership structures, enabling self-organization into influential groups with the knowledge, background, and ability to address unique situations.[35] Therefore, CLT highlights the importance of creating conditions for emergence through open communication, shared understanding, and flexible structures which allow expertise to surface. The systems analysis methodologies existent within military doctrine enables the development of emergent strategies.

Connection to Military Doctrine

Military doctrine supports emergent ideas through iterative planning, environmental framing, and the emphasis on decentralized execution. The Joint Planning Process enables operational military leaders, commanders, and staff to analyze their environments and develop innovative approaches in complex situations.[36] The availability of strategic guidance from national to operational levels establishes the purpose of military action along the "competition continuum" and drives planning.[37] Emergent strategies develop when subordinate leaders interpret their environment, gaining fresh situational analysis, and devise creative approaches within the boundaries set by command. at each level —from strategic to tactical —enable creative solutions to complex situations. Iterative systems analysis reveals cross-domain opportunities and enables emergent strategies.

Military leaders foster a climate for learning that creates conditions for emergent strategies through trust-building, clear communication of objectives, and organizational alignment. The physical domains of cyberspace, space, air, land, and sea each have unique capabilities that provide opportunities for emergent solutions. Understanding the capabilities enabled by a systems analysis of each physical domain creates opportunities for innovative solutions that achieve operational objectives.[38] Understanding goal pathways instead of specific end states allows CLT to use systems analysis and an echelon-level understanding of strategic objectives to develop emergent strategies toward their achievement. Although there are alignments between emergent leadership and military doctrine, the challenge posed by hierarchical command and control structures

hampers its full implementation. Therefore, the key to overcoming traditional hierarchical and fixed-structure challenges is empowering transformative leaders to set the conditions for emergent strategies and innovative solutions.

Challenges and Enablers of Emergence

The mission command concept of centralized control and decentralized execution within military structures both enables and challenges the conditions needed for developing emergent strategies. However, as Raisio and Kuorikoski explain, each echelon must have the authority to understand and react to its operational environment to enable emergence.[39] This means the military structure must balance oversight and control of subordinate organizations with the decentralized decision-making to increase coherence with strategic objectives. Planning for future events as part of mission command should provide the necessary resources to accommodate dynamic changes rather than restricting subordinate units' ability to react.[40] Executive military leaders must underwrite their subordinate leaders' authority to act within the bounds of their area of responsibility to mitigate the fear of failure from innovative actions and overcome hard-power cultural paradigms. At the same time, subordinate leaders must maintain vertical and horizontal feedback mechanisms to ensure a clear understanding of priorities, environmental changes, and positional conditions in relation to desired objectives.

Challenges to emergence include risk aversion, rigid structures, and misalignments between espoused values and actual behavior. Raisio and Kuorikoski describe the correlation between the leader's responsibility for assigned tasks and their authority to make situation-based decisions supporting common objectives in unique crises.[41] The psychological safety, a key requirement for critical thinking, inherent in these situations, enables the emergent thinking needed to address high-stress environments. Professional advancement based on operational results challenges emergent leadership due to the risk of unacceptable operational failure. Examining the cultural phenomenon of risk-averse military leadership at operational levels through Schein's cultural lens may reveal a disconnect between espoused values and behaviors in crisis.[42] Technological advancements, like uncrewed systems and artificial intelligence information processors, offer the opportunity to enable the implementation of emergent leadership across the military.

While technological advancements pose challenges and require new military processes, they can also enable emergent strategies.

While technological advancements pose challenges and require new military processes, they can also enable emergent strategies. Artificial intelligence, real-time data processing, and autonomous systems empower leaders to detect and respond to emerging patterns on the modern battlefield.[43] Enablers derived from technological advancements offer military leaders at every echelon opportunity to develop emergent strategies toward common goals. At the same time, the speed at which information changes can overwhelm military leaders and encourage greater control over decision-making processes at higher organizational levels, counteracting the benefits of emergent leadership. Emergent leadership does not eliminate ethical and moral dilemmas that military leaders must navigate.

Ethical Considerations for Emergence

Military leaders looking to foster emergence must ensure that the options developed align with national values and ethical standards of conduct. Strategic and command guidance

provide clear boundaries grounded in values, legal frameworks, and professional standards which ensure decentralized decision-making stays ethically aligned in pursuit of national interests.[44] Adaptive and emergent behavior must remain grounded in ethical principles, particularly as technological capabilities expand.

Rather than introducing new doctrine, CLT illuminates the mechanisms that already underpin successful mission command...

Conclusion

CLT aligns with and expands on existing doctrinal concepts, the Joint Planning Process and Mission Command.[45] Both concepts emphasize and blend centralized intent with decentralized execution. CLT may provide a theoretical explanation for how this blend functions in practice and why it may be effective in complex environments. Professional Military Education presents opportunities to integrate CLT concepts more deliberately across leader's career.

Military education institutions like the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College (CGSC), including the SAMS, educate military leaders on leading in complexity. For example, see the recent addition of the Complexity Toolkit to the Command and General Staff Officer Course curriculum.[46] Continued emphasis on leadership competencies that enhance adaptability, like complexity thinking, systems analysis, data literacy, and reflective practices, across PME levels may increase both operational effectiveness and long-term organizational learning.

Integrating CLT into military leadership methodologies strengthens existing doctrine by offering a cohesive framework for understanding how decentralized action unfolds within the boundaries set by command. CLT clarifies how adaptive and emergent leadership contribute to operational effectiveness and provides language for articulating the leadership processes required in complex environments. The challenges presented by technological advancements, including UAS, have transformed the battlefield. These technological innovations challenge traditional military structures that rigidly respond to dynamic situations. The increasing interconnectedness of the global environment requires reinforcement of flexible and adaptive leadership methodologies like CLT.

The CLT method explains how commanders set boundaries and how subordinate leaders exploit complexity to achieve shared objectives. These leaders set conditions for flexibility, innovation, and disciplined initiative needed to face the complexities of modern warfare, from technological advances to cross-domain interdependence. Transitions between strategy and planning relies on operational design bridges to create plans that adapt to shifting perspectives and situations.[47] CLT fosters decentralized initiative by setting boundaries and feedback mechanisms which enable innovative solutions through sense-making at the level of need.[48] Rather than introducing new doctrine, CLT illuminates the mechanisms that already underpin successful mission command and deepens the profession's understanding of leadership in a dynamic world.

Implications for Future Research

Future research on CLT as an operational method may continue to explore and inform the Leadership and Education domain of DOTMLPF-P. Specific evaluation of distributed decision-making, decentralized leadership, and data literacy could further inform the discussion. Consideration of doctrine and policy revisions includes updated command protocols and analytical frameworks to incorporate CLT. Aligning performance metrics that value

adaptability and innovation incentivize flexible and adaptable leaders. Applying CLT concepts enables the implementation of innovative solutions using available resources and capabilities across the physical domains.[49] Finally, lessons learned from a comprehensive examination of complexity leadership theory create a cohesive framework for application within military command and control contexts. ***IAJ***

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Fostering *Ethical Leadership*

by Joseph Dwayne Blanding

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The Army's current ethics education—annual compliance training with minimal Primary Military Education (PME) exposure—underprepares leaders for time-compressed, right-versus-right dilemmas in complex environments. This article urges organizations to provide ongoing unit-level training focused on virtue development. Evidence shows that conscientiousness, agreeableness, and emotional stability predict ethical leadership. By integrating the ethical triangle with short vignettes, leader modeling, and ethics-aware After Action Reviews (AARs), units can build ethical habits within mission command without altering Rules of Engagement (ROE) or legal standards.[1] By adopting a flexible, integrated approach, the Army can better equip commanders to respond to complexity and support effective mission command. Key terms used, such as *virtue ethics* and the *Big Five Personality Traits*, are defined next to clarify the framework for this approach.

Ethical leadership provides a foundation for informed, ethical decision-making in complex environments. Kalshoven et al. define ethical leadership as the demonstration and promotion of conduct that is normatively appropriate.[2] Virtue, as explored by Mizzoni and Koller, refers to character traits that motivate ethical actions and underpin good living.[3] Relativism holds that knowledge, value, and ethics are always contextually bound.[4] Resilience, as defined by Meadows, Miller, and Robson and the U.S. Army, is the ability to adapt, recover, and grow in the face of adversity.[5] A

Colonel (Ret.) Joseph Dwayne Blanding, Ph.D., is an assistant professor in the School for Command Preparation at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College (CGSC) in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Prior to this role, he served in CGSC's Department of Command and Leadership from 2021 to 2024. Born in Pineville, SC, he earned a BA from Morris College in 1994, after which he joined the U.S. Army's Transportation Corps. His last assigment before retiring from active duty in 2020 was as the U.S. Army Central G4/logistics officer. A combat veteran of three wars, Blanding continued his professional growth by obtaining multiple advanced degrees. He has also published articles on military leadership and conducted research with ETH Zurich. Recognized for his excellence as an educator, Blanding was named Civilian Educator of the Year for academic years 2024 and 2025. He is married with children.

shared understanding of these virtues strengthens mission command, an approach that empowers decentralized decision-making.[6] Given these concepts, the current focus of annual ethics training does not meet the demands of ethically challenging and ambiguous environments. The following section explains why this is inadequate and how it can be improved.

Current ethics training does not adequately prepare military leaders for the complex ethical situations they may encounter.

Clarifying the Argument and Addressing the "So What?"

Current ethics training does not adequately prepare military leaders for the complex ethical situations they may encounter. The Army's educational system has relied on the ethical triangle as its primary decision-making framework; however, this approach requires a greater emphasis on ethical reasoning to support mission success. Maintaining this status quo risks both mission success and the integrity of leaders, underscoring the urgent need for change. This article focuses exclusively on the virtue domain, one of three ethical domains discussed in a series, and explains its role in helping leaders navigate dilemmas between statutes, consequences, and character. To address this gap, the Army must adopt a more comprehensive and continuous ethics training model, focusing on character development driven by the Big Five traits.

The Big Five Traits and Character Development

The potential benefits of this approach are significant. Ones, Sinangil, and Wiernik posited, "In addition to their predictive validity for overall job performance, measures of the Big Five personality traits are also powerful predictors of leadership and counterproductive behaviors, as well as performance in occupations such as the military," making understanding these traits and how they relate to character not just beneficial, but necessary.[7] The Big Five Traits consist of *openness*, *conscientiousness*, *extraversion*, *agreeableness*, and *neuroticism*. In this article, *openness* can be considered a willingness to try new experiences, whereas *conscientiousness* may be associated with dependability. *Extraversion* is centered on sociability, while *agreeableness* focuses on areas such as cooperation and harmony. Lastly, *neuroticism* refers to an individual's emotional stability when working in a group setting.

Kalshoven, Hartog, and Hoogh observed, "The 'Big Five' are foundational, genetically based, and relatively stable personality traits recognized across cultures," making them suitable for this article, as character development is ongoing and vital for ethical reasoning.[8] This emphasis on character development will inspire personal growth and ethical maturity in leaders, enhancing their confidence and effectiveness. These considerations could empower commanders to make adaptive and morally sound decisions in rapidly changing operational contexts. Cultural change within the military is necessary to fully use the ethical triangle, enabling commanders to foster adaptive and morally sound decision-making.

Virtues and Ethical Decision-Making

In today's complex world, military leaders must deliberately integrate the Big Five personality traits with virtuous character to enhance ethical behavior and leadership. The central argument is that effective military leadership requires connecting personality traits and virtues through structured frameworks, ethical training, and behavioral modeling. To achieve this, military culture must evolve toward flexible frameworks that prioritize ethical

responses in dynamic situations. By investigating how the Big Five traits relate to virtue—using tools such as the ethical triangle, systems theory, AARs, and the Cynefin framework—leaders can achieve consistent ethical behavior and effective leadership across contexts. The Cynefin framework, proposed by Snowden and Boone, groups problems into five categories: clear, complicated, complex, chaotic, and disorder.[9] This framework helps visualize challenges and align operational approaches with varying levels of complexity and uncertainty. Leaders can route issues to suitable teams: Communities of practice for complex tasks, crisis teams for chaotic tasks, experts for complicated issues, and junior personnel for clear ones. These assignments preserve resources, reduce confusion, and enhance organizational efficiency.

Ethical leadership facilitates informed and ethical decision-making through actions, relationships, and communication. Their findings indicate three of the "Big Five" traits—conscientiousness, agreeableness, and emotional stability—are key antecedents to ethical leadership. Conscientiousness encourages reliability and responsibility; agreeableness fosters respect and cooperation; emotional stability enables calm, resilient leadership. Your understanding and use of these traits as leaders, scholars, and students remain significant and influential. Focusing on these traits supports ethical decision-making and underscores the importance of consistent training. Furthermore, such leadership fosters transparency, accountability, and psychological safety. To underscore the importance of psychological safety, Patil, Raheja, Nair, Deshpande, and Mittal noted that psychological safety, "when present at the workplace, makes people feel comfortable with them, ask bold questions, share concerns, and ask for help, resulting in high team performance and lower team conflicts."[10] Conversely, "a lack of psychological safety at work impacts the team's performance and the organization's bottom line."[11] In their study of 101 responders, gathered through snowball and convenience sampling and analyzed via regression analysis, they found that team dynamics are significantly impacted by psychological safety, team leaning, team efficacy, and productivity in teams.[12] These elements are crucial for achieving moral outcomes. Therefore, I use Patil et al.'s study as a basis for advocating psychological safety throughout this article.

