

US Military Ethos – A Primer

As promised, since several expressed that they “couldn’t wait,” herein is my response to Dr. Rick’s suggestion that Secretary Hegseth “perfectly” represents the “ethos” of the US military establishment. We’ll take a look at his evidential offerings. I am delighted at his willingness and commitment to continue his adult education.

Let’s first define “ethos.” Let’s go with Webster’s definition: “the distinguishing character, sentiment, moral nature, or guiding beliefs of a person, group, or institution.” Let’s see if Rick’s examples meet that test when applied to the US armed forces.

We must first start with a foundational principle established by law that all professional military members understand - civilian control of the military. The Commander-in-Chief, often through his Secretary of Defense, sets defense policies, directs deployments, and authorizes wars and military operations. The role of senior military officers is to offer advice, analysis, and recommendations regarding these issues. Once offered and a decision is made, military leaders are duty-bound to execute those decisions to the best of their abilities. One important caveat: we must obey only LAWFUL orders. In the US military, the Nuremberg defense (“I was only following orders”) doesn’t work, as we shall see.

Rick starts with the Taguba Report. In essence, this is a description of the depredations inflicted on prisoners at Abu Ghraib, generally at the hands of US military members. A cursory study of Abu Ghraib reveals that the systematic torture and abuses that occurred in that prison were authorized by Bush, Rumsfeld, Cheney, et al. Of course, these civilian leaders were never held accountable. Their military purveyors were though:

“In response to the events at Abu Ghraib, the United States Department of Defense removed 17 soldiers and officers from duty. Eleven soldiers were charged with [dereliction of duty](#), maltreatment, [aggravated assault](#) and [battery](#). Between May 2004 and April 2006, these soldiers were [court-martialed](#), convicted, sentenced to [military prison](#), and [dishonorably discharged](#) from service. Two soldiers, found to have perpetrated many of the worst offenses at the prison, Specialist [Charles Graner](#) and PFC [Lynndie England](#), were subject to more severe charges and received harsher sentences. Graner was convicted of assault, [battery](#), conspiracy, maltreatment of detainees, committing indecent acts and dereliction of duty; he was sentenced to 10 years imprisonment and loss of rank, pay, and benefits. England was convicted of [conspiracy](#), maltreating detainees, and committing an indecent act and sentenced to three years in prison. [Brigadier General Janis Karpinski](#), the commanding officer of all detention facilities in Iraq, was reprimanded and demoted to the rank of [colonel](#). Several more military personnel accused of perpetrating or authorizing the measures, including many of higher rank, were not prosecuted. In 2004, President [George W. Bush](#) and Defense Secretary [Donald Rumsfeld](#) apologized for the Abu Ghraib abuses.”

These US servicemen and women were imprisoned and otherwise punished because they failed to uphold the true ethos of the US military - that we will obey the lawful orders of our civilian masters. Regardless of orders, each soldier, sailor, airmen, and Marine is still guided by the morality of right and wrong. This is our ethos. Are bad actors out there? Of course. But their bad actions are taken *despite* our ethos, not *because* of it.

Rick goes on to cite US troop deployments to Israel as further evidence of some sort of pernicious ethos in the military. The President orders troop deployments around the world all the time. Of course, this is his purview given civilian control of the military in furtherance of national security policies and objectives. Should we expect US commanders to refuse a deployment if they disagree with where the President wants to send them? "Private Rick, grab your gear. We're deploying to Israel." "No thanks, Sarge. I'm gonna sit this one out. Thanks for the opportunity, though."

Beyond my previous post about how US Administrations formulate and conduct Security Assistance programs, I don't have much to add to the curious inclusion of the Gaza genocide conspiracy theory as part of some sort of murderous ethos in the US military. Maybe Rick has reports of SEAL teams shooting up refugee camps. The decision to send bombs and bullets to our allies is completely controlled by the Administration, not the military. I have personally contributed to analysis for and against providing various weapon systems to certain allies as part of my duties at CENTCOM (from one of my performance reports: "... He is easily my most strategic thinker and one of the Command's top intellects."). The President takes the advice and recommendations of his military commanders and then issues his decision. We salute and then implement that decision. Not too complicated or mysterious. Rick's conspiracy problem here is with Biden, not some evil US military ethos.

Drone wars. Yes, I would guess that the US military continues to conduct drone strike operations in theaters of conflict. The service members who remotely fly these things are given targets based on intelligence inputs. Hopefully, they're killing bad guys. I'm pretty sure that the intel guys and gals don't get it right all the time. But the ethos of the drone drivers is not to willy-nilly blow people up - I would think that they have no reason to question the authenticity of an enemy target. I would also think that if they did, they would refuse to engage in keeping with today's true military ethos. I know some drone operators are troubled by their involvement - see for example "National Bird," a 2016 documentary available through Prime Video. I'm glad they question the morality of what they do - that internal examination is in keeping with US military culture.

