

# “Ethical Implications of Military Leadership”

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[Annex C. Outline for Lecture at  
MCA Seminars in USAREUR  
14.-18. February 1977]

Second Project: “Ethics and Values Seminars”

## ABSTRACT

*In a democratic society, the military is (1) not very democratic but, (2) ought to be as democratic as morally possible. Ethically, democracies which account for “rights” and “responsibilities” implied in the law of retribution (each ought to get what each deserves), function as consequence takers are the decision makers. Even the military, while functioning differently, as decision-making is sacrificed for the good of defending the larger society, such sacrificial dignity, hardly making the military “immoral,” now evidences a growing as-much-as-morally-possible inclination to democratizing, too. (Stephen C. Krueger)*

### I. Theme: Democratic Morality and the Military

Question: How democratic ought a military establishment within a democratic society be?

Answer: a) Not very democratic,

But b) as democratic as morally possible.

### II. Democracy defined as a moral reality

- A) Granted, it may also be defined amorally—e.g., as socio-psychological procedure for getting people “involved,” giving them a sense of “ownership,” etc.
- B) Even the approach of the Declaration of Independence, with its emphasis upon universal human “rights,” while that is a highly ethical principle, is not yet ethical enough. For it still says little about the converse side of “rights,” namely, responsibility.
- C) Furthermore, to define democracy only in terms of “rights” also says little about that ethical reality, the “law of retribution,” as a two-way process: it describes penalty as well as reward, negative consequences as well as positive ones.
- D) For me, what makes democracy superior as an ethical reality? Answer: It is still the best system for giving people the government they deserve.
- E) An ethical formula for democracy: Whoever takes the responsibility of making a decision ought also take the consequences of this decision: whoever has to take the consequences of a decision ought also share in making that decision.
- F) This joining of decision-making with responsibility-taking and with consequence-taking is often attributed, historically, to the Enlightenment. But really it has precedence already in medieval church-history—cf. the Fourth Lateran Council: “What teaches all, all must approve” –and indeed in the Hebrew-Christian Scriptures.

- G) But in view of the ethical descriptions of democracy in D), E), and F), above, let us ask the theme question again as a sort of refrain: Is that sort of democracy (where what touches all must be approved by all) possible in a military establishment, even in a military establishment within a democratic society? Obviously not, or not very much. But then, if democracy is morally superior, is a military form of governance and leadership immoral?

III. Together with this ethical understanding of democracy goes a corresponding understanding of democratic leadership: In a democracy the good leader, the morally good leader, is one who develops in his constituents not so much follower-ship as leadership

- A) What the Bill of Rights implies is that the most dangerous enemies of the Republic are those leaders who are convinced it is they who 'know what is best' for the rest of us.—Quoted (not verbatim) from Senator Sam Ervin, chairman of the Special Senate Investigation Committee on Watergate
- B) Henry Schlesinger the Elder: True, ordinary people may not always know what is best for them: but in the long run they at least know what is best for them better than anyone else does.
- C) My own suggestion: What is even more important is not whether the people, rather than their leadership, know what is best for them, but whether they have the kind of leadership which encourages, enables, cajoles them, the people, to share responsibility—to share responsibility for making those decisions which they, the people, most certainly do have to suffer in the form of consequence-taking?
- D) To imagine that democracy should minimize leadership is morally absurd, but what democracy does require is a special kind of leadership. 'Not just the sort of leader who provides caringly for his people's (or his troops') wants, nor even just the sort of leader who respects his people (or his troops) as persons, for both of these qualities might well be found in a monarchy. But rather the sort of leader who gets his people, often against their own moral lethargy, to assume an ever larger share of responsibility for those decisions whose consequences they have to take.
- E) Along with this democratic understanding of leadership goes, at least as a by-product, the ideal of anonymous leadership. Cf. the quotation (allegedly from LaoTze) according to which the good leader is one who leads so effectively that, when all is done, it is the people who can say, See what we have done. This accords with the Christian ideal of leadership as servanthood.
- F) But now, again, the refrain: With this democratic obligation of leadership before us, where the leader (often aggressively) has to get his constituents to help make those decisions whose consequences they take, can a military establishment—even within a democratic society—afford such a view of leadership? If not, is the military's alternative sort of leadership, by comparison, immoral?

