

Building Moral Resources in Leaders for an Era of Persistent Conflict and Beyond

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In the multidimensional, highly complex, and morally ambiguous realm of combat, and counter insurgency operations (COIN) in particular; soldiers and leaders must be tactically and technically proficient, knowledgeable of leadership skills, and able to use these abilities. More importantly however, they must be imbued with strong character to use these abilities to positively and ethically influence their followers and organizations and execute the ethical conduct of war. After their first reenlistment—and often before—every soldier becomes a leader, and it is leaders who are responsible for the moral development of followers as well as the moral culture and climate in their unit. Simply, moral leaders decide and do what is ‘right’, reinforce and role model ‘right’ for others, and develop followers to have similar capability for moral thought and action. We will later discuss, however, that ‘right’ is often an abstract and complex phenomenon.

Based on the nature and strategic importance of our current conflicts, it can be argued that there is a need to accelerate the moral development of leaders in our Army. Historically, our Nation has suffered strategic level consequences when character based leadership was found lacking in leaders and units. My Lai, Abu Ghraib, and Mahmudiya stand out as three of the most obvious examples. However, even the Pat Tillman case serves as an example that leaders at all levels are not immune from the absolute necessity to exhibit character based leadership. We note, however, that the vast majority of soldiers and leaders do the right thing, time and again, and are able to do so under the most challenging of situations. Thus we take a positive perspective and ask not how can we fix the Army, as it is not broken, but how can we harness Army best practices, as well as draw from best practices from academia and other DoD, public and private organizations; and target those practices to accelerate the moral development of the force.

While moral development is central to leadership, as are leaders to the moral development of their units—as noted by Snider and colleagues in an accompanying conference paper—the Army lacks an explicit model or framework to guide such development. Further, from an institutional perspective, what moral and ethical development that occurs has largely been thought of as the domain of lawyers, chaplains, and policy implementation offices (e.g., sexual harassment or equal opportunity). Such efforts often manifest in required training, briefings, policy letters, or other codifications which serve to train or inform, but not to adequately *educate and develop* leaders. While the legal and chaplaincy professions surely play a large role in the developmental process, we argue that moral and ethical development is the purview of leaders and is a responsibility that cannot be delegated or abdicated. Lacking a purposive framework to

inform and guide leaders in this duty, however, most Army moral development occurs through “on the job training”, tacit learning, or through observing exemplar role models. While these processes aid in development, research shows that they do not accelerate development as well as more deliberate and intentional processes. We as an Army intensely train for areas of competence. *Thus, should we not equally focus on domains of character?*

We reinforce that moral development is a life-long journey; thus, entry into the Army should only be looked at as a waypoint and not as a start point or end state. In fact, a study conducted by West Point researchers found that officers in the rank of major, averaging in excess of ten years of service, were still developing morally, and that on average had not yet achieved the higher levels of moral development attainable. We thus must take a holistic view of the force and target development throughout leaders’ Army careers. Such development is critical because when determining a leader’s credibility, followers assess both their character and their competence.

Leader competence entails technical and tactical knowledge, intelligence, decision-making skills, and interpersonal social skills. A leader’s character, conversely, is the combination of values and attributes that define who the leader is as a person. Thus, leaders’ character will influence what their core values are, how they establish a command climate, how they interpret situations, think about their leadership duties and style, what they demand and inspire in followers, the decisions they make, and most importantly, how they behave as leaders. Subordinates will willingly follow the directives of leaders they trust and will put forth extra effort and assume a greater degree of risk to accomplish the mission. On the other hand, subordinates who do not trust their leaders may question orders and perhaps take measures to minimize risks to their personal safety against orders. The bottom line is that in order to lead effectively, especially in extreme situations such as combat, leaders must earn their subordinates’ trust. The latitude that allows the leader to be directive in combat and still gain the commitment of their followers must be built over time and prior to ‘game day,’ through the exercise of consistent and trust-evoking moral leadership. And importantly, in this era of persistent conflict, the time between ‘game day’ and a young private or lieutenant’s ‘start day’, is often very short—emphasizing needed acceleration of moral development processes.