Psychological safety—a team's belief they can speak up without fear—is critical for ethical behavior and learning.

Psychological safety—a team's belief they can speak up without fear—is critical for ethical behavior and learning. Its main value is enabling open discussion, where subordinates feel safe voicing concerns and exercising moral judgment. Mechanisms like mission command and AAR reinforce this by having leaders solicit input before decisions, explain risk acceptance tied to the commander's intent, and review value tradeoffs afterward.[13] These routines link agreeableness (respectful dialogue), conscientiousness (follow through), and emotional stability (composure) to ethical outcomes.[14] Leaders influence this climate by welcoming input and being open, directly shaping a supportive team environment. As seen in parent-child relationships, psychological safety enables recovery and growth from setbacks; similarly, in organizations, it is equally crucial for fostering ethical outcomes.

By prioritizing ethical climates, commanders foster psychological safety, which encourages subordinates to voice concerns and exercise moral judgment, thereby increasing the likelihood of ethical outcomes. Psychological safety fosters open communication, trust, and

accountability, particularly in military mission command, and promotes the alignment of ethical values between leaders and followers. This alignment leads to greater satisfaction, trust, and commitment, and reduces turnover. When leaders facilitate shared moral reasoning and values, mutual trust and positive work environments grow. Additionally, organizations characterized by psychological safety are better equipped to learn from their mistakes—a necessity during periods of complexity and experimentation—and more likely to align individual and organizational values. Leaders who conduct ethical training centered on the Big Five Personality traits further strengthen the connection between individual and organizational values.

Cultivating virtues is crucial for shaping behavior and leadership...

Research by Kalshoven et al. provides insight into the characteristics that support ethical leadership.[15] They found that conscientiousness and agreeableness most consistently relate to ethical leadership: Conscientiousness promotes attention to ethical obligations, and agreeableness enhances positive interactions. Emotional stability is positively associated, only after controlling for the other traits, which is understandable as it is important that leaders remain composed under pressure. Openness to experience and extraversion were unrelated in their study, yet this article maintains the main argument that focused training can help even these traits support ethical decision-making. By emphasizing conscientiousness, agreeableness, and emotional stability while recommending development across all Big Five traits, this article highlights the importance of regular training to enhance ethical leadership.

To further support ethical leadership, developing moral virtue, as Aristotle emphasized, centered on habit, remains essential. This focus aligns with the ethical triangle, a central concept in military ethics. The ethical triangle emphasizes the importance of considering all three domains before deciding, while maintaining consistent, effective training to reinforce ethics is imperative. Developing an ethical code and ensuring it aligns with the organization's overall values and beliefs is critical to obtaining ethical outcomes. Cultivating virtues is crucial for shaping behavior and leadership, particularly in unpredictable situations. Ultimately, integrating virtue ethics into practical leadership not only prepares individuals for ethical challenges but also establishes a foundation for enduring organizational integrity and effectiveness.

Virtue Ethics in the Military Context

Virtue ethics is central to military ethics because it shapes behavior, culture, and leadership to ensure ethical consistency and integrity. Thus, virtue ethics offers military leaders practical guidance that directly informs both character and action. Emphasizing virtue ethics is essential for cultivating ethical excellence and for promoting duty and honor among military and civilian professionals. Aristotle further describes virtue as a balance between deficiency and excess, asserting that such virtues shape character. Gong and Zhang note that virtue ethics is about developing character, not merely evaluating actions.[16] As a result, soldiers and subordinates who arrive with an established character, developed over many years, require ongoing training to further cultivate these traits.

In addition to continuous training necessary for character development, seasoned individuals will also need ongoing training to accommodate various virtues. This adjusts their behavior, reinforcing or balancing their character for consistent ethical habits. Cultivating a culture of dignity, respect, and ethical conduct is an intentional process, achieved through ongoing initiatives and training focused on ethics. The

Army strengthens its ethical foundation in professional military education; instructors often link the "Golden Rule" to virtue ethics. This principle, present in many religions, highlights treating others as you would want to be treated, cultivating compassion and empathy, which are essential for ethical leadership. Consistent application develops character and reinforces Army values in daily actions.

The Big Five Personality Traits link to the Golden Rule through agreeableness, openness, and conscientiousness. Agreeable people show dignity, harmony, and compassion, reflecting the Golden Rule. Openness supports valuing others' ideas for better group decisions. Conscientious people focus on responsibility and consistent ethics, embodying the principle of treating others as they wish to be treated. These leaders not only practice the Golden Rule but also set a clear ethical standard for their organizations.

Training focused on the Golden Rule can address cultures weakened by unethical behavior by illustrating proper conduct and enhancing ethics over time. Emphasis on this principle is essential. Leaders who exemplify the Golden Rule facilitate ethical outcomes, as subordinates are more likely to report misconduct when supported. This fosters a climate that rewards whistleblowing, aligning with Schein's mechanisms: Subordinates notice what leaders prioritize and how they respond to behavior.

Applying virtue ethics in a military context means using principles such as the Golden Rule to guide behavior, specifically to ensure that prisoners of war are treated with respect and dignity. Historical failures demonstrate how the absence of virtues can undermine legality and legitimacy. For example, if leaders had emphasized the Golden Rule, the outcomes of the 2003 Abu Ghraib scandal or the treatment of prisoners during the Vietnam War might have been different.[17] To illustrate my personal connection, I would not want to be subjected to inhuman acts. I use Koller's words to emphasize this, when he stated that "virtues play a significant role in ethics because of their importance for moral practice."[18] Further underscoring this, Elkatawneh conjectured that "The scandal included many inhuman acts and violation of human ethics, particularly because Islamic law strictly prohibited gay acts, nudity, while the Jailers force the prisoners to strip naked and masturbate in front of each other."[19] As Koller tried to delineate practical standards from moral standards, he declared that "moral standards claim universal validity in the sense that people who accept them regard them as binding also for other people."[20] This distinguishes those standards from personal desires, the recommendations of prudence and social habits, but not always from legal norms. Likewise, to further connect virtue ethics to historical decision-making, if these principles had guided decisions after the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, the U.S. response to Japanese-American citizens might have changed.[21] Leo concluded, in reference to the Senate bill granting reparations to the living internees, that the internment policy "was caused by racial prejudice, war hysteria and a failure of political leadership."[22]

Training focused on the Golden Rule can address cultures weakened by unethical behavior...

This practical application of virtue ethics demonstrates its importance: It ensures that ethical conduct is central to military life by framing personal responsibility as a key component. As MacIntyre emphasized, virtue ethics focuses on character underscoring why repeated training in virtues is essential for shaping behavior, particularly because personality and character are formed long before military service but determine ethical

consistency. Gong and Zhang further highlight that instilling these virtues embeds ethical behavior as an instinct rather than an obligation, supporting the military's need for sustained ethical training.[23]

...the challenge of transforming ingrained personality traits heightens the importance of aligning individual values with those of the organization

Because individuals enter the military with established personality traits, as noted by Gong and Zhang, the military must intentionally shape character via continuous training aligned to Army values.[24] Consistent training serves as both an acknowledgement and support for the Army's deliberate effort to foster character that is compatible with its ethical framework. Lee emphasized that organizations must actively cultivate the desirable qualities making up "empirical character."[25] This confirms that to instill the Army's ethical standards, focused development on traits—such as those found in the Big Five personality model—is essential to the institution's mission and culture.

The Big Five Personality traits form the core aspects of personality and refer to individual differences in habitual patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving. Character, as previously stated, is the set of moral and ethical traits and habits unique to an individual. Character is tied to one's values and beliefs, which are often guided by culture or group, commonly referred to as relativism. The power of values in ethical decision-making cannot be overstated, as noted in a quantitative study of 174 working professionals attending part-time graduate programs and working for companies ranging from large multinational pharmaceutical companies and defense contractors to small job shops and technology companies. The study, conducted by Fritzsche and Oz, concluded that "values do appear to play an important role in the ethical dimension of decision making, suggesting that when hiring, one might tend to prefer employment candidates with altruistic values to those demonstrating self-enhancement values."[26] Fritzsche and Oz's study addressed recruitment endeavors, but what about current employees who may have values inconsistent with ethical decision-making? Changing values and beliefs within an organization to include personnel who make up the organization requires a reculturing effort.

Ultimately, the challenge of transforming ingrained personality traits heightens the importance of aligning individual values with those of the organization. Through honest self-assessment and openness to feedback, individuals can identify where growth is needed. Reflection, as Mizzoni emphasizes, enables conscious change in habits—revealing which actions serve ethical excellence.[27] Practically, knowing your own likelihood of acting in others' interests, even without external assessment tools, is a vital step. The ongoing, intentional cultivation of values within the military—supported by models like the Big Five—reinforces the institution's broader mission: To ensure that every member not only acts ethically but also embodies the virtues essential for service and leadership in complex contexts.

The Big Five Model: A Deeper Dive

The first trait is openness. Openness centers on how easily an individual is willing to try new things or be open-minded to things outside their usual sphere of influence. This is important and impacts their ethical decision-making. People who are open realize that others are capable of making valuable contributions. They are more likely to change their ideas when it becomes apparent that more prudent options are available. Being conservative or adhering to standard operating procedures is characteristic

of someone with a low tolerance for openness. This can limit not only the individual's growth but also the organization's growth. Adherence to SOPs may appear to be ethical, but it may also be deficient in addressing the challenges encountered in an environment teeming with complex problems. Openness to others broadens your awareness of blind spots and challenges your biases. This opens the possibility of ethical outcomes. An open leader also fosters trust, ensures empathy, and increases participation. These actions lead to a broader awareness of current and future challenges. To navigate an uncertain and chaotic environment, leaders must innovate within ROE/LOAC while making their ethical reasoning explicit. Leaders often follow established ways of doing things, which can limit their ability to address new challenges.

Transitioning from openness, the next trait, conscientiousness, refers to being dependable and trustworthy. This gradually builds others' trust in you. According to numerous studies, conscientiousness is a crucial trait as a precursor to ethical decision-making. The role of conscientiousness in ethical decision-making cannot be overstated. This trait makes individuals more likely to be trusted if they consistently make moral choices. Conscientious people are more likely to be dependable and thoughtful in their actions. As a result, they may be more likely to exhibit more ethical tendencies and report issues that demonstrate unethical behavior. Consistent behavior ensures habituality. This means ethical behavior becomes a habit for conscientious individuals.

Building on conscientiousness, consistently making moral decisions shapes your character. Mizzoni noted, "good habits (virtues) are the building blocks of good moral character."[28] Recall Aristotle's view that "character results from habit."[29] Once others recognize your character, their trust in you as a leader grows. Character highlights leaders' crucial role in shaping a culture of trust, reinforcing their influence, and pointing to the audience's role. To enable this, introverted commanders must make a deliberate effort to engage with subordinates, allowing their character and moral behavior to be assessed. Next, it is essential to discuss extroversion and introversion, as well as how these traits influence ethical decision-making.

Openness to others broadens your awareness of blind spots and challenges your biases. This opens the possibility of ethical outcomes.

Turning to the third trait, differences in sociability between extroverted and introverted individuals play a key role in their ethical decision-making. Extroverts are generally more sociable and tend to prefer larger audiences. Introverts tend to be less sociable and seek smaller, more intimate settings. These tendencies affect how well each can connect with and understand group challenges. Kalshoven et al. found that sociability is unrelated to moral behavior. However, sociable leaders tend to be more effective in engaging in dialogue and understanding others' needs.[30] This broader awareness allows them to consider options that benefit more people and to determine when overriding a rule may be justifiable. Introverts may not emphasize interpersonal skills as strongly in front of an audience, which can hinder their holistic understanding of the environment. Leaders skilled in interpersonal communication uphold principles of inclusion, cooperation, and democratic leadership. This helps them consider the broader implications of their choices and make more informed, ethical decisions.

Moving on to the fourth trait, agreeableness is associated with cooperation, teamwork, and group understanding, underscoring its significance in ethical decision-making.

Agreeable individuals naturally consider others' needs and perspectives, often leading to more ethical outcomes. People also differ in whether they believe they should lead or follow for group success, similar to having an internal or external locus of control. Those with an internal locus trust their own ethical judgment, whereas those with an external locus rely more on others, which influences their confidence in their ethical leadership.

Some individuals thrive under pressure, while others struggle emotionally, which can impact their ethical clarity.