IV. The answer here being suggested to that question is twofold. Recall the question, How democratic ought a military establishment within a democratic society be? The twofold answer: a) not very democratic but b) as democratic as morally possible.

- A) Consider, first, the negative pole of the answer: not very democratic. Then ask, Why ought a military establishment not be very democratic? Why, ethically speaking?

i) There are a good many bad answers to that question. One bad answer is to evade or to minimize the difference between the un-democratic governance of the military, on the one hand, and the governance of the democratic society around it, on the other hand. E.g., such minimizing as this: “The US Army is no more un-democratic than General Motors has to be.” Nonsense: GM, no matter how hierarchical it has to be, does not and may not exercise the functions of civil and criminal law, or execute these, over against its employees. —Another bad answer is to over-react in the opposite direction and to argue, as one woman from the military recently did, “The military form of government is the best social system in the world”—also for civilian society. —Another bad answer is the one quoted recently from one of our commanders in Europe, when approached with the suggestion that he sponsor a seminar on military ethics: “War is just damned immoral, so why try to justify it or any part of it on ethical grounds?”

ii) A good answer, I believe, is one which admits that persons who enter a military vocation do indeed forego certain moral responsibilities as well as moral rights which their civilian counterparts continue to enjoy, but which further argues that this foregoing ought to be opted for, ethically and vocationally, as a sacrifice. They make this moral sacrifice, fully aware of the risks that entails for them also ethically, but do so for the sake of a higher moral good: to protect those very “values” in their society which they themselves, at least temporarily, have to suspend in their own work and lives. —Recall the NCO from 10<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group (with two tours behind him in S.E. Asia, one with wounds) who said about civilian demonstrators in the USA’s burning cities of the ‘60s: “I assume that’s why guys like me do what we do, right or wrong—to defend their right to demonstrate, right or wrong.”—Only a few weeks ago former Sec’y of the Army Hoffmann testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee that soldiers are not overpaid in view of the “sacrifices” they have to make. I agree, but one of the most demanding sacrifices soldiers make is their (relative) sacrifice of democratic ethics, for the sake of those very ethics. Why not face up to that sacrifice of theirs and dignify it with the ethical justification it deserves? That might just help to reinstate “the profession of arms” as a “service,” a very sacrificial service.

B) Now consider the positive pole of our two fold answer: “...But as democratic as morally possible.” Perhaps the best way to argue this side of the answer is simply to describe recent experience, my own personal experiences in the military as well as the larger observations which apply to society generally.

i) That there has been a progressive democratization of military leadership, and not only during peacetime, can be documented by a year-by-year comparison of the Officer’s Manuals of the US Army. Cite examples. Note also the Army’s current FM 22-100 on “Military

Leadership,” (quotations), then add to that the fact that the manual’s chapter on “Professionalism and Ethics” has already been rewritten (so I have been informed by the author) in the direction of still further “Humanization.”

ii) No doubt a good deal of this sort of democratization is due not so much to ethical interests as to general secular interests in “participatory” involvement, which often can quickly become manipulative: e.g., a) the increasing demands for independent decision-making which devolve upon the soldier because of the new sophistication of highly technologized, high-velocity warfare (i.e., “Efficiency”); or b) the egalitarian-populist movements in our society at large.

iii) But I think I’ve experienced this move to democratize-as-much-as possible, within the Army (for me, especially within the chaplains’ sections), in a way that suggests a connection with a far more ethical interest, an interest that helps people to be morally responsible. Examples.

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