In this paper we make a call to arms for leaders across the Army to start an intense and frank dialog to answer critical questions to guide the force through the current and future conflicts. We are at a critical time in our Army’s history and one that may have transformational effects on the future of the force. We encourage the Army to create and get involved in a vibrant ‘conversation space’ to advance how we might accelerate the education and development of character based leaders. In this paper we present select concepts that might begin to stimulate as well as provide frameworks for parts of the ensuing dialog.

TOWARD ADVANCING AN ARMY FRAMEWORK FOR MORAL-ETHICAL DEVELOPMENT

We start with a multilevel approach to building moral resources for the Army and display this theoretical, yet practical, framework in Figure 1. As shown in the outside circle, as individuals join the force they are socialized through various formal and informal processes with the aim of inculcating and internalizing the beliefs of the profession. These individuals are then embedded in a unit culture and climate established by the unit's leaders. This culture and climate then influences their moral thoughts and behaviors, which is in turn, embedded in a larger strategic level Army culture and climate, which is continually faced by various external pressures (e.g., technology, societal changes, political). As shown by the inner circle, individual members are then held responsible to continually build and reinforce that culture. Leaders at all levels should intentionally focus on developing and nurturing this climate and culture; and this enormous responsibility serves as the focus of this paper.

Through this dynamic process, changes occur in the Army culture and associated beliefs over time. The accompanying conference paper, by Colonel Matthew Moten, indeed discusses the evolutions of the Army's ethic over time. An organization's culture and command climate is critical as it consists of a shared collection of implicit and explicit values and assumptions regarding the appropriate way members should perceive, think, feel, and behave in relation to dealing with each other and their environment to accomplish unit missions and reach unit goals. Thus, the organization's culture has a significant influence on the values, attitudes, beliefs, and behavior of its members.

Multi-Level Approach to PME

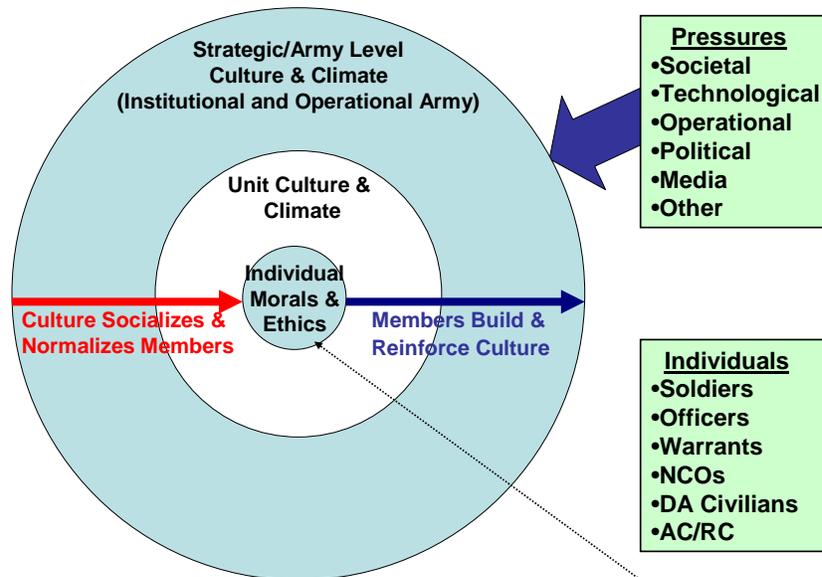


Figure 1.