Considering whether you prioritize your own benefit over others' highlights the ethical frameworks of ethical egoism and rational ethics. These perspectives emphasize self-interest and rationality in decision-making. Mizzoni and Kalshoven et al. discuss these theories, noting that personality type (introverted or extroverted) does not determine ethical reasoning solely.[31] Introverts may process dilemmas privately, while extroverts often share their perspectives through dialogue. Training should provide both reflective and collaborative modalities. By doing so, the extroverted leader may have greater situational awareness due to inclusion and may be able to make decisions that benefit the group as a whole, rather than a particular subgroup. An introvert, through their isolation, may make decisions based on their own values and beliefs, neglecting the larger group, which may result in less ethical decisions. I believe that the process of collaboration, providing shared understanding and awareness, tends to lead to more ethical discussions. As such, introverts must make a concerted effort to socialize even though it may be uncomfortable to fill in their gaps or blind spots. Understanding the situation and acting accordingly is necessary for an ethical outcome. Nevertheless, your ability to manage stress is crucial, as it directly influences moral choices through both psychological and physiological effects. In stressful group settings, individuals might also be tempted to lie to protect their reputation or self-esteem.

Finally, the fifth trait, neuroticism, influences ethical decision-making by impacting how leaders cope with stress and uncertainty. Some individuals thrive under pressure, while others struggle emotionally, which can impact their ethical clarity. Individuals generally know their comfort level with unpredictability and emotional resilience. Emotional stability is often associated with clearer thinking during stressful times. Selart and Johansen found that stress influences ethical actions more than the recognition of ethical dilemmas, especially under conditions of punishment or the absence of rewards.[32] This highlights the importance of maintaining well-being and engaging in continuous training to support ethical decisions that align with organizational values.

The role of organizational culture in ethical decision-making is paramount, as demonstrated by the influence of group or cultural behavioral norms. Regular ethics training, with a focus on the Big Five traits, creates a foundation for consistent moral actions. Kalshoven et al. highlighted the organizational benefits of ethical leadership development.[33] By continuously evaluating and cultivating these core traits, leaders can guide themselves and their organizations through ethical complexities. Ultimately, building an ethical culture where leadership and followership standards are evident enables organizations to meet present challenges and thrive into the future.

Limitations and Implementation

Reculturing, or changing one's values and beliefs, is indeed a challenging task. Fullan provided a similar definition. He stated, "Reculturing involves transitioning from a

state of limited attention to assessment and pedagogy to a state where [professionals] and others routinely focus on these matters and make associated improvements."[34] Like organizations, changing an individual's values and beliefs is a complex process. Consistent training is not just a necessity; it is essential. It is also a reassurance that people will behave consistently in similar situations. Gong and Zhang hypothesized that "when someone acts a certain way under some circumstances, it stands to reason that he would still do the same under similar circumstances."[35] They provide an example of a brave man: "His past actions show his bravery, and we can also expect his future behavior to be consistent: a righteous man will act righteously, a brave man bravely, a moderate man moderately, and a benevolent man kindly."[36] This is not to say that change is impossible. It simply emphasizes the need for continuous training and development. This is a significant endeavor that requires time, but it is feasible and can lead to optimistic change.

The literature is clear regarding the length of time it takes to change an organization's culture. Even the definition provided by Fullan makes it evident that it is an iterative, ongoing process. In some cases, it can take many years to complete.[37] There are successful examples of reculturing efforts. Microsoft, under Satya Nadella, transitioned from a culture of all-knowing to one of learning in just four years. Under Lou Gerstner, IBM restructured the organization to position it for long-term success. These successful reculturing efforts were characterized by the use of feedback as a key tool for understanding and addressing individual concerns. Feedback is crucial in the reculturing process. It helps identify areas of resistance, understand individual perspectives, and provide evidence to explain why values and beliefs need adjustment. This demonstrates that it is possible to change an organization's culture over time. The size of the organization increases the difficulties of reculturing, because you will have to engage with each individual in a consistent dialogue. Providing feedback and evidence to explain why they need to adjust their values and beliefs is similar to how you assess the organizational climate. To properly assess the organizational climate, the assessor needs to go to each individual and ask them about their feelings regarding the organization. The difficulty lies in the individual who may feel one way today but feel differently tomorrow. The exact opposite may occur in the future, thus requiring continuous assessment. This is similar to the need for constant training to mold character and align it with organizational values. As self-identity and moral identity are cultivated through mental experiences and moral tendencies to act, realistic training through scenario-based exercises becomes significant.[38]

...changing an individual's values and beliefs is a complex process. Consistent training is not just a necessity; it is essential.

Ongoing Ethics Training: A Foundation for Ethical Leadership

Leaders must train to foster creativity and innovation, especially in complex domains where solutions emerge only through adapting and learning from experience. Openness is essential for approaching challenges with a systems-thinking mindset, allowing counterintuitive ideas to surface. Recognizing when an approach is insufficient requires overcoming barriers like ego, making training in receptivity to alternative ideas vital for effective leadership.

Building on creativity and openness, training that stresses the importance of being conscientious and reliable is also vital and closely aligns with Army values. If you say you will do something, you must follow through on

it. Repeated emphasis on this point encourages reflection and increases dependability. Training in helping others is equally important. Leaders cannot overlook these topics—dependability has varying meanings. Focused training ensures consistent ethical behavior.

Developing personal characteristics is equally crucial for effective leadership. Leaders sometimes must adapt their natural tendencies, whether extroversion or introversion, to inspire and build trust within their teams, even when this means stepping outside authentic leadership norms. Engaging with subordinates, regardless of personal preference, helps build confidence and resilience throughout the organization. Emphasizing cooperation and team-building skills equips leaders to empower larger formations through competence and inspiration, introducing the importance of agreeableness.

Training should regularly include exercises that emphasize ethical decision-making

Building the team and empowering others is crucial in all organizations. Training in team building, collaboration, and transparency fosters learning, growth, and progress. Unit events, such as organizational balls and dining ins and outs, should be leveraged to boost cohesion and highlight esprit de corps in ethical decisions. This focus ensures individuals are connected to a shared mission, amplifying commitment and dedication. Resilience is a core leadership trait. Commanders should prioritize resilience training, seek behavioral health support, and use Army Community Service (ACS) resources. These steps help leaders maintain sound judgment in challenging situations and foster confidence by building a reliable support network within the Army.

Turning to ethical training, while all Department of Defense (DoD) personnel receive annual ethics training, unit-level education focused on virtues is equally important. Such training helps produce consistent ethical outcomes and empowers commanders to make informed decisions, aligning actions with the principles of the ethical triangle. Sense-making tools, such as the Cynefin model, support this by clarifying ambiguous situations, thereby reinforcing the central focus on ethical decision-making.

My primary recommendation is to conduct unit and organizational-level training using the Big Five personality traits as a basis for grouping subordinates and leaders and then using scenario-based ethical dilemmas to encourage discussions that foster the development of ethical behavior. I further recommend assessing extroversion and introversion to ensure that extroverts join collaborative sessions and introverts participate in reflective settings. Extroverts tend to benefit most from interactive, team-based exercises, while introverts often thrive in workshops that allow for time for reflection. High-agreeableness individuals should participate in role-playing activities with real-world ethical dilemmas. Therefore, it is essential to conduct personality assessments, such as the NEO Personality Inventory (NEO-PI-R), the Big Five Inventory (BFI), or the Ten-Item Personality Inventory (TIPI), before training to assign individuals to the most suitable groups.[39]

A key recommendation is to provide continuous ethics training so that ethical behavior becomes a habit. Training should regularly include exercises that emphasize ethical decision-making, scenario-based activities, team-building exercises, and leadership challenges, focusing on the ethical triangle and other relevant frameworks. Leaders should provide targeted feedback on ethical decision-making during scheduled development or counseling sessions, offering suggestions for improvement. Supervisors should conduct pre- and post-training assessments to measure improvement

in ethical reasoning and behavior, continuously reinforcing a culture. Leaders should maintain a weekly ethics routine, which includes sharing historical examples, thinking aloud about ethics, and conducting focused reviews with three key questions. Pair reflective writing with group discussion. Each session should align with the commander's intent and inform updates to SOP and training. Emphasize follow-through, constructive dialogue, and emotional control under pressure. Regular counseling and After-Action Reviews (AARs) help foster ethical learning. Ongoing discussions build integrity. AARs allow leaders and teams to review decisions, improving operations, morale, and ethics. Integrate training, ethical modeling, and high standards to maintain ethical outcomes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, leaders must prioritize ethics training and understand how personality influences character, particularly in relation to relativism. This highlights the importance of maintaining character and encourages role modeling. A leader's commitment to character inspires commanders to use the ethical triangle effectively. Training on the Big Five personality traits helps develop character and ensures ethical decision-making.

Before training, it is essential to conduct personality assessments, such as the NEO-PI-R, BFI, or TIPI, to assign individuals to the most effective groups. Scenario-based ethical dilemmas should drive discussion and growth in ethical behavior. Assessing extroversion and introversion allows extroverts to engage in teamwork and introverts to benefit from reflection. High-agreeableness individuals should take part in real-world ethical role-playing. Prioritizing personality alignment with training methods maximizes effectiveness.

Once intent and virtuous decision-making are established, reinforce the need for an organizational climate of learning and psychological safety. This encourages subordinates to engage in ethical reasoning. Use scenario planning, backcasting, dialogue, and after-action reviews to inform virtuous decisions and foster trust in leaders. Focusing on outcomes and flexibility assures confidence and adaptability in uncertain environments. ***IAJ***

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Navigating *Ethical Complexity*

by Joseph Dwayne Blanding

Editor's Note: This is the second article of a three-part series on military ethics and leader development in InterAgency Journal No. 15-2/Fall 2025.

Effective military leadership integrates systems thinking with the ethical triangle to discipline judgment under mission command. This integration guides leaders to test lawful options against rules, consequences, and virtues. Leaders also anticipate second- and third-order effects. By linking commander's intent, concise communication, and ethics-aware After Action Review (AAR) to short, realistic vignettes, units convert abstract ethics into repeatable habits. This process occurs without altering Rules of Engagements (ROEs) or legal standards.[1] Effective military leadership relies on these foundations. They guide leaders in making ethical choices, empowering subordinates, and navigating dilemmas within military ethical standards. Shared understanding grows through clear communication and repeated ethics training. Systems thinking helps daily decisions connect to larger impacts and supports leader adaptation. The operations process includes planning, preparation, execution, and assessment. These interconnected steps achieve mission success.

This article explains why annual compliance and ad hoc ethics moments underprepare leaders for complex, right-versus-right dilemmas. It next defines systems thinking and the ethical triangle and illustrates how they align with mission command.[2] Building on these definitions, the article also proposes a unit routine of vignettes, leader modeling, and ethics-aware AARs. This routine

Colonel (Ret.) Joseph Dwayne Blanding, Ph.D., is an assistant professor in the School for Command Preparation at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College (CGSC) in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Prior to this role, he served in CGSC's Department of Command and Leadership from 2021 to 2024. Born in Pineville, SC, he earned a BA from Morris College in 1994, after which he joined the U.S. Army's Transportation Corps. His last assigment before retiring from active duty in 2020 was as the U.S. Army Central G4/logistics officer. A combat veteran of three wars, Blanding continued his professional growth by obtaining multiple advanced degrees. He has also published articles on military leadership and conducted research with ETH Zurich. Recognized for his excellence as an educator, Blanding was named Civilian Educator of the Year for academic years 2024 and 2025. He is married with children.

builds ethical habits and anticipates second and third-order effects without changing ROE or legal standards.[3]

Leaders who combine operational processes with systems thinking gain a deeper understanding of the system and its interconnections. This perspective enables both ethical decisions and anticipation of consequences. By recognizing these links, leaders establish clear expectations, communicate effectively, and foster a shared understanding. Clear intent makes ethics part of every action. Communicating the leader's intent is crucial for accountability and ethical conduct.

During rehearsals, leaders assign responsibilities and set clear expectations, guiding individuals to act in accordance with the organization's values. Rehearsals enable leaders to model ethical behavior by demonstrating expected conduct. Upon assuming command or responsibility, leaders must define leadership, followership, and the ethical code that governs actions. Discussions should clarify these foundational concepts. Continuous ethics training and communication help ensure consistent behavior. This makes scenario-based training about dilemmas necessary. Next, key terms are defined, including systems thinking and the Cynefin framework, to clarify the approach.

The operations process is defined as the "central command and control activities performed during operations: planning, preparing, executing, and continuously assessing the operation."[4] Lawrence, citing Snowden and Boone, stated that the Cynefin Framework is a decision-making or analytical framework.[5] It recognizes the differences between system types and proposes new approaches in complex social environments. Unlike categorization modeling, where the framework precedes the data, the Cynefin Framework is a sense-making model. The framework emerges from the data. Lawrence, citing Snowden and Boone, describes five domains:

1) simple, where cause-and-effect relationships are predictable and repeatable.

2) the complicated domain, where cause-and-effect relationships exist, but are not self-evident and therefore require expertise to decipher.

3) the complex domain, where cause and effect are only obvious in hindsight, with unpredictable and emergent outcomes.

4) the chaotic domain, where no cause-and-effect relationships can be determined.

5) disorder, where decision-makers or analysts do not know the domain in which they reside.[6]

A more detailed explanation follows later in the article. Building on this foundation, Mann, Parkins, Issac, and Sherren citing Sweeney and Sterman, defined systems thinking as "the ability to represent and assess dynamic complexity."[7]

Rehearsals enable leaders to model ethical behavior by demonstrating expected conduct.