Okay, Milley and Esper at Lafayette Square. Anybody who thinks those two people were supporting Trump's anti-democracy agenda by appearing with him that day needs to switch the channel off Fox "News":

"Both Milley and Defense Secretary Mark Esper, who also accompanied Trump in his walk across the cleared Lafayette Square, have said they were not aware

where Trump was going when they fell in step behind him, and that they thought they were leaving the White House to thank National Guard troops stationed nearby. Aides have also said Milley was dressed in fatigues because he was headed to an FBI operations center.”

Just like he has done to so many Trumpsters, those two got duped that day. Milley, in particular, has been outspoken in his denunciation of Trump. Google search him. In fact, if anyone wants to get insight into the true ethos of the US military, read some of his writings and speeches. Like this [one](#). And this one:

“The freedoms guaranteed to us in the Constitution allow people to demand change just as the peaceful protesters are doing all across the country. That is why we serve in the military. On day one, you and I, we all, we all swore an oath to support and defend the Constitution. And its essential American principle that all men and women are born free and equal. That is the foundation of our military ethos, who we are as service members and as an institution. All of us in uniform are willing to die for that idea, the idea that is America. And so we must also be willing to live for that idea, for freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom to peacefully assemble. And freedom to vote and freedom to believe as you wish in your religion.”

Thanks to Rick for bringing General Milley’s name into this conversation. I hold him up as an exemplar of the ethos of the modern US military.

And finally, the Iraq Wars. Hundreds of thousands dead. I’m not sure if Rick is conflating the “why” with the “how” in the context of military ethos. The military went to war (along with a coalition of 42 other countries) because the Commander-in-Chief ordered them to do so. There was no doubt at the time that it was a lawful order. I’m pretty sure the armed services would not have deployed and started a war on their own. Hundreds of thousands died because a Bush ordered each war. Our ethos is that we obey the lawful orders of our civilian masters. That’s the “why” they died.

As to the “how,” when it comes to combat, the US military is a blunt instrument. It is a hammer taken to the face of an iPhone. At the war colleges, we nodded in solemn agreement about the never-again folly of the Vietnamese model of “limited war” - the Clausewitz-ian approach is to be favored. Presidents are so advised - think hard before you deploy us. The goal is to seek out the enemy and destroy him. Quickly. Efficiently. In ways that minimize friendly casualties. Preferably on his territory, not ours. While still adhering to international laws, norms, and standards that seek to guide the conduct of war.

In warfare, innocent people will die. That is the nature of warfare throughout history. The ethos of the US military is to make every effort to minimize collateral damage. You see this in the use of precision weapons even though they are much more costly. Compare the air wars of previous conflicts: carpet bombing of Dresden and Tokyo, even Hanoi to a lesser degree. The targets in these air campaigns were

civilians, euphemistically described as the “will” of the enemy. This has changed. Intentional targeting of civilians is illegal and an anathema to the ethos of today’s military. (Those poor lieutenants sitting in missile silos at Malmstrom ready to push their city-killing nuke buttons are another discussion altogether...)

Nevertheless, US combatants struggle with the lethality and superiority of their weapon systems, even when trained solely on the enemy. First-hand accounts from the Battle of 73 Easting and the “Highway of Death” reflect the moral dilemma US service men and women face in conducting modern war. I’m glad this gives them pause - it speaks to the culture of our warriors.

Having immersed ourselves in all the mean things the US military is supposedly doing, I suggest you do a Google search on “US military humanitarian assistance.” Spend some time there. You’ll see some macro-level programs each branch is involved with. What you won’t see are all the daily activities conducted by local units helping their communities in hundreds of ways. Each unit I was assigned to during my 22 years of service had outreach programs to local organizations intended to support the community in general. We loved that shit. We were greatly appreciated in return. In no small part, this too, was an integral part of our ethos.

The crayons used to paint the “ethos” picture above invoked just the red-green-blue primary colors. The profession of arms is much more complicated than that. Students of this piece can sign up with me for more advanced seminars on Just War Theory, Nuclear Deterrence Theory, Military Doctrine, Approaches to Arms Control, and the Limits of War, among others. All of these topics inform and contribute to the modern US military ethos.

I would be remiss if I failed to mention the profound (and controversial) impact that the principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion have had on the US military ethos. Do a Google search on diversity and General Milley, and his replacement, General C.Q. Brown. As Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, these two men championed DEI tenets and mandated that programs be established throughout the services to weave these principles into unit training. Closer to home is USAFA Superintendent Lieutenant General Jay Silveria’s [“Get Out”](#) address given to the cadet wing during a noon meal formation in Mitchell Hall. Please click that link and check it out. This is our ethos.

Light years from a “perfect” example, Secretary Hegseth, with his moral failures, gutter-level standards, misogyny, and Christian hypocrisy, is the *antithesis* of the US military ethos. The danger that Hegseth represents is not that he *reflects* the US military ethos; it’s that *he may seek to change that ethos to mirror his*. Trump wants to fire the DEI Generals – Hegseth is his boy. My guess is that Hegseth is destined to serve as the poster child for how you DON’T conduct yourself as a professional in the United States military.

If you read this far, apologies for the long winded, unnecessary response to a flippant, off handed, ill-conceived, remark. Nevertheless, hope I gave you something to think about. And thanks for all the fish.