As an Army we currently lack, yet greatly need, a framework to better understand and improve this multilevel process and its effects on the development of individuals and units. Such a framework should account for actions and responsibilities for both the institutional Army (e.g., schoolhouses, training centers), as well as the operational Army. We hold that the advancement of a framework for developing a moral climate and culture in military units requires, 1) highly-developed moral soldiers and leaders at the individual level, that 2) intentionally and thoughtfully interact to further promote moral thoughts and behaviors in their groups and social networks, and that 3) through these positive, moral social interactions a culture and climate will emerge that further strengthens and reinforces the “moral fiber” of the unit, and ultimately the Army.

Our view is that true moral culture and climates cannot be mandated (or taught by stacks of power-point slides) but emerge and are sustained through processes of social interaction and education. Progress along these lines might be made if the Army’s culture adapted such that moral development was conducted as part of the “hidden-curriculum” in everything we do. Further, character based leadership education and development can be more purposively integrated into the fabric of our school houses, training centers, and unit installations. Through such holistic and seamless approaches, we as an Army might never again spend an hour looking at power-point slides for “ethics training”. Leaders may intentionally impact this process by 1) morally developing soldiers and subordinate leaders through education, role modeling and other methods, as well as integrate those *character development* experiences *seamlessly* with *competency training*, 2) setting the conditions for high quality social exchanges between these individuals as well as the psychological safety (e.g., non-attribution) for all unit members to discuss and challenge moral decisions; and at the organizational level, and, 3) establishing systems, rules, and norms that promote, reward, and sustain moral engagement and behavior.

ETHICAL DEVELOPMENT IS A MULTIDIMENSIONAL PROBLEM

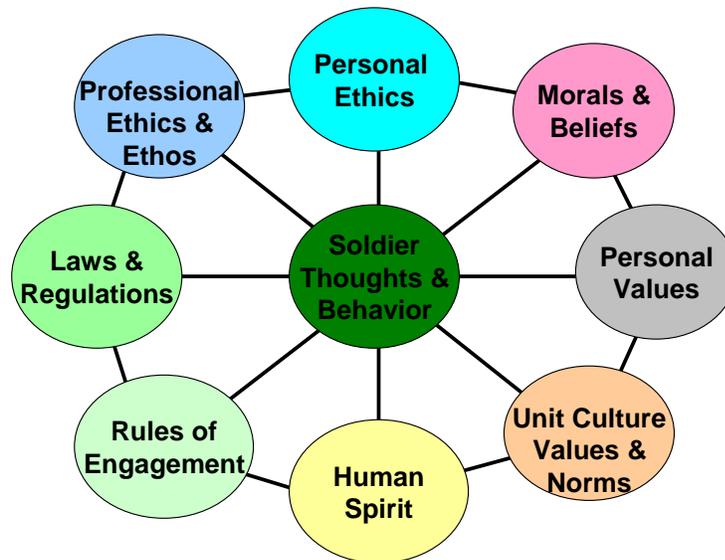
As we begin to advance a multilevel framework for building ethical soldiers, leaders, units and organizations, we must also address the complexity of the developmental process. As an Army, we often speak of the “Professional Military Ethic,” or PME. Strictly defined, the PME includes those things that as a profession we believe in and hold dear to our culture and institutional identity. The PME is the focus of the accompanying conference paper by Dr. Don Snider, Major Paul Oh, and Major Kevin Toner. Snider et al, suggest that the values and norms of the profession can be thought of as distinct from the values and norms of the individual professional. We agree and hold that this is because:

1. There is an extensive process of internalizing the PME that may take a matter of years depending upon how effectively that process is accelerated for any individual soldier or leader. Thus at any point in time the individual values, beliefs, ethics and other attributes of any individual will likely not perfectly match that of the profession;

2. Individuals come to the profession with distinct morals, values, beliefs and aspects of the human spirit that they will always hold onto to reinforce those of (or perhaps despite those of) the profession, and;
3. The PME can never envision nor address the full breadth of complex moral dilemmas that individuals will face nor the varying extenuating factors that will be present during any dilemma.

