The Centrality of Military Ethics to the Military Profession

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Service in the U.S. military is highly regarded by the American public at this time in our history, but it is important to remember that this has not always been so. In my college years, as the Vietnam War was coming to a close, large segments of our society viewed the military with disdain, bordering on contempt. The pivot around which the relationship between the military and the people rotates is the trust and confidence earned by the military, and the key to that trust is the perception and reality of the high ethical standards and competence the military displays.

All true professions are in a "social trustee" relationship with the society. Like clergy, medicine and law, the military bears primary responsibility for a crucial social good: the security and stability of the nation. When those professions are trusted, in exchange for that responsibility, the society gives these professions unique privileges to manage their own internal affairs, to decide issues of membership and promotion for their members, and to rely on the expertise of the profession. Conversely, when that

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trust is questioned or begins to erode, the society can and does take away those privileges and distrusts their professional advice. The key to maintaining that relationship of trust is the degree to which the profession is seen as engaging in effective and consistent self-policing of its ranks and maintaining its own ethical high ground.

Recent years have witnessed some cracks in the foundation of the ethics of the military profession. The Navy has seen more Detachments for Cause of relatively senior officers than it would normally expect – and the overwhelming cause of those detachments has been personal misconduct. Very senior officers such as David Petraeus, John Allen and David Huntoon have departed under ethical clouds. The mishandling of issues of sexual assault in the military has risen to a level of concern that is causing members of Congress to consider taking away parts of the military's legal autonomy to deal with the issue and to require that it be addressed even by the President – a sure sign of the erosion of trust.

Addressing these issues is of great concern at any time but is perhaps especially critical at this historical juncture. Our military forces have been pushed to their limits in the past twelve years of war. But as those wars wind down, many new stressors and pressures loom on the horizon. We know we're entering a period of budget drawdown and restraint. Career paths will inevitably be more competitive and uncertain. Very hard choices have to be made in areas of procurement, force structure, and training. But all that will be in an environment much different than that most officers have grown up in and will challenge them to apply their best professional judgment in that novel context to ensure they design, train, and equip the best and most relevant force possible for the future. This will be fraught with ethical challenges requiring officers to rise above community and service parochialism and make genuine good faith efforts to meet those challenges.

Historically, periods of drawdown diminished budgets and diminished resources have put great strain on the force. Current war college students, and the next few years' groups, will bear the brunt of leading their services and agencies through a period of great adjustment and change. Only the consistent demonstration of the highest standards of professional ethics will maintain the bond of trust between the services and agencies and the society and government they serve. And only if that trust remains high will the profession maintain an adequate degree of autonomy to ensure that the profession is best able to manage and discipline itself – the hallmarks of true social trust professions.