To operationalize such thinking, the operational approach broadly describes the mission, operational concepts, tasks, and actions needed to accomplish the mission.[8] Closely related, a commander's intent is a clear and succinct expression of the purpose of the operation and the desired military end state that supports mission command, provides focus to the staff, and helps subordinate and supporting commanders act to achieve the commander's desired results without further orders, even when the operation does not unfold as planned.[9] With these definitions in mind, the next section discusses why it is important for the commander or director to define leadership, followership, and ethical

expectations upon assuming responsibility for the organization.

Defining Leadership, Followership, and Ethics

Defining effective leadership, followership, and ethics is essential for mission success, as it sets clear expectations and fosters accountability. These definitions create an environment demanding virtuous leaders, as Gong and Zhang highlight the contemporary importance of righteousness.[10] Leaders who clearly state their values and expectations enable open correction, thereby reducing groupthink. For genuine command effectiveness, leaders must promote open dialogue, encourage feedback, and consistently model virtues to sustain accountability and mission accomplishment.

A commander's influence is vital for making ethical followership proactive and routine.

A commander's influence is vital for making ethical followership proactive and routine. Explicit guidance and accountability transform ethical conduct into an expectation, not an option. By recognizing and reinforcing ethical acts through consistent training, leaders establish a clear standard. Clearly communicating that illegal or unethical orders should be challenged ensures subordinates know ethical behavior is essential for mission accomplishment.

Leaders who define what good leadership looks like are more likely to guide their subordinates through ethical dilemmas. This is for the same reasons noted in the previous discussion on followership. Subordinates will act in accordance with the expectations set by their leader. This is similar to Schein's primary embedding mechanism, where people pay attention to what leaders pay attention to. Setting leadership expectations, combined with a systems-thinking approach that identifies the relationships, connections, and needs of each component, guides subordinates in making ethically sound decisions. They do so because they understand the system's characteristics and behaviors holistically. Defining what good leadership entails and the expectations of all involved guides individuals to act in accordance with the organization's values and beliefs. Leaders must do this upon assuming command or responsibility of an organization. It guides behavior, increases the possibility of an ethical climate and organizational culture, and helps avert occurrences of unethical behavior. Historical failures demonstrate how the absence of virtues can undermine legality and legitimacy. Leaders must model high standards and foster open, ethical dialogue.

The cases of Lieutentant Colonel Nathan Sassman, former commander of 1-8 Battalion, and Colonel Steele, former commander of 3rd Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, illustrate why leaders must consistently demonstrate ethical behavior and foster candid, ethical dialogue within their units. In both instances, unethical actions by soldiers, apparently influenced by their units' leadership climate, resulted in the premature end of these commanders' careers. In Lieutentant Colonel Sassman's case, his unit was accused of forcing detainees into the Tigris River, which allegedly led to the drowning death of at least one civilian detainee. It was further alleged that Lieutentant Colonel Sassman encouraged his troops to withhold information in order to reduce their punishment. In Colonel Steele's case, soldiers in his unit were accused of killing unarmed Iraqis during Operation Iron Triangle. These soldiers attributed their actions to unclear rules of engagement and an aggressive command climate created by Colonel Steele. Both commanders served during the Iraq War. Ethics training, reinforced by leaders' example, aligns individual and organizational values. Leaders' commitment to systems thinking and

ethical conduct influences team behavior and fortifies the ethical climate. The ethical triangle supports systems thinking by framing decisions in terms of rules, outcomes, and values, encouraging a multidimensional evaluation.

The Ethical Triangle: Balancing Statutes, Consequences, and Character

Military leaders' decisions have a profound impact on the ethical climate around them. This article argues that, although all three domains of moral decision-making—statutes, consequences, and character—are relevant, a leader's character has the most significant impact on ethical outcomes. To clarify this, an overview of each domain is provided, but the article will focus primarily on virtue ethics. Leaders must weigh when to follow rules and when character-driven judgment is more effective. Gong and Zhang distinguish domains: one focuses on consequences, another on following rules, and the third on character.[11] Developing a strong character enables ethical decision-making, and this analysis aims to help leaders navigate dilemmas by emphasizing the importance of virtue.

Kem's triangle disciplines judgment by testing actions across rules (law and ROE policy), virtues (professional character), and consequences (effects on people, mission, legitimacy).[12] Dr. Jack Kem served as chief academic officer, dean of academics, and professor at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College and authored four books and over thirty-five articles on ethics and related topics. As emeritus dean, I draw on his ethical triangle to structure this paper and use virtue ethics to frame character as a habit-shaped disposition for right action under pressure.[13] Practically, leaders identify non-negotiable constraints (ROE and Law of Armed Conflict[LOAC]), assess immediate and downstream effects, and confirm alignment with unit virtues and commander's intent.[14] This illustrates how ethical principles shape real-world decisions.

For the deontologist, the act must be done out of duty "regardless of the nonmoral value it produces or may produce."[15] Building on this, virtues bridge motivation and outcomes, emphasizing the importance of continual character development. This focus on growth is significant in ethical theory. To connect theory and practice, it is crucial to establish a practical process for applying the ethical triangle, which this paper will outline.

Leaders must weigh when to follow rules and when character-driven judgment is more effective.

First, identify principles the individual or organization may violate. At this initial stage, it is crucial to understand the complexities of universal or international law that govern ethical conduct. The rule of law is often complex, making the rules of engagement difficult to interpret. The military does not focus heavily on rules of engagement during garrison time before deployment due to limited time and new work-life balance priorities for recruitment and retention. Given these complexities, adopting a systems thinking approach is valuable. Systems thinking clarifies which lawful option distributes risks and benefits best within ROE/LOAC and the commander's intent, rather than suggesting when to violate rules.[16] The triangle's lenses ensure rules, consequences, and virtues are considered together.[17] This approach enables leaders to understand the broader implications of their decisions and more accurately predict future outcomes.

After considering deontological principles, shift to outcomes through consequentialism. Unlike merely seeking the greatest benefit for

all, this approach finds balance when overriding rules. A deontologist asks if a threshold has been reached, providing options, while a utilitarian seeks the greatest good. At the consequential domain, focus on who benefits or loses. Since leaders cannot predict the future, systems thinking and sense-making tools like Cynefin help determine when to apply act- or rule-based consequentialism.

Next, consider situations where an egalitarian approach may be necessary to promote an equitable distribution of outcomes among those affected. This inward focus helps sustain moral balance, underscoring the role of good character in moving within the ethical triangle. Research by Gong and Zhang distinguished the significance of virtues and their relationship to a person's identity and moral integrity, affirming that "the difference between virtues and rules is that the former is a manifestation of an individual's character, where rules are an instrument to reach a goal."[18] This underscores the importance of personal integrity in moral behavior.

...the virtuous domain...focuses on aligning personal character with organizational values, making individual conduct a central component of ethical leadership.

The final domain in this process, and the primary focus of this article, is the virtuous domain. This domain focuses on aligning personal character with organizational values, making individual conduct a central component of ethical leadership. Character here is developed through continuous training, ensuring values are ingrained and sustained. In the virtue domain, selecting someone who consistently demonstrates ethical actions is essential; this moral individual serves as a visible guide for ethical decision-making. The right guide must be widely recognized for moral integrity and for embodying objectivist values—such as respect for universal moral laws like 'do not harm innocents' or 'do not steal.' Virtue ethics is grounded in professional traits—integrity, honesty, and benevolence—that underpin conduct under stress.[19] Because stress can undermine ethical performance even when dilemmas are clear, leaders should cultivate resilience and use structured reviews.[20] After-action reviews and leader modeling add the consistency that stabilizes decision-making in high-pressure situations.[21]

Personally, I look to Jesus Christ or Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK) as moral examples. When questioned about MLK's personal flaws, I respond that leadership is complex—no one is perfect. What matters for our purposes is his lasting, positive impact on society. Leaders must recognize that moral fallibility is human, as Louden notes: "Every human being is morally fallible, for there is a little Oedipus in each of us."[22] Aristotle emphasized that everyone is capable of making mistakes. This perspective enables leaders to focus on taking ethical actions and fostering ongoing growth.

The central recommendation is for leaders to systematically apply the ethical triangle and systems thinking by aligning decisions with recognized moral role models. This approach involves assessing dilemmas, acting, reviewing outcomes, and adjusting as needed through ongoing ethics training. Consistent application ensures adaptability and ongoing development of ethical leadership.

To address these ethical challenges, the Cynefin framework is instrumental in identifying ethical dilemmas, thereby facilitating virtuous acts that address these issues. It becomes evident that understanding the complex environment is crucial. This understanding enables leaders to determine the optimal level of effort and resources to commit, thereby transforming opportunities into standard operating procedures

—a critical step for addressing potential issues the unit may encounter in the future. To further assist commanders, the use of communities of practice and experts within the complicated domain, as noted by Snowden and Boone, is essential.[23] The U.S. Army is considered the best Army in the world because it prioritizes providing realistic training to its personnel. As such, leaders must consistently provide scenario-based training. This training is crucial as it enables soldiers to understand the second- and third-order effects of their decisions, thereby enhancing their ability to make ethical decisions. Once again, backcasting or scenario planning, products used within systems thinking, can provide a reassuring structure for addressing ethical concerns and expanding ethical options through moral reasoning. Training in ethics and systems theory/thinking should begin early in a leader's career. Scenario-based training fosters a virtuous approach by giving subordinates an opportunity to consider the outcomes of their decisions, thereby increasing their likelihood of creating the greatest good for the greatest number.

These two areas are crucial when discussing virtues and the decision-making process. As mentioned earlier, it is challenging to determine what you will encounter in the future. To address this, scenario planning and back casting provide decision-makers with a structured approach to review actions and assess options. By using these tools, decision-makers can adopt a virtuous approach and make the most moral choice. Furthermore, the method offers reassurance and guidance in uncertain environments. However, it is essential to acknowledge that techniques effective today may not be effective tomorrow, as illustrated by chaos theory and the butterfly effect. As Gharajedaghi cited from Einstein, "We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them."[24] In this context, chaos theory and the butterfly effect highlight how small changes in our environment can alter outcomes, leading to significant problems later. Therefore, to seek the greatest good, continuous training in consequentialism and understanding the system remain important. This ongoing process ensures decision-makers feel reassured and guided.

Leaders bear significant responsibility in applying systems thinking and theory. In particular, their role is crucial in recognizing how components interact and influence one another, which enables them to identify behaviors that reflect virtue. When leaders understand these links—a skill often built in design thinking—they are better equipped to select the most ethical option. For example, design thinkers can "create feasible wholes from infeasible parts."[25] Building on this, they can "identify new sets of alternatives and objectives, looking for more desirable possibilities in the future" and determine who will benefit.[26]

...to seek the greatest good, continuous training in consequentialism and understanding the system remain important.

Similar principles guide commanders in their operational planning. Similar to backcasting and scenario planning in systems thinking, commanders begin at the endpoint and work backward. They identify decision points or areas needing ethical consideration. Dialogue and rehearsals set the unit up for success. These actions maximize the likelihood of making moral decisions with consequential outcomes. Commanders must be clear and concise in their intent but flexible in the operational approach.

Modeling Ethical Behavior

Unit commanders play a central role in promoting ethics by leading through example and connecting actions to clear ethical outcomes.

Despite time constraints, providing context helps soldiers see the larger mission, fostering shared understanding and successful mission command. By applying systems thinking, commanders show how ethical choices yield lasting positive effects. Openly evaluating the impacts of decisions sets ethical norms, encouraging ethical behavior throughout the organization.

Critical analysis equips soldiers to make informed, ethical choices by assessing consequences.

Commanders must prioritize critical thinking, with systems thinking as an effective framework. Critical analysis equips soldiers to make informed, ethical choices by assessing consequences. This practice supports both immediate actions and long-term outcomes. Leaders who apply and demonstrate a clear ethical decision-making framework show subordinates how to approach complex dilemmas common in our field. Encouraging soldiers to consider the broader impacts of their actions helps them select outcomes that are widely recognized as ethical. Modeling these behaviors promotes ongoing development; leaders willing to admit and learn from errors, especially during AARs, empower their teams to do the same. Modeling ethical behavior promotes continuous improvement, which is directly related to a systems thinking approach, as experimentation coupled with single-loop, double-loop, and triple-loop learning is required. Leaders modeling ethical behavior create a climate conducive to ethical decision-making and reinforce the use of all three domains of the ethical triangle to make more holistic, ethically aligned decisions. This approach offers a valuable lesson for both military and civilian organizations, fostering organizational improvement.

Systems thinking fosters effective adaptation in complex environments. Leaders committed to ethical conduct inspire teams, showing every action affects the system's health. Army culture may resist critical thinking, relying instead on intuition at lower levels. Leaders who acknowledge their imperfections strengthen ethical standards and demonstrate ethical decision-making, moving away from purely intuitive choices.

Intuitive judgment is key to Army operations, but can affect structured processes such as the Military Decision-making Process (MDMP) and the Army Design Methodology (ADM). Gharajedaghi says linear systems are the sum of their parts, but nonlinear outcomes come from interactions.[27] These methods work in that environment. MDMP is a planning guide, while ADM uses creative thinking for unique problems. Both need sound judgment. Commanders show judgment, confidence, and adaptability under pressure, supported by these processes. Open team dialogue helps blend intuition and structure to solve complex challenges.

Leaders must provide an organizational climate that is conducive to learning, collaboration, and open communication, allowing subordinates to discuss possible scenarios and anticipate future actions or situations in which they will need to adapt. In this situation, leaders should focus on the behaviors of adaptive leaders who understand that their role is not to solve problems, but to ensure their subordinates have the necessary tools and resources to solve complex problems. In systems thinking, scenario planning is a powerful tool for providing visualization of where an adjustment or potential decision needs to be made, allowing everyone time to reflect and create alternatives. By adhering to the systems thinking or theory approach, everyone will gain an understanding of how the components are interconnected, which enables them to make decisions based on careful analysis and consideration of all relevant factors.

The utility of the systems thinking approach lies in its holistic view of the system, ensuring that all relevant perspectives, such as political, social, and environmental, are considered. One of the problems with using the ethical triangle as a framework is that the military may default to the deontological portion of the framework and neglect the consequentialism and virtues domains due to the high stakes associated with violating rules and laws. In systems thinking, a holistic approach analyzes how each component is interconnected with others, including actions and relationships, which results in a more ethical decision because all perspectives are considered. Similarly, it is essential to maximize the use of the ethical triangle by using all three domains (virtues, deontology, and consequentialism) and working inward to ensure that all domains are balanced before deciding. In other words, for the ethical triangle to be effective, all three domains must be considered in a similar manner to systems thinking, where an understanding of all components and how inputs to one component result in either a balance or reinforcing output on another component. This necessitates a discussion on all three domains of the ethical triangle and how to properly use the framework.

As mentioned earlier, systems thinking helps identify situations that require adaptation by prompting individuals to consider how solutions will affect the entire system. This likely leads to decisions that benefit all parties. Moreover, by adopting this approach, leaders and subordinates can gain a deeper understanding of the complexities in uncertain and chaotic environments. This understanding, in turn, enables them to make more informed and ethical decisions by using all three domains of the ethical triangle. In complex conditions, Cynefin's probe, sense, respond posture, together with systems thinking's focus on interdependencies, keeps attention on emergent effects.[28] Furthermore, the triangle ensures that those effects are weighed alongside legal boundaries and professional character, producing choices that are both legitimate and durable.[29] To apply these principles in practice, units use short vignettes to identify value conflicts. They then conduct ethics-aware AARs to capture impacts and adjust Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). Through this cycle, intent is translated into decisions that follow rules while staying aware of consequences and character.[30]

In systems thinking, a holistic approach analyzes how each component is interconnected with others, including actions and relationships, which results in a more ethical decision...

How to Operationalize Ethics Training

Additionally, scenario-based training enables the unit to target the mission's objectives, ensuring a virtuous approach is attainable. Ongoing training is essential for reinforcing consistent ethical behavior. I recommend taking the following steps to implement ethical training at the organizational level.

1) Leaders can introduce right-versus-right ethical dilemmas using vignettes that connect desired ethical outcomes to current or anticipated ethical challenges focused on rules, virtues, and consequences.[31]

2) Leaders can conduct ethics-focused AARs that evaluate actions taken, implications, and next steps. They should examine second- and third-order effects of decisions and align findings with the SOP to assess whether changes are needed for ethical outcomes.[32]

3) Leaders should actively encourage dissent and questions, designating individuals

beforehand to serve as devil's advocates. This approach tests decisions, fosters disagreement with leadership when needed, and aims to increase engagement, psychological safety, and learning.[33]

4) Leaders can demonstrate scenarios involving themselves based on rules, virtues, or consequences, and explain their chosen course of action to illustrate their ethical perspectives. They can also link these viewpoints to the commander's intent, including purpose, key tasks, and end state.[34]

Success depends on a clear, concise commander's intent as the foundation for a virtuous approach. Commanders who clearly articulate the situation foster a shared understanding and establish clear limits. This guidance allows subordinate leaders to achieve desired outcomes and apply ethical frameworks. A well-defined commander's intent empowers leaders, applies sound judgment, and complements rules of engagement to promote decisive and ethical decision-making.

Success depends on a clear, concise commander's intent as the foundation for a virtuous approach.

Limitations and Implementation

Transforming the values and beliefs within an organization to better include its members requires a concerted effort in reculturing, which Fullan described as moving beyond a limited focus on assessment and pedagogy.[35] Instead, organizations should prioritize and improve these elements routinely.[36] Modifying an individual's beliefs also takes substantial effort. Ongoing training is not only beneficial, but crucial for providing consistent responses in similar situations. Gong and Zhang suggested that if someone behaves a certain way in one context, similar behavior can be expected in related contexts.[37] For example, a courageous individual's past actions reflect bravery; future behavior will likely align with that—just as a righteous person will act righteously, and a benevolent person will act kindly.[38] This underscores the importance of continuous training and development. Although this requires time and effort, it is achievable and can lead to positive change.

The literature highlights that changing an organization's culture is a lengthy endeavor. Building on the need for continuous training and development, Fullan defines transformational change as an iterative, ongoing process that can take several years. Successful examples include Microsoft under Satya Nadella, which shifted from certainty to learning within four years, and IBM under Lou Gerstner, which was restructured for long-term viability. In these cases, feedback was critical for addressing individual concerns, understanding resistance, and identifying necessary changes in values and beliefs. These examples demonstrate that cultural transformation, though challenging, is possible over time. The key lesson is that patience, feedback, and leadership are crucial for sustained cultural change.

However, reculturing is more challenging in larger organizations. To address this, open dialogue is needed with each individual. Providing evidence and feedback explains why changes in values and beliefs are needed. This process is similar to assessing organizational climate. Proper assessment engages individuals to understand their feelings about the organization. The challenge is that individual perceptions can fluctuate. This requires ongoing evaluation. Similarly, continuous training helps shape an individual's character to match the organization's values. Self-identity and moral identity develop through experience and moral inclinations.[39] Thus, realistic training, especially

in scenario-based exercises, becomes vital. Ultimately, tailoring communication and training to individual needs, as well as assessing ongoing perceptions, are essential for success.

Conclusion

Systems thinking and sense-making tools, such as the Cynefin framework, can assist commanders and subordinates in understanding the entire system, ensuring they are aware of the second- and third-order effects of their decisions, which maximizes the potential results for the most ethical decision. Thus, the ethical triangle complements systems thinking when it comes to making ethical decisions, as the leader will view all domains of the triangle, including laws, consequences, and virtues, much like systems thinking requires an understanding of how components interact and relate to each other, resulting in a more holistic outlook.

To support this argument, commanders need to translate ethical foundations into clear actions. Leaders should create shared understanding by describing the operational environment, identifying the current and desired end states, and clarifying operational approaches. This clarity enables adaptability and allows for the establishment of clear right and left limits through a commander's intent, which in turn supports virtuous and ethical decisions. Personally delivering this intent reinforces mission command and ethical standards.

Leaders reinforce the main argument by providing resources and fostering an organizational climate rooted in collaboration, trust, and open communication. This approach, consistent with adaptive leadership, facilitates the collective understanding necessary for ethical decision-making throughout the organization. Integrating all domains of the ethical triangle is essential for making balanced ethical decisions. Leaders must model ethical reasoning and behavior to embed these practices in the organization, supporting the argument that this model encourages a culture of ethical alignment through consistent training and role modeling. Applying the ethical triangle begins by focusing on principles and potential rule violations, then on consequences, and finally on virtues like empathy and the Golden Rule. This virtuous approach directly operationalizes the argument that combining frameworks results in sound ethical decisions. ***IAJ***

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Enhancing *Ethical Decision-Making*

by Joseph Dwayne Blanding

Editor's Note: This is the third article of a three-part series on military ethics and leader development in InterAgency Journal No. 15-2/Fall 2025.

As leaders, your decisions have significant impacts. The Army emphasizes the ethical triangle, but leaders may prioritize rules and law over efficiency. I recommend adopting a multifaceted ethics approach that goes beyond strict rule-following. Should senior officials strive for clearer rules of engagement to minimize ambiguity or allow flexibility for commanders' ethical judgment? How will you advocate for the right balance to ensure ethical decisions and mission success?

Army ethics training currently overemphasizes strict rule-following (deontological ethics) and integrates consequentialist and virtue ethics only to a limited extent—creating a shortfall. To address this, the Army should implement ongoing ethics training, foster role modeling by senior leaders, adopt flexible rules of engagement, and use scenario-based exercises to simulate ethical dilemmas. These steps will help leaders adapt ethically in complex, changing operational environments and ensure commanders can make morally sound decisions by navigating laws, rules, values, and consequences, rather than relying solely on rules. This article, one of three on ethical frameworks, clarifies consequentialist ethics for organizational commanders and leaders. Focusing solely on the consequential domain, I cover its importance, benefits, limitations, and key distinctions, and conclude with actionable recommendations for leaders, particularly in military settings.

Colonel (Ret.) Joseph Dwayne Blanding, Ph.D., is an assistant professor in the School for Command Preparation at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College (CGSC) in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Prior to this role, he served in CGSC's Department of Command and Leadership from 2021 to 2024. Born in Pineville, SC, he earned a BA from Morris College in 1994, after which he joined the U.S. Army's Transportation Corps. His last assigment before retiring from active duty in 2020 was as the U.S. Army Central G4/logistics officer. A combat veteran of three wars, Blanding continued his professional growth by obtaining multiple advanced degrees. He has also published articles on military leadership and conducted research with ETH Zurich. Recognized for his excellence as an educator, Blanding was named Civilian Educator of the Year for academic years 2024 and 2025. He is married with children.

Improving ethical decision-making in the Army fundamentally depends on building leaders who are both adaptable and ethically grounded. Robust ethics training, visible role modeling, and flexible rules of engagement are crucial. Applying systems thinking and sense-making tools helps commanders and subordinates understand the broader impact of their decisions, directly supporting ethical adaptability—the core requirement for effective mission command in complex and unpredictable contexts.

Operationalizing this argument requires using a structured approach—taught through Professional Military Education (PME)—to developing commander's intent so that intent defines ethical boundaries. Structured to include ethical boundaries, commander's intent would help subordinates make ethical decisions and guide ethical decision-making by establishing permissible actions and rules of engagement. Commanders who clearly communicate their intent ensure respect for the local populace, maintain discipline, and enable precise targeting that minimizes civilian harm.

Clear intent also allows commanders to explain legal and ethical considerations, resolving potential misunderstandings before operations begin. It sets a standard for adaptability and trust, guiding actions amid uncertainty. Combined with consistent delivery and after-action review (AAR), this framework reinforces ethical standards, clarifies desired outcomes, and strengthens decision-making by highlighting what constitutes ethical success. Regular AARs and diverse scenario planning further develop adaptability and ethical competence, underscoring the essential role of ethical expertise in effective leadership.

To extend the discussion on ethical development, regular ethics training is a core component of the military's daily operations. Karapetyan underscored this need, arguing that ethical education is needed to cultivate soldiers and leaders of character, as well as to address the organizational culture that often puts soldiers in moral dilemmas.[1] She outlined two approaches to ethics training: a gradual, osmosis-like influence and direct, explicit teaching. Both support the argument that ongoing ethical training is necessary to establish a robust moral foundation, underscoring its critical role in shaping an ethical military force.

The lack of ethical triangle instruction in unit training and limited exposure to PME highlights a clear gap. Drawing on over 32 years of service, I only encountered the ethical triangle as a professor in 2021and never saw it emphasized at the unit level. This underscores the need for ongoing ethical development: soldiers' morals are shaped by subjectivism, cultural relativism, and objectivism—personal, group, or universal standards refined by experience. Culture and religion influence these views, leading to differing attitudes about right and wrong. Yet, most children learn from family and community that acts like stealing, killing, and lying are wrong. Therefore, ongoing modeling and discussion of ethics is essential to shape a strong moral compass.

Improving ethical decision-making in the Army fundamentally depends on building leaders who are both adaptable and ethically grounded.

Given these frameworks, leaders foster ethical growth by applying emotional intelligence to understand and influence themselves and their teams. Because emotional intelligence shapes ethical decisions, leaders must reflect on their beliefs and assumptions, including whether good people can err in certain contexts. Where do they rank on McGregor's Theory X–Theory Y scale? These beliefs directly influence a group's moral standards. Goldman, citing McGregor,

defined Theory X as such: "People are naturally unmotivated to work tend to avoid it unless compelled. As a result, they must be coerced, controlled, directed, and threatened with punishment to work toward goals. Most people reportedly prefer this treatment, as it allows them to do only what is explicitly required and avoid additional responsibility."[2] He continued by defining Theory Y, declaring that, "Work is natural for people if it is satisfying, so they will show self-control and direct themselves toward goals they care about. Commitment comes from satisfaction and rewards, with the most powerful being the sense of progress toward self-fulfillment. Theory Y suggests that people will seek and accept responsibility because it is satisfying, and avoiding work is learned, rather than natural."[3]

Modeling ethical behavior is essential for building and sustaining the Army's ethical climate.

Together, these theories show that ethical reasoning is complex and context-dependent, yet current Army training in moral reasoning does not address this complexity. The prevailing assumption—that individuals will automatically uphold Army values without explicit guidance—creates a significant gap. While the Army uses the ethical triangle in decision-making, official doctrine centered on leadership and ethics, such as Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, only briefly addresses ethical reasoning. Of its three short paragraphs on the subject, just one references the triangle's domains without naming it. ADP 6-22[ii] therefore offers limited instruction for leaders' ethical responsibilities in daily activities. As Kenny, Lincoln, and Balandin noted, ethical reasoning is a "reflective process that involves the exploration and analysis of moral issues and problems in daily life."[4] To improve ethical outcomes, the Army needs both robust guidance and stronger ethical role models. Clearer guidance and role modeling are needed for consistent results.

Modeling ethical behavior is essential for building and sustaining the Army's ethical climate. Leaders at every level have a direct responsibility to set this example. Saleem-Tanner noted that commanders must actively create environments that support ethical conduct, citing Greenleaf's view that leaders are responsible for enabling followers to act ethically.[5] This highlights the central role leaders play in shaping ethical standards within the Army. Additionally, Karapetyan asserts that ethical decision-making can be developed.[6] Therefore, leaders must intentionally model ethical behavior and use tools like the ethical triangle to guide their units through dilemmas and reinforce Army values.

The Army maintains that leaders must act deliberately and remain informed when making ethical decisions, emphasizing a systematic, explicit approach. Ethical choices may involve clear rights and wrongs or competing values.[7] Both Kem and Army doctrine stress evaluating virtues, codified rules, and outcomes to ensure the greatest benefit. Kem's four ethical dilemmas highlight the need for a clear framework, such as the ethical triangle, to guide leaders.[8]

Kem's ethical triangle shows why a clear ethical framework is vital for Army leaders. The three parts—rules, virtues, and consequences—link to three core ethical approaches. Each gives a unique viewpoint, but complex outcomes mean leaders must think in systems to spot broader effects. The Army's use of the ethical triangle, both for following rules and thinking through dilemmas, demonstrates that this model directly supports leaders' decisions.

Fleming, Chow, and Su simplified ethical reasoning into two capacities: prescriptive and deliberative.[9] Prescriptive reasoning, which involves identifying the ideal solution, sets the standard for ethical conduct. Deliberative

reasoning, on the other hand, is the process of forming the intent to act on these standards. The ethical triangle—a framework that integrates principles, consequences, and virtues—helps commanders identify, assess, and motivate action on ethical issues; this includes developing moral sensitivity (recognizing ethical issues), moral judgment (deciding what is right), and moral motivation (having the drive to act ethically). Fleming et al., referencing Rest (1979), further detailed four essential steps in this process, supporting the need for systematic ethical decision-making in leadership.[10]

Building on these ideas, the Army also regards the ethical triangle as a valuable framework for helping commanders navigate ethical dilemmas. Kem provides a comparable structure for ethical decision-making using the ethical triangle.[11] He proposed the following:

1) Define the problem (ethical dilemma) in terms of right versus right.

2) Consider alternative courses of action or action choices.

3) Test the courses of action against the "ethical triangle."

4) Principles-based ethics

5) Consequences-based ethics

6) Virtues-based ethics

7) Consider additional alternative courses of action (such as "win-win" possibilities or no decision).

8) Choose the course of action or action choice.

9) Implement the course of action.

It is noteworthy that Kem emphasized working inward, using all three domains to reach an ethical conclusion, further connecting his structure to the overall ethical triangle framework.

The ethical triangle provides a balanced approach to ethical decision-making; however, its effectiveness in military contexts is limited by the realities of military culture, accountability demands, and stringent legal frameworks. Although ethics, as described by Kenny, Lincoln, and Balandi and Karapetyan aim to guide conduct and prevent failures, these ideals often conflict with operational complexities.[12] Therefore, I contend that while ethics are vital, military environments inherently restrict the consistent and practical application of the ethical triangle.

...while ethics are vital, military environments inherently restrict the consistent and practical application of the ethical triangle.

My confidence in the ethical triangle's utility stems from more than 32 years of service in the U.S. Army. The central argument of this article is that while I recognize the value of the ethical triangle, the Army's culture often conflicts with its use, emphasizing rigid adherence to rules of engagement (ROE) over ethical discretion. The ROE are directives regulating combat actions which, while guiding conduct, restrict broader ethical frameworks.[13] I will analyze this tension between ethical ideals and institutional practices. My introduction to the ethical triangle came at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College in 2021, a change from my 2006-2007 student experience, which shows the Army's evolution in ethical thinking. These experiences shape my critical perspective on ethics in military service.

In my scholarly work, I emphasize that leaders should weigh all three domains of the ethical triangle—deontological, consequentialist, and virtue-based—when making decisions. I argue, however, that in practice, military

culture and accountability constraints push leaders toward a deontological approach, thereby limiting the comprehensive application of the triangle. While the Army advocates for balance among ethical frameworks, the structural and cultural realities of the organization make this a challenging endeavor. I contend that these constraints underscore the urgent need to reconsider whether the military's reliance on the ethical triangle is viable, given that resistance to change, heightened accountability, and legal pressures significantly restrict leaders' ability to apply it fully.

The U.S. Army's culture is deeply rooted in history and tradition. For this article, culture is simply defined as "how we do business around here." Donnithorne, citing Schein, defined culture as, "a pattern of shared basic assumptions that was learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems."[14]

Strict structure and tradition make it hard to use comprehensive judgment, as recommended by the ethical triangle.

Army culture supports independent, critical thinking in theory. In practice, its traditions, strict rules, focus on masculinity, and respect for hierarchy create a gap between ideals and reality. This makes ethical reasoning stressful inside the system and shows that military culture constrains ethical judgment.

The Army is among the most stressful careers in the world. Bohse highlighted this in his study on military culture and mental health. Bohse, citing Statistica, affirmed that, "Serving in the military is considered one of the most stressful jobs, with a job stress score of 72.47 (based on a 0–100 scale). The second, third, and fourth most stressful jobs were firefighter (stress score: 72.43), airline pilot (stress score: 61.07), and police officer (stress score: 51.97), respectively."[15]

In the military, based on Hofstede's dimensions, soldiers are discouraged from showing weakness or seeking help to maintain a masculine identity. The military is a culture deeply rooted in masculinity, as noted by Ott in her dissertation on the subject. She identified military culture as favoring characteristics typically associated with "masculine personality traits as opposed to feminine personality traits."[16] In other words, the military perpetuates a masculinity contest culture. Ott, citing Reit, defined masculinity contest culture as "a representation of idealized norms of masculinity which privilege the tough, stoic, warrior who is capable and willing to employ violence to achieve whatever ends into which he may be ordered."[17] Traits such as domineering and assertiveness come to mind. I say this based on Ott's revelation of four norms that constitute a masculine culture. These norms are: "1) show no weakness; 2) strength and stamina; 3) put work first; and 4) dog-eat-dog."[18]

By graduation from Boot Camp, injuries or illness are seen as personal weaknesses. Military organizations instill in their members the belief that prioritizing personal needs over the group's mission is not only inappropriate but also dishonorable.[19] This discussion is important because it highlights how military culture restricts the ability of leaders and commanders to prioritize their own values, beliefs, and needs in the interest of the group. Strict structure and tradition make it hard to use comprehensive judgment, as recommended by the ethical triangle. The pressure of military operations often forces leaders to rely on rules and laws. This is a deontological outlook and supports the main argument that culture shapes the limits of ethical reasoning.

Under stress, the military operates as a bureaucratic system with a rigid structure. It obeys rules, regulations, and orders from the chain of command. Soldiers, whether through basic training or officer preparation, learn to follow these directives. The impact of not following orders is significant. Furthermore, success in exercises and operations directly leads to promotions. This connection is a powerful motivator, as highlighted by Bohse. In addition to these pressures, the challenges of military life are further compounded by the stigma associated with seeking assistance. For example, the *Orlando Sentinel* reported in 2002 on the stigma related to seeking assistance:

> Army investigators said Thursday that a military culture discouraging early intervention contributed to five recent killings involving couples at Fort Bragg. They noted that while existing marital problems and stress from duty-related separations are likely factors, earlier help could have prevented the tragedy. Col. Dave Orman, a psychiatrist who led the 19-member investigative team, emphasized the need for soldiers and families to feel supported in seeking assistance for domestic issues.[20]

Seeking assistance is often stigmatized in the military. Bohse revealed, citing Shay stating that, "Speaking of psychological problems or seeking help is strongly discouraged among soldiers as it not only portrays weakness, but it can result in adverse actions such as loss of military clearance, inability to operate firearms, and even an administrative separation."[21] Reinforcing the demands of military life and culture, Yamaguchi stated that:

> Regardless of the branch of service, all recruits are required to adopt a structured lifestyle upon entering Boot Camp. The common military core values, such as honor, courage, selfless service, and devotion to duty, are instilled throughout initial training. As I spent years in the Marine Corps, I have personally witnessed and experienced this very distinct and unique culture. A common expression in the Marine Corps is "Pain is a weakness leaving the body" (Brown, 2010, p. 28), and most recruits, through intensive training, eventually come to believe that tolerating pain is highly valued (Brown, 2010).[22]

By the time these recruits graduate from Boot Camp, the core values of military organizations are so deeply ingrained in the minds of service members that they feel it is appropriate and even an honor to prioritize the needs of larger groups over their own.[23]

...the challenges of military life are further compounded by the stigma associated with seeking assistance.

Soldiers learn to obey directives in basic training or officer preparation. The consequences of disobedience are significant. As stated, promotions link directly to successful exercises and operations. This connection is a strong motivator, as Bohse's declaration highlighted, "During their service contract, soldiers must always be prepared for field exercises, annual training, and deployment. They also undergo regular military inspections and other assessments for combat readiness (Chapman et al., 2012). The outcomes of these activities also determine whether a soldier advances in their career. Poor performance or lack of competency can risk administrative separation (Taub, 2014)."[24]

The stress of high expectations and the risk of removal make command roles difficult. Heightened accountability discourages future commanders from taking similar actions, impacting the command accession process.

Beynon reported, "More than half of the Army's senior officers are turning down opportunities to command. Instead, they choose the stability of staff roles over the high-stakes demands of leadership or retire, according to internal service data" (para. 1).[25] This underscores how demands for accountability strongly influence officer decisions about leadership roles.

Commanders are held accountable for their actions and inactions, which is essential for effective military leadership. Karapetyan emphasized that accountability is critical to maintaining standards of conduct; without it, trust may decline, power might be misused, and operational effectiveness could suffer.[26] According to Karapetyan, transparency not only fulfills a requirement but also supports public trust and the institution's integrity. This foundation of accountability shapes the environment and expectations for military leaders.

The primary challenge for commanders is striking a balance between regulations and moral judgment.

This strong emphasis on accountability contributes to a persistent investigative culture within the military. Some view this as necessary for maintaining standards. However, it can discourage critical and creative assessment of leaders' values and beliefs. High-profile cases, such as the removals of Major General George W. Weightman, Major General Kenneth Kamper and several officers, after the Fort Hood incident, show the severe consequences of leadership failures. The steady trend of commander removals highlights the tension between rule-bound accountability and the need for leadership flexibility.

The primary challenge for commanders is striking a balance between regulations and moral judgment. Some leaders, such as Navy Captain Brett Crozier and Lieutenant Colonel Stuart Scheller, have been removed for acting on conviction instead of compliance. Historical cases, including those involving General MacArthur and General Billy Mitchell, also demonstrate that prioritizing moral principles can have professional and legal consequences. This tension often leads commanders to favor compliance. As a result, leadership becomes riskier, and bold ethical actions are inhibited. This dynamic is at the heart of military leadership today.

Army Regulation (AR) 600-20 guides commanders at all levels in performing their duties. Rules and laws are codified in doctrine, treaties, and laws to hold commanders and leaders accountable. For example, AR 600-20 states commanders must, "guard against and suppress all dissolute and immoral practices, and to correct, according to the laws and regulations of the Army, all persons who are guilty of them and take all necessary and proper measures, under the laws, regulations, and customs of the Army, to promote and safeguard the morale, the physical well-being, and the general welfare of the officers and enlisted persons under their command or charge."[27]

Karapetyan recognized the military justice system as key for "enforcing accountability of leaders." She stated leaders are "accountable for their conduct and for the performance of their unit or team," emphasizing their responsibilities.[28] The military justice system investigates conduct breaches, ensuring responsible parties face consequences.

Karapetyan noted that both internal and external accountability exist, with internal accountability through court-martial and military justice, and external accountability through bodies such as the United Nations, the International Criminal Court, and human rights organizations. Penalties for violating these laws are substantial. Military commanders

face stark consequences—including demotion, financial loss, and professional setbacks—when their moral judgment clashes with established directives, as illustrated by General MacArthur, General Billy Mitchell, and Lieutenant Colonel Stuart Scheller.

Consequentialism provides a practical framework for military ethical decision-making, prioritizing outcomes as the primary measure of morality. Some theorists, such as Xu and Ma, argued that deontological rules can cause moral shortcuts that overlook broader impacts.[29] Furthermore, strict accountability and institutional culture limit commanders' ability to use outcome-based reasoning. Commanders must weigh competing pressures and consider consequences for all stakeholders. This tension between outcome-oriented morality and organizational constraints underscores the complexity of applying consequential ethics.

Building on these complexities, accountability pressures directly influence decisions in combat operations. This connection is evident in the application of rules of engagement, which may prohibit commanders from targeting protected sites, such as mosques or hospitals. As noted by the International Committee of the Red Cross, the law protects all civilian and military hospitals, as well as religious centers.[30]

In these circumstances, commanders cannot justify breaking these rules, even if doing so might seem justifiably consequential in order to end the conflict sooner. While such decisions are urgent and consequential, leaders are deterred by the high risk and accountability pressures. To navigate these challenges, an overview of the ethical triangle, specifically consequentialism, is provided, along with recommendations for its effective application in military ethical reasoning.

The Ethical Triangle (Consequentialist-Focused)

Consequentialism

Due to globalization and technological advances, the world is more interconnected and uncertain than it was in the past, such as during the 1920s or 1930s. The environment has become increasingly complex and dynamic due to scientific and technological advancements. For this reason, the military must provide comprehensive ethical training and model the desired behavior. It must also allow flexibility in the rules of engagement to achieve battlefield success. The ethical triangle is the framework chosen by the U.S. Army for ethical reasoning. Consequentialism plays a key role in policy and means apportionment.

...tension between outcome-oriented morality and organizational constraints underscores the complexity of applying consequential ethics.

Consequentialism, a logical approach to military ethics, is especially relevant to policy and resource distribution. Xu and Ma stated, "ethical utilitarianism adherents were more sensitive to distributive justice issues."[31] This highlights fairness in outcomes. Jamieson and Elliott defined consequentialism as a "family of theories that holds that acts are morally right, wrong, or indifferent in virtue of their consequences." Right acts "produce good consequences"[32] Freeman said, "the right act in any circumstance is one most conducive to the best overall outcome"[33] Enck, Pauchnik, and Perry added that a "person's action is morally right if it creates the best outcome for the greatest number and is morally wrong if it does not."[34] Utilitarianism, a type of consequentialism, focuses on outcomes.

Utilitarianism has two key areas: act and rule utilitarianism. Hooker and Derek Parfit are two major figures in this field. Hooker defined rule consequentialism as aligning an act with rules whose acceptance leads to the best impartial consequences.[35] Parfit said act consequentialism means "What each of us ought to do is whatever would make the outcome best."[36] These definitions, rooted in scholarship, invite deeper thought on consequentialism.

According to Hooker, act-consequentialism holds that moral rightness is determined solely by whether an act would promote value. Rule-consequentialism says rightness is determined by whether the "general acceptance of rules allowing that act would promote value."[37] These theories are not only abstract ideas. They affect every day moral decisions. When considering utility or happiness, there are two views: egalitarianism and theological ethics. Freeman recorded, "Teleological view affirms the consequentialist thesis that the Right maximizes the good… But they hold an additional thesis defining good independently from the Right or separately of any moral concepts or principles."[38] He stated that egalitarian acts are "right, not because they maximize the good, but because they are required by an egalitarian decision procedure that requires giving equal weight to everyone's interests. Equal consideration, not maximum utility, is the 'fundamental goal' of these egalitarian, utilitarian theories."[39]

The Cynefin framework equips you with the tools to understand and navigate complex environments, instilling confidence in your decision-making.

In addressing an uncertain environment, it is important to combine a systems thinking approach with the Cynefin framework. This combination not only helps make sense of the environment but also ensures sound moral reasoning. As a foundation, Lawrence, quoting Snowden and Boone, defined the Cynefin framework as a decision-making or analytical tool.[40] Specifically, it recognizes the causal differences between system types and proposes new approaches to "decision-making in complex social environments."[41] Building on this, Lawrence, citing Snowden, explained that the Cynefin framework consists of five domains. He provided a concise description of these domains, declaring that:

> There are five domains: 1) the simple domain, where cause-and-effect relationships exist, are predictable, and are repeatable; 2) the complicated domain, where cause-and-effect relationships exist, but are not self-evident and therefore require expertise to decipher; 3) the complex domain, where cause and effect are only obvious in hindsight, with unpredictable and emergent outcomes; 4) the chaotic domain, where no cause and effect relationships can be determined; and 5) disorder, where decision-makers or analysts do not know the domain in which they reside.[42]

The Cynefin framework equips you with the tools to understand and navigate complex environments, instilling confidence in your decision-making. Emergent practices, as informed by reviews conducted in hindsight, will assist decision-makers in adopting a consequentialist ethical approach to determining the best options for achieving the greatest good.

The Cynefin framework provides leaders with a clear, structured approach to navigating uncertainty and ethically allocating resources. By relying on recommendations from the community of practice, leaders can determine when to invest further in emerging practices. Experts help refine these practices into best practices. This process, coupled with scenario planning and backcasting, reduces anxiety and

provides decision-makers with structured tools to pursue the greatest good—a central, yet challenging, tenet of consequentialism.

While Cynefin and systems thinking prepare organizations for unpredictable settings, these benefits require deliberate training. Developing mastery is challenging because methods must continually evolve; problems change and require new thinking, as noted by Gharajedaghi.[43] Ongoing training in consequentialism and systems approaches is key, enabling ethical and effective decisions in dynamic environments.

Building on the importance of ongoing training and new thinking, leaders have a crucial role in applying systems thinking. This enables them to see how components interconnect and to allocate resources for the greatest good. By employing design thinking, decision-makers can more effectively identify ethical options and innovative alternatives, as noted by Gharajedaghi.[44] Although predicting the future is challenging, especially in the face of rapid change, military education should emphasize consequentialism to prepare leaders for mission success.

In this context, even though all Department of War personnel receive annual ethics training, unit-level training in consequentialism complements these efforts. A clear understanding of consequentialism enables commanders to make decisions that promote the greatest good, thereby reinforcing mission command—the Army's approach to empowering decentralized, context-driven decision-making.[45] Cynefin and similar sense-making frameworks underpin this ethical and leadership approach.

Taken together, these frameworks and training approaches reinforce one another. The Cynefin framework enables leaders to understand complex environments and allocate resources effectively. Relying on communities of practice and experts is essential. Continual scenario-based training, a priority for the Army, helps soldiers see the impact of their decisions and strengthens ethical reasoning. Early consistent ethics and systems thinking training, with leaders modeling behavior, can help ensure ethical outcomes. Next, I provide recommendations for organizational leaders and subordinates regarding ethics.

Recommendations

Unit commanders must set the ethical standard by modeling behavior and connecting actions to outcomes, a core principle of consequentialism that aims to maximize overall good. While providing rationale enhances mission command, time constraints can make this difficult. Still, when soldiers see the broader purpose, they are more equipped for operational success. Commanders should emphasize critical and systems thinking, helping subordinates make informed decisions and anticipate long-term effects through consequentialist analysis. However, the Army's reliance on intuition at lower levels can hinder this shift, limiting the effective application of frameworks such as Military Decision-Making Process (MDMP) and Army Design Methodology (ADM). Linear systems summarize parts, whereas nonlinear systems reflect complex interactions.[46] The MDMP supports iterative planning, while ADM fosters creative problem-solving.[47] Despite time pressures, direct-level commanders must use judgment to develop subordinates amid operational complexity.

Despite time pressures, direct-level commanders must use judgment to develop subordinates amid operational complexity.

To reinforce ethical decision-making, commanders should model and dedicate time specifically to consequentialism training. This training must strike a balance between

consequentialism and deontology, as these frameworks sometimes conflict or converge. Soldiers should learn to distinguish and apply each approach, directly aligning ethical theory with their foundational values. Practical exercises should demonstrate how these ethical frameworks are applied in day-to-day decisions, thereby connecting theory to practice. Flexibility in the rules of engagement may extend the possibility for commanders to use their values and beliefs to guide their actions.

...commanders can maximize the ethical triangle through continuous ethics training, deliberate role modeling, and leveraging flexibility in rules of engagement.

Flexibility in rules of engagement lets leaders at all levels adapt to uncertainty. Senior leaders should avoid strictly deontological approaches, giving commanders options to maximize ethical decision-making. A balance of rules and adaptability is vital in dynamic settings, illustrating the interplay between deontology and utilitarianism. To guide action within this flexible framework, commanders must clearly communicate both the current and desired end states through the operations process. The operations process is defined as planning, preparing, executing, and assessing operations.[48] At times, an emphasis on adaptive leadership is crucial for overcoming these challenges.

Scenario-based training supports a consequentialist approach by allowing subordinates to consider the outcomes of their decisions and thereby maximize the overall good. Similar to back casting and scenario planning, commanders start at the endpoint and identify key decision points and ethical moments. This alignment creates a structure for effective training. Importantly, scenario-based training keeps the unit focused on mission results and supports a consequentialist method. To further support ethical decision-making, dialogue and rehearsals set the unit up to make moral choices. Additionally, repetition and clear communication skills are imperative for shared understanding and ethical outcomes. To achieve this, commanders must clearly state their intent while maintaining a broad operational approach. The operational approach broadly defines the mission, operational concepts, tasks, and actions needed to accomplish it. A commander's intent is a: "clear and succinct expression of the operation's purpose and desired end state. It provides focus and helps subordinate and supporting commanders act to achieve the desired results, even if the operation deviates from the plan."[49]

Clear, concise commander's intent is key to success. A well-crafted commander's intent is central to enabling a consequentialist approach. By clearly portraying the operational environment and establishing boundaries, commanders provide shared understanding and empower leaders on the ground. This intent supports momentum, ethical decision-making, and operational effectiveness. Flexible rules of engagement further complement these efforts.

The practice of AARs is at the heart of the Army's commitment to continuous learning and moral advancement. Regular AARs reveal both situational understanding and the real consequences of choices. They help leaders proactively determine who benefits from specific courses of action. By making AARs integral, the Army ensures that learning, operational morality, and adaptability drive improved mission outcomes. This process, combined with adaptive leadership and thorough pre-mission analysis, creates the flexibility needed to achieve both operational success and moral clarity.

In conclusion, commanders can maximize the ethical triangle through continuous ethics training, deliberate role modeling, and leveraging flexibility in rules of engagement. By

applying systems thinking and sense-making tools, such as the Cynefin framework, commanders and subordinates can better understand the impacts of their decisions. This includes second and third-order effects. Such understanding helps optimize outcomes for the greatest number of people.

Commanders achieve operational success by fostering a shared understanding. They must clearly state both the current position and the desired end state and issue transparent guidance. By intentionally incorporating vagueness in the operational approach, commanders enable adaptability and sound judgment as conditions change. This flexibility is fundamental in complex environments. It ties directly to consistently meeting mission and ethical objectives.

A precise and clear commander's intent provides boundaries for a consequentialist approach, enabling subordinates to act with purpose and flexibility within ethical parameters. To ensure alignment on ethical priorities, delivering intent both in person and in writing is essential. This approach also strengthens decision-making and trust. Furthermore, consistent AARs reinforce this alignment and bolster adaptability.

Additionally, repetition and rehearsals are crucial for achieving an ethical outcome. Supporting techniques, such as scenario planning and dialogue, further enhance informed and ethical leadership. Taken together, all of these are crucial for achieving the mission. ***IAJ***

Notes

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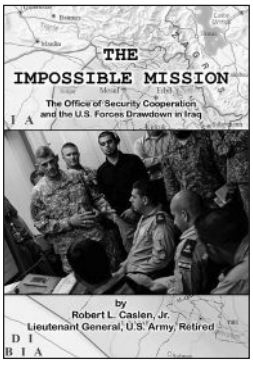
Book Review



The Impossible Mission: The Office of Security Cooperation and the U.S. Forces Drawdown in Iraq

by Robert L. Caslen, Jr.

Outskirts Press, Parker, Co., 2025, 328 pp

Reviewed by Col. (Ret.) Andrew Shoffner, Ph.D.

The famous American educator, John Dewey, is credited with pioneering the concept of learning through reflection.[1]

In a similar manner, retired Lieutenant General Robert L. Caslen, Jr., seizes the opportunity to learn from his experiences while overseeing the end of the war in Iraq as the Director of the Office of Security Cooperation – Iraq (OSC-I). In his book, *The Impossible Mission: The Office of Security Cooperation and the U.S. Forces Drawdown in Iraq*, Caslen provides a first-hand account of how the United States terminated the eight-year war in Iraq and almost lost the resulting peace. What makes his story so remarkable is the revealing look at how well-meaning decisions, with a goal of bringing the troops home by the end of 2011, had unintended consequences and set the conditions for the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) to take root.

Serving as the senior military official overseeing the transition, Caslen provides a candid, apolitical report of what he and his team of only 157 military personnel experienced in the final stage of the war. Using a chronological approach and a forthright narrative, he describes the numerous challenges, the fluid environment, and offers twelve strategic lessons learned with a desire that the same mistakes are not repeated in the future.

Set in the political milieu of a war fatigued United States and an occupied Iraq, Caslen describes the obstacles he faced ranging from establishing the size of his force, mitigating the risks of not having a Status of Forces Agreement, to negotiating the internecine rivalry between the Department of Defense and Department of State. Originally selected to serve as a residual force commander of approximately 15,000 troops, Caslen quickly found himself leading a contingent of only 157 service members due to changing domestic political guidance. Ironically, he was still expected to execute the same mission originally assigned to the larger force. Complicating matters was the Iraqi parliament's disapproval of a Status of Forces Agreement which made it illegal for foreigners to be in Iraq without a visa. Disappointingly, Caslen and his team witness the adverse interagency rivalry between the Department of State and Department of Defense firsthand. After more than eight years, the State Department was now the lead agency in Iraq and had a different appreciation

for the security requirements going forward. The result was a diminished OSC-I team with limited resources and authorities.

This odyssey occurred in the fluid environment of a war-torn Iraq where a Shi'a president took drastic measures to consolidate power among the Shi'a, Sunni, and Kurdish factions. Consequently, key Sunni and Kurdish government officials were removed from positions, thus polarizing the Sunnis and the Kurds and jeopardizing the eight-year effort to establish a representative form of government. Making matters worse, the Iraqi president became more authoritative and put the nascent democratic process at risk. Together, these actions created a perfect storm and set the conditions for "the rebirth of radical Sunni extremism called ISIS."[2]

Part of what makes this work so insightful are the last two chapters—one dedicated to the Kurd-Arab issue and the other addressing the question, "Is Iraq worth the investment?" Caslen offers prescient insights regarding the issue of the Kurds and the challenge they face as a nation without a state, yet existing in three sovereign territories: Turkey, Iraq, and Iran. His understanding of their challenge is unique and garnered from living and working with the Kurds for a total of three years. Regarding the question of the Iraqi investment, Caslen takes a strategic perspective and considers the answer from a long-game point of view. The goal of a democratic Iraq will take considerable time, but the benefits can be remarkable. He also very somberly addresses the commitments made by the service members and contractors who paid the ultimate price in pursuit of a new and better Iraq. He candidly states, "we owe it to their sacrifice, to fix the mistakes that occurred over there."[3]

Citing Winston Churchill, "those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it,"[4] Caslen leans into his military background and offers an After-Action Review (AAR) of his experiences in the Epilogue. At a macro-level, they can be categorized into four areas: war termination, department transition, strategic planning, and building coalition-partner capacity. He holds no punches and offers twelve strategic lessons learned such as why simply departing a war does not end a war, how the effort to Americanize the Iraqi military failed, and the need to modernize the foreign military sales process. While he acknowledges the significant errors made, Caslen also makes note of the tremendous accomplishments by those who committed much to help re-establish a secure and democratic Iraq.

The Impossible Mission is not just a whirlwind account of the end of the Iraq war; rather, it is a descriptive explanation of one of the most overlooked and least studied aspects of war—war termination and the transition to peace. Simply put, reading this book is a must for all strategic planners, on both sides of the Potomac, as well as those serious about influencing interagency policy. ***IAJ***

Notes

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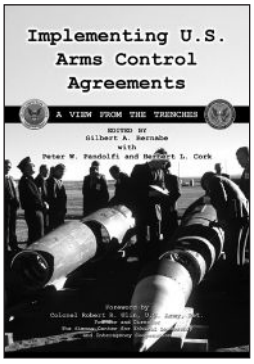

Implementing U.S. Arms Control Agreements: A View from the Trenches

Edited by Gilbert A Bernabe with Peter W. Pandolfi and Herbert L. Cork.

Outskirts Press, Parker, Co., 2025, 322 pp.

Reviewed by Col. Andrew Morgado, Ph.D.
Assistant to the Dean of Academics, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College

> ***There is only one sane policy, for your country and mine, to preserve our civilization in this modern age: A nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought. The only value in our two nations possessing nuclear weapons is to make sure they will never be used. But then would it not be better to do away with them entirely?[1]***
>
> ***President Ronald Reagan***
> ***State of the Union Address, 1984***

President Reagan's direct appeal to the citizens of the Soviet Union through his State of the Union Address caught many by surprise. This was the first indication that the President entertained the idea of reducing the world's nuclear arsenals as a matter of policy. Though it took until the ascension of Mikhail Gorbacev to the position of President of the Soviet Union for President Reagan to have a willing partner, this was the beginning of a new strategic direction. Ultimately it led to the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty signed in 1987 soon followed by a series of other arms reduction treaties. But for all the groundbreaking achievements produced by this effective diplomacy, the signature and ratification of the treaty did not eliminate any nuclear weapons. The devil, of course, was in the details of implementation. It is this crucial topic that serves as the subject of Gilbert A. Bernabe's edited volume, *Implementing U.S. Arms Control Agreements*. Translating strategic direction into on-ground reality is hard, unglamorous, but essential work. This is the subject of Bernabe's insightful book.

The Department of Defense, designated as the lead agency to implement President Reagan's "trust but verify" guidance,[2] created the On-Site Inspection Agency (OSIA) to perform the inspection and escort functions.[3] Bernabe's 19 edited chapters and epilogue provide multiple, first-hand perspectives on how OSIA teams accomplished a unique and challenging set of tasks. These inspection teams ultimately oversaw the implementation of seven total treaties.[4] Starting with a "blank sheet of paper" the OSIA had to create both the teams, policies, inspection protocols, a training regimen, and processes to tackle problems from the theoretical to very practical ones.[5] Due to the broad set of areas to inspect and the very technical expertise required to actually verify weapons and treaty components, the DoD and OSIA relied on a joint and interagency collaborative approach to deal with a multitude of problems. Bernabe's volume is a very human account of how real people needed to come together to overcome everything from institutional inertia to soothing

bruised egos.

The twin themes of problem solving and the art of the practical run throughout the volume. These are lessons for policy makers and practitioners across multiple echelons. Planners must frequently translate big ideas into executable plans with limited, and sometimes conflicting, guidance or direction. The team assembled to meet the President's intent ultimately achieved the right ends through perseverance and a unified effort. OSIA was a successful confidence-building measure created in an era of high tension and confrontation that helped advance the interests of our country and of peace. Though the players and conditions in the arms control arena changed over time, these arms inspections helped foster transparency, trust, and cooperation.[6] These are all aspects of the international community that currently seem in short supply in our contemporary world.

The professional and casual reader must excuse some of the historical, fact-setting redundancies common in multi-author works, but the consistency of message comes through. Both audiences will appreciate the humanity presented in this work as well as the innovative ways real people came together to solve real problems, both in the U.S. and U.S.S.R. The work of OSIA remains both instructive and illuminating. ***IAJ***

Notes

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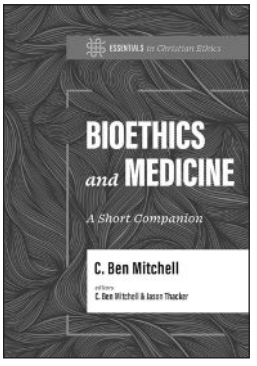

Bioethics and Medicine: A Short Companion

by C. Ben Mitchell

B&H Academic, Brentwood, Tenn., 2025, 160 pp.

Reviewed by Chaplain (Major) Andrew Schmitz
Bioethicist, U.S. Army/Ph.D. Student, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

The stakes are high in medical and military ethics; this book will help leaders learn the moral framework of this vital field so that they will make the ethical decisions when the time comes. The phrase commonly attributed to Archilochus, "We don't rise to the level of our expectations; we fall to the level of our training," applies to bioethics. Military leaders need proactive literacy in this field before they encounter ethical scenarios like biotechnologies in warfare, reverse triage[1], or medical care for civilians during noncombatant evacuation operations.

Leaders unacquainted with medical ethics may find the prospect of jumping into such a deep field to be daunting. Where to start? Who are the leading voices? The "Short Companion" ethics series answers these questions. For reference, this is the same series in which Paul Miller, the CGSC Foundation's General Hugh Shelton Distinguished Visiting Chair of Ethics, wrote *Ethics of War*[2]. Ben Mitchell, the co-editor of the series and the author of *Bioethics and Medicine*, is just the man to write a book like this. In addition to teaching bioethics at the graduate level for decades, he was also a consultant with the Center for Genetics & Public Policy at Johns Hopkins University, and was the co-director for Biotechnology Policy and Fellow of the Council for Biotechnology Policy in Washington, D.C.

Bioethics is a relatively new field that has been created partly in response to the Nazi physicians[3] in the 1930s and 1940s who committed crimes against humanity in their unethical human research experiments. The Nuremberg Trials[4] held those doctors to account, and the world saw the need for codifying a system of ethics and specifically addressing matters of bioethics in application, among other areas, to military medicine. Mitchell extends the history of bioethics to the Classical Greek era.

Mitchell writes this book from a Christian worldview, but handles the Greek mythological origins of medical ethics with honesty and care. He explains to the reader the import of the fourth century BC Greek physician Hippocrates of Kos. Hippocrates' most well-known contribution to the history of the profession of medicine was, of course, the Hippocratic Oath. It contains the commitment, what Mitchell calls a 'covenant,' to do no harm, among other statements. Mitchell traces this promise of non-maleficence through his book, and uses it as a foundation for the modern incarnations of medicine.

Mitchell cites the example of how the new technology of dialysis machines is one of the momentous developments that catalyzed modern-day bioethics. Seattle's Swedish Hospital in 1962 had very few dialysis machines, not enough to treat all of its patients. How did they decide who

lived and who died? Who made those decisions? The distribution of scarce medical resources is not an isolated historical vignette; advances in biotechnology happen all the time. Leaders are responsible for making tough, ethical decisions. Mitchell's book describes the ethical principles and moral values that are contained in the field of bioethics. He helpfully references Beauchamp and Childress' timeless text *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*[5] by summarizing some of the main principles of autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, and justice.

Before Mitchell addresses issues such as "Ethics at the Edges of Life" (which includes physician-assisted suicide), genetics, eugenics, and transhumanism, he advances the argument that a coherent moral framework must undergird bioethics. He believes that the art and science of medicine are instantiated within a historical profession, and are an inherently moral enterprise. Said differently, the professionalism of medicine must necessarily include a commitment for the physician not just to be defined by their duty, but by their virtue.

> *"…understanding who doctors are meant to be is an essential aspect of understanding the role medicine is to play… the practice of virtuous behavior trains moral muscle memory, as it were, to do the right thing without having to run ethical calculations for every decision. The virtues become part of the physician's way of inhabiting the world. The practice of medicine is a "habit of mind," heart, and will."*[6]

Leaders who wish to learn more about the ethical frameworks in bioethics and medicine will struggle to find a more helpful introduction to the subject than *Bioethics and Medicine*. It is concise, consistent, and introduces the reader to some of the most profitable modern thinkers, including Leon Kass, Daniel Sulmasy, and Edmund Pellegrino. Any leader operating in the joint environment that has even an adjacent interaction with medical ethics ought to read *Bioethics and Medicine*. Command authority incurs the responsibility to understand the language of the staff specialists within their organization. Mitchell's book will help lay the moral foundation for tomorrow's decision-makers who will fall to the level of their ethical training. ***IAJ***

Notes

1 E. Ann Jeschke and Sarah L. Huffman, "*Reimagining 'Honorable Death' in Future Large Scale Combat Operations," Ethical Implications of Large Scale Combat Operations* (Arthur D. Simons Center for Interagency Cooperation, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 2019), 69–79, https://thesimonscenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Ethics-Symp-2019-p69-79.pdf , accessed August 21, 2025.

2 Paul D. Miller, *Ethics of War: A Short Companion* (Essentials in Christian Ethics Series, B&H Publishing Group, March 1, 2025)

3 Kevin A. Lazenby and Peter Angelos, "*What Do We Owe Our Patients? Surgeon Obligations When Patients Are Too Sick for Surgery*," *Journal of the American College of Surgeons* 239, no. 4 (October 2024): 394–399. https://doi.org/10.1097/XCS.0000000000001106.

4 Jeremy Sugarman, "Ethics in the Design and Conduct of Clinical Trials," *Epidemiologic Reviews* 24, no. 1 (2002): 54–68. https://doi.org/10.1093/epirev/24.1.54.

5 Beauchamp, Tom L., and James F. Childress. 2012. *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*. 7th ed. New York: Oxford University Press.

6 C. Ben Mitchell, *Bioethics and Medicine*, (B&H Academic, 2025), 52

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The Simons Center
Fort Leavenworth, Kansas 66027
ph: 913-651-0624
www.TheSimonsCenter.org

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CGSC Foundation, Inc.
100 Stimson Avenue, Suite 1149
Fort Leavenworth, Kansas 66027
ph: 913-651-0624
www.cgscfoundation.org