Here we expand upon the thoughts of Snider et al., and encourage an even more refined discussion of those factors, including yet extending beyond the PME, that influence the moral thoughts and behaviors of individuals. Figure 2 displays examples of the dynamic influences that may bear on a soldier or leader at any one time and influence their thoughts and behaviors. These factors range from strict codifications such as laws and regulations, through the more adaptable yet still codified rules of engagement (ROE), the ethics of the profession (PME), unit culture and norms, and extend through to personal morals and beliefs, values, ethics, and aspects of the human spirit. We hold that if we are to accelerate the development of Army soldiers and leaders that any framework for that development must address and serve to build on these varying factors in individuals and units. Further, we suggest that such a multidimensional framework should explicitly address and seek to mitigate potential divergences between the PME of the institution and those of the individual.

Defining the PME “Battlespace”



- Different soldiers may “weigh” the influence of each component differently
- The same soldier may weigh influences differently in different contexts

Figure 2

In Figure 2 we also make distinct beliefs and morals from values and ethics. For example one may *believe* and hold as a *moral* that the unnecessary loss of any human life should be avoided if at all possible, which may lead them to *value* diplomacy, non-kinetic, nonlethal, and proportional use of force, and develop a set of *ethics* that serve as the more distinct rules by which they guide their own and their followers' behavior accordingly. These refined distinctions of terminology are important as we pursue leader development.

As an institution we understandably focus most on professional ethics. If we as conferees and the Army are to conduct a useful discussion of the PME, and how the PME fits with the other factors shown in Figure 2, however, we must first define and develop *what the profession is*. Further, does the Army have a *profession* or *professions*? The answer to that question then further leads to the question of whether in practice we have an *Army ethic* or *Army ethics*? Or perhaps *should* we have an *Army ethic* or *Army ethics*? The Army, like all large institutions organizes itself largely by expertise specialization. Some example institutional Army specializations include science and technology, acquisition, legal, medical, chaplaincy, financial management, education, public works, and public affairs. In the operational Army, skill stratification is based on maneuver, fires and effects (e.g., infantry, armor, or artillery), operations support (e.g., military intelligence and signal), and select force sustainment specialties (e.g., logistician). Further, the total Army force includes active and reserve components, Army career civilian workforce, and a political appointee workforce.

The Army does not require all members of the total force to have the same professional expertise (e.g., the exercise of land power). It is professional expertise, however, that is one of the primary factors defining what a profession is (see paper by Snider, Oh, and Toner). We are not at this point suggesting that the Army be stratified between professionals and non-professionals, but that if we are to advance a PME that it may be useful to identify professional (or sub-professional) boundaries and determine what ethic might best serve the missions and functions of each grouping. For example, only a portion (e.g., doctors, nurses and physician assistants) of the medical community are considered medical professionals, yet other workers, some of which may be considered professionals (e.g., medical lawyers, medical equipment engineers, or insurance processors) operate within the sector and are not held to all of the medical profession's ethics. It may be useful as an Army to ask questions such as whether the creed to "never leave a fallen comrade" is central to all portions of the total force, or whether, for example, a more useful creed to an Army depot professional might be to "never send a soldier to war without the best possible equipment"?

The factor shown in Figure 2 that we as an Army tend to shy most from engaging in development is the domain of the human spirit, perhaps because it is often wrongly equated with religiosity. Yet all soldiers and leaders hold spirit whether they seek to address that spirit through religion or not. It is in seeking an understanding of their evolving spirituality that soldiers and leaders will form and reinforce their self-identity, find their sense of purpose and meaning in life, form their own philosophy for viewing the world, and develop the standards that define for them what it means to live a good

life. Regardless of one's approach to addressing spirituality, whether it is through religion, the study of philosophy or ethics, the arts, nature, or other means, all leaders must establish clear core beliefs and values and uphold those beliefs with conviction to be a moral leader—a leader of character—a leader who brings meaning to his or her missions, soldiers, and organization.

