

Building a Soldier: Educating Soldiers to Win in a Complex World

Jeff Fanelli, University of Louisville SBS, 2018

The U.S. Army's experience in 20th century wars has largely shaped the contemporary mindset about education and training. Two massive world wars and a counter-insurgency in Vietnam formed a training culture which oscillates between scientific empiricism and the intangibles of human morale. The result has been an Army with incredible technical expertise buttressed by ethical codes and values. The challenge is achieving an balance between technical training and intellectual education to build agile leaders who can adapt to win in a complex world while acting consistently with the Army Values. One powerful way to achieve this is to integrate studying virtue ethics into professional military education. This, however, requires a departure from the traditional methods of military education that is dominated by empirical, objective assessment.

The Rise of Empiricism in U.S. Army Training

American military education and training was deeply influenced by the experiences of WWI and WWII, in which a nation's industrial output was equated with might on the battlefield. War became a matter of industrial production more so than the historical precedent of man versus man. This favored scientific management principles to support what the German's dubbed in WWI as the *Materialschlacht*—the battle of material.¹ Spawned from a quest to improve the quality of American shipyards and factories in the early 1900s, empirical analysis

¹ David W. Holden, "Managing Men and Machines: U.S. Military Officers and the Intellectual Origins of Scientific Management in the Early Twentieth Century" (PhD. Diss., University of Kansas, 2016), 136, https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/bitstream/handle/1808/21847/Holden_ku_0099D_14487_DATA_1.pdf?sequence=1

was applied to each aspect of production to find gains in efficiency.² The new science of management became the contemporary craze and quickly proliferated to professions beyond manufacturing. When applied to the conduct of war, the primacy of the empiricism encouraged a practical and utilitarian mentality.³

During the two world wars, military training and education largely served to mass-produce recruits, who fit neatly into a military machine so that it could grind away against an opponent.⁴ Eventually, a scientific mindset permeated the military culture to the point that “in fighting, men counted numbers; and finally, as the habit grew only numbers counted.”⁵ By the Vietnam War, Army planners and strategists obsessed over objective measurements, such as the number of aircraft sorties, villages pacified, tonnage of bombs dropped, and kill-ratios.

However, the Army’s experience in Vietnam drove morale, professionalism, and discipline to alarming lows. The habit of counting numbers was not winning the war, nor could it explain the resiliency of the Vietnamese spirit. Furthermore, the perceived lack of integrity of the American government shattered the trust with the American public. Professionalism and discipline in the military progressively worsened as draftees were pulled from an increasingly skeptical society that was losing commitment to the war effort. One junior officer noted that the Army in the first years of the Vietnam War was entirely different than the Army during his second tour a few years later.⁶ Atrocities like the My Lai massacre in 1968, further eroded public trust and reinforced the downward spiral.

² Ibid, 143-147.

³ Ibid., 199.

⁴ Donald E. Vandergriff, *The Path to Victory: America's Army and the Revolution in Human Affairs* (Presidio Press, 2002).

⁵ David W. Holden, “Managing Men and Machines: U.S. Military Officers and the Intellectual Origins of Scientific Management in the Early Twentieth Century,” 138.

⁶ For an overview of the changes to american military and society through the Vietnam War, see the TV documentary “The Vietnam War: A Film by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick,” 2017.

After Vietnam, many officers set out to rebuild a broken, dispirited Army. One initiative was to improve training under the direction of newly established Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC). Concurrently, the Army Chief of Staff in 1973, General Abrams, set out to rebuild the Army as an all-volunteer force, and recognized that any reforms had to be accompanied with instilling discipline and values.⁷

In TRADOC, General William E. DePuy and Major General John H. Cushman had different approaches to reforming military education and training. General DePuy, the commander of TRADOC, wanted to train officers for combat with straightforward tactical rules. He believed that a military functioned best when soldiers were told what to do in simple terms. DePuy argued that doctrine should, therefore, be written succinctly emphasizing key points. On the other hand, Major General Cushman, who was assigned by DePuy to actually write the doctrine, believed that an organization would reach its fullest potential when its members were able to think freely and collaborate. To Cushman, doctrine should focus less on prescribed tactical rules and instead foster deeper understanding of war itself. Cushman's goal was not only to train officers, but also to educate and enrich them intellectually so that they would be prepared for any assignment.⁸

DePuy's approach eventually prevailed and set trajectory of military training and education. TRADOC adopted training methods that prescribed how to destroy the enemy in combat operations. Technical and tactical proficiency was paramount. Eventually, this morphed into units demonstrating proficiency by completing step-by-step processes measured against evaluation checklists. Logically, anyone could step into a duty position, follow the checklists,

⁷ John W. Brinsfield, "Army Values and Ethics: A Search for Consistency and Relevance," *Parameters* (Autumn 1998), 69-84.

⁸ Paul H. Herbert, "Deciding What Has to Be Done: General William E. DePuy and the 1976 Edition of FM 100-5, Operations," *Leavenworth Papers*, no. 16 (1988): 52-59.

and demonstrate a measurable level of proficiency. Military professional education curricula was also standardized to meet specific terminal learning objectives measured against grading rubrics. Education was focused on teaching prescriptive planning and doctrinal frameworks to provide a common language across the entire military. Only a few bastions, such as the Army War College, kept a curriculum to build intellectual capacity beyond tactical operations.

The Army was also actively engaged in reestablishing professionalism and public trust. The inquiry into the 1968 My Lai massacre sparked several internal reviews of the Army's ethical climate. One study noted a prevalence of "unhealthy pressures to strive for success" while others questioned whether the traditional values of *Duty, Honor, Country* were sufficient guides for soldiers' ethical behavior.⁹ This sparked an explosion of ethics training over the next two decades. By 1989, a survey found that the military was more trusted than most other public institutions, including the U.S. Supreme Court.¹⁰

Nonetheless, a series of sexual assaults in the 1990s attracted extensive public scrutiny of the military's culture. In one case, at Aberdeen Proving Grounds in 1996, several soldiers and a drill sergeant were convicted of sexual crimes against female recruits, including rape. Under the threat of congressional litigation, the Army set out to self-police its behavior by launching several new programs.¹¹ The Army's Character Development XXI initiative aimed to instill values and build character as part of NCO and officer training. In a related effort, the Center for Army Leadership revised FM 22-100, *Army Leadership*. It included a new set of Army Values, LDRSHP (loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, and personal courage), which are still used today.

⁹ Brinsfield, "Army Values and Ethics: A Search for Consistency and Relevance," 69-84.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

These factors – the tradition of a scientific mindset, the adoption of operationally focused training and education, and the expectation of adhering to an ethical standard – have shaped the Army’s professional education system. Although this has created an Army unmatched tactically in conventional war, it has arguably been unfit in dealing with new, ambiguous situations as the past two decades in Iraq and Afghanistan bear testament. One could ask if traditional training methods are enough to win in a complex world, given the fact that soldiers face non-traditional threats and are expected to critically assess orders—ethically and conceptually.

Building Agile Leaders

Integrating the study of virtue ethics into military curricula is one way to prepare officers for the complexities of today’s battlefield. Virtue ethics instill character traits as guiding principles for decision-making in diverse situations. Deliberate study of great leaders provides inspirational role models as guides to personal actions. This in turn influences the formation of one’s own character through the habituation of action. In short, virtue ethics aim to build a human.

Other ethical frameworks are not as adaptable to the ambiguous environments in which soldiers are expected to operate. Consequentialist ethics, such as utilitarianism, base decisions on a cost benefit calculus, which is unguided by any principle other than pursuing actions that bring the greatest benefit to the greatest number. Deontology, or rule-based ethics, claims immutable, universal rules that cannot be broken, even in ethical gray areas. Strict observance to rules favors obedience over critical thinking. On the other hand, virtue ethics emphasize a consistent, deliberate pursuit of self-improvement toward excellent character. Reflecting about

one's self and about great leader's actions can inform decision making, regardless of the situation.

The Army uses all three ethical frameworks in some varying proportion. Obedience to regulations, policies, and orders is grounded in rule-based deontological ethics. Operational decisions rely heavily on consequentialist risk-payoff calculations, in which soldiers' lives must be measured against achieving some outcome. Finally, the spirit that binds the Army together is founded on values, creeds, and oaths—the virtuous template through which soldiers demonstrate character by living the Army Values.

In this respect, virtue ethics can be a transformational education to inspire soldiers to be better. Biographies, history, philosophy, literature, and movies are means to deepen understanding and instill virtue. George Washington's actions at Newburgh are an enduring lesson about duty, honor, and sets a historical precedent for American civil-military relations. *The Caine Mutiny*, a 1954 film, explores the reaction of sailors toward an incompetent captain and a peer who actively foments disobedience, a situation to which most soldiers can relate. Literature and classical texts also can provide fountains of inspiration. Shakespeare memorialized the battle of Agincourt through Henry V's "Band of Brothers" speech, not by describing the devastating effects of the English longbow.

Studying great leaders provides examples of paradigmatic leadership styles and how character impacts an organization. For example, Joseph Addison's stage play, *Cato: A Tragedy*, explores the aura of Cato and Julius Caesar's personalities and their effect on others. Cato is guided by modesty, duty, and service as compared to Caesar's crass ambition and appeal to self-interest. Today, management theory would frame Addison's story as a case study of transformational and transactional leadership styles. Addison, however, portrays these concepts

in a compelling, palpable story that challenges us all to contemplate our own reactions if found in a similar situation. In short, stories illustrate human behavior in a relatable, impactful way that studying theory does not.

Addison's play also highlights an important critique of virtue ethics—following virtuous principles does not necessarily lead to success. Although Cato is staunch beacon of civic duty, he was still defeated by Caesar at the battle of Pharsalus. Unable to raise a new army, Cato chooses suicide over surrender. Obviously, being a selfless, inspirational leader did not lead to success. The question for virtue ethicists, however, is not how to be successful. Virtue ethics help understand oneself while striving to adhere to a shared vision of the good instead of a pursuing selfish ambitions.

Organizational virtues are established when a group of people share a common vision and conception of what constitutes the common good.¹² The seven Army Values, along with ethical codes, oaths, and creeds establish a common vision for military service. Inspiration cannot simply come from reciting and memorizing the Army Values, but requires critical examination of their origins. Deontological ethics, on the other hand, follow principles rigidly which makes it unadaptable in ambiguity. In this case, an organization risks functioning like a hammer that is engineered only to hit nails. Equally, consequentialist ethics can create an organizational culture that ignores principles for the primacy of results, and risks producing a toxic work environment that marginalizes people or departs from ethical practices.

Intellectual study, as opposed to blind acceptance of values, is necessary to maintain a healthy appreciation of the military's purpose. This avoids what Martin Van Creveld calls the soulless machine, in which military cultural values are taken to the extreme.¹³ Take for example

¹² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W.D Ross (Batoche Books, 1999), 75-81.

¹³ Martin Van Creveld, *The Culture of War* (Presidio Press/Ballantine Books, New York, 2008), chapter 18.

the Prussian Army at Austerlitz in 1805. Unmatched in discipline and fighting in formation, the Prussian army was the model for its time. Yet, the entire army and culture collapsed when overwhelmed by the agility and mass of Napoleon's armies. Van Creveld argues that the Prussian values of obedience and discipline became ends unto themselves. Officers became preoccupied with regulatory process and cleaning weapons for ceremonial drill so much that it forgot the purpose of disciplined formations in the first place.¹⁴ Two hundred years later, General Cushman worried that DePuy's training methods would lead to a modern-day soulless machine, breeding a generation "who all know how to clean a rifle but who don't know 'why' we have an Army."¹⁵

Implications for Military Education

By 2006, an intensifying insurgency in Iraq, scandals at Abu Ghraib prison, and a rise in sexual assaults was reminiscent of the Army's lapses in Vietnam and in the 1990s. Just as in the past, the Army launched new initiatives and programs to address contemporary challenges. The Center of Army Profession and Ethics was established to fortify an ethical climate across the Army. The expectation, as Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis stated in a 2018 memorandum addressed to the entire military, is that all leaders need to be ethical sentinels.¹⁶ Furthermore, the Human Dimension Concept published in 2009 strives to optimize soldier performance across cognitive, physical, and social attributes by including human development, moral-ethical

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Matt Schudel, "John H. Cushman, Army general who brought new flexibility to military planning, dies at 96," *Washington Post*, November 11, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/obituaries/john-h-cushman-army-general-who-brought-new-flexibility-to-military-planning-dies-at-96/2017/11/11/3d4f17fc-c713-11e7-aae0-cb18a8c29c65_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.c742ac9cad56

¹⁶ Jim Mattis, "Ethical Sentinels" (official memorandum: Department of Defense, September 13, 2018).

expertise, and understanding political cultures as part of military training.¹⁷ General Robert Brown acknowledged the educational challenge when he contrasted the days needed to train soldiers in rote repetition to stand in a phalanx as compared to the years it will take to build “an ethical soldier who understands all the things that are required in the complex world.”¹⁸

The challenge for the Army is that if professional education becomes too philosophical, it is critiqued for not teaching the skillsets soldiers need to succeed in their next assignments. If education becomes too skills focused, it risks becoming too prescriptive without the intellectual depth necessary for agile thinking in volatile, uncertain environments.¹⁹ To develop adaptive soldiers, course work requires intellectual deliberation. This clashes with the dominate Army methodology of teaching prescriptive doctrinal frameworks and certifying technical expertise.

If the Human Dimension Concept is to be complemented by education in virtue ethics, what would it look like? For one, instructors and curricula unaffiliated with the military would be unbridled from parochial and bureaucratic pressures to deliver measurable results with an instant return on investment. A meaningful education in virtue ethics is not prescriptive, nor necessarily applicable to immediate problems faced by any organization. This is tough to implement when governed by short-term apportioned funding. Furthermore, it is difficult to measure the very thing that virtue ethics tries to instill – virtuous character.

Second, the curriculum should avoid the familiar Army method of providing a “how to” guide accompanied by grading rubrics. A powerful way to engender agile thinking is to stimulate intellectual thought without a predetermined outcome. Biographies, history, philosophy, and literature uncovers insights into human nature and provides a better blueprint for

¹⁷ *An Army White Paper: The Profession of Arms* (U.S. Army TRADOC, December 8, 2010), 7.

<http://data.cape.army.mil/web/repository/white-papers/profession-of-arms-white-paper.pdf>.

¹⁸ “Discussion: Human Dimension,” YouTube video, 1:59:53, posted [Oct 2014].

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pAnnDBwrV6c>.

¹⁹ Brinsfield, “Army Values and Ethics: A Search for Consistency and Relevance,” 69-84.

action than memorizing decision making frameworks. In essence, learning to follow a framework is emphatically different than learning a concept, so that it can be molded to fit the situation at hand.

Finally, the target audience should be NCOs and mid-level officers. Entry level military training is meant to inculcate the Army Values and the warrior spirit through crucibles and hardships. A rugged, harsh environment is necessary to prepare soldiers for the physical and mental demands of war. It is not a good venue for the intellectual pursuit of virtue. There is also necessary technical training to learn the tools of modern war during the first years of service. Intellectual study and deliberation, however, is better suited for soldiers and officers already with some experience in their trade.

In conclusion, an education in virtue ethics complements knowledge gained from experience and can help form character through the deliberate study of great leaders. Great leaders, what soldiers aspire to, will define an organizational culture. Intellectual deliberation helps teach how to think about any situation and use foundational character principles as guidelines for decisions. This is in contrast to simply learning prescriptive rules or frameworks to follow. Implementation of this education should be an opportunity for leaders, who after some time living the military life, to ponder the meanings of why and how we serve.

The views presented in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of DoD or its components.