Further, as noted on the bottom of Figure 2, different soldiers may weigh the influence of each of these factors separately. Some soldiers may tend to be guided more by the rules of engagement and laws, while others draw their guidance more from personal values and morals. Others may draw from internal sources of their human spirit, while yet others seek to comply with the norms and expectations of their unit members. Regardless of such weightings, it is clear that a framework for moral development might best take a holistic approach and target a wide set of factors.

MORAL SITUATIONAL COMPLEXITY AND ADAPTABILITY

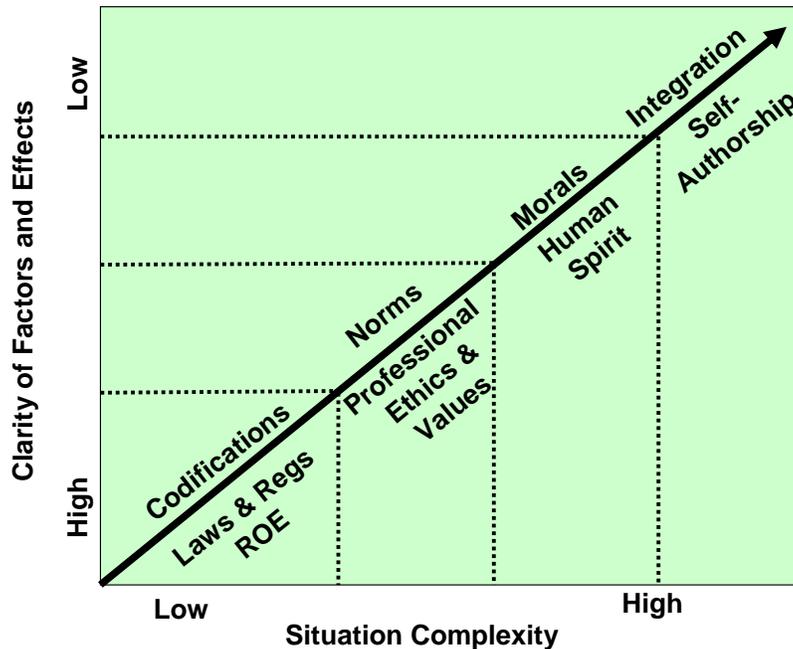
In Figure 2 we suggested that a variety of factors will influence soldiers' and leaders' thoughts and behaviors in any given situation and/or moral dilemma. Adding further need to take a more refined approach to moral development, we now propose that the same soldier may weight each factor differently in their ethical decision-making across different contexts and situations. For example, one situation may prompt a soldier to base their actions strictly on the ROE while in another he or she may draw more from his or her personal ethics. This differential weighting may be influenced by factors such as, 1) what factors are most present and salient in the context, 2) the level of development of the individual (such that less developed individuals often tend to look for outside guidance and clear rules), or 3) the complexity and dynamics of the situation. Therefore, beyond addressing the multiple factors influencing ethical thoughts and behaviors, it is important that in advancing a framework for development that these three and similar parameters are considered.

The third parameter, the complexity and dynamics of the situation is readily apparent in the current COIN conflict where soldiers are often faced with morally-ambiguous situations and must make immediate decisions, often without the ability to consult with their leaders. We propose that in these situations, the codifications (i.e., ROE, laws, and regulations) are often insufficient or inapplicable. For example, in a recent interview a young leader who refrained in an engagement from using deadly force due to unnecessary risks to non-combatants stated that “we could have killed a hundred of them and still been within the ROE.” This highlights the need for soldiers that are educated and developed along all dimensions displayed in Figure 2.

Figure 3 attempts to portray a simplified example of the effects of situational complexity on those factors influencing soldiers. Labels along the arrow suggest factors that may be sufficient to guide moral decision making and behavior under conditions of increasing complexity. As shown, in conditions where complexity is high, coupled with a low level of clarity over the various situational factors available for use in decision

making, as well as low levels of clarity over the potential effects or outcomes of behaviors, soldiers and leaders must be able to integrate various sources of information and factors and ultimately “self-author” their solution. Conversely, in less complex situations where the factors and effects are clear, codifications may be sufficient to guide decision making and behavior.

Defining the Moral-Ethical “Battlespace”



In sum, what we attempt to make clear is that nowhere are moral development and ethical enlightenment more critical than in our Nation’s Army. To lead in combat, young men and women must have developed a highly accurate “moral compass” in order to manage the constant tension between personal morality and their role as a member of the profession of arms—a profession that must manage violence on behalf of the greater good. The dilemmas faced by soldiers and leaders are like those always faced in battle – morally ambiguous situations where they have to choose between imperfect solutions, all of which may have questionable moral overtones and many of which will have strategic implications. Does a leader expose his soldiers to enemy fire to save an innocent young child? Does the leader order her soldiers to fire on a car filled with a civilian family that does not appear to be slowing for a traffic control checkpoint? Extended to garrison situations, does a leader punish a soldier by reduction of pay knowing that his family already has financial problems? These examples should make clear that it is more important for the Army to focus on educating and developing *how* to think about and resolve such dilemmas than it is to focus on *what* the specific outcome should be. It is more critical to enable leaders to process such ambiguous dilemmas autonomously, without supervision, and to come up with the best moral and ethical solutions. Appropriately, as the philosopher John Stuart Mill stated, “Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.”

Given tenets of the discussion thus far, in personal conversations LTC Pete Kilner has inquired whether the Army should focus on “principles of conduct” versus strict codifications or ethics. Much like the doctrinal Army principles of the offense or defense allow leaders to adapt implementation to meet the commander’s intent and situational variables, might moral principles be developed that serve as similar guideposts, yet offering room for thoughtful adaptation? Pete suggests that when rules are black and white they no longer serve to guide behavior in the grey. Further, even in a rules-based system often the various factors shown in Figure 2 are in conflict with one another. For example, duty to one’s soldiers or peers (i.e. unit culture and norms) may conflict with the ROE or a regulation. Leaders must be able to sort through and adjudicate such conflicts through the complex evaluative process mentioned earlier.

It would be useful to educate leaders specifically on how to deal with such competing values, yet still stay within certain principles. Specifically, education and development across our Army may focus on moral reasoning, ethical decision making, and behavior processes. It may be useful for example, to prompt soldiers to examine moral issues through three lenses or perspectives: (1) what is right by the laws, rules, norms, or duties (*deontological processing*), (2) what produces the best consequences (*teleological processing*), and (3) what is the most overall virtuous action regardless of norms or outcomes (*areteological processing*). Each one of these three processing “lenses” may in fact produce a separate and distinct moral solution if viewed in isolation. For example, consider a leader deciding whether to open fire on a team of enemy fighters who have placed themselves in and are engaging U.S. forces from the middle of a group of civilian noncombatants. A deontological approach may consider the use of force as allowed under the ROE. A teleological lens may consider the negative potential outcomes such as political fallout as well as increased hostile behaviors by the local population. An areteological lens might focus on the virtue of one’s actions and the taking of unnecessary human life. Would we not want soldiers to consider all three?

Thus soldiers and leaders must learn to simultaneously view moral dilemmas through all three lenses to understand all the dynamics of an issue and determine the overall best course of action. Such holistic processing has also been shown in research to be very effective in moral development, particularly if conducted in a group setting where ideas are exchanged. A culture promoting non-attributional dialogue (not one way conversations) is required for this growth and development to occur. Rigidly employing only one lens is problematic when trying to resolve a moral dilemma and may result in an insufficient solution. More importantly however, a dogmatic technique will often not result in any learning or growth.

For instance, simply stating to a room full of soldiers that “we do not harm non-combatants” is not sufficient as situations may very well pose the very dilemma to leaders where they have to choose between mission accomplishment and/or force protection and non-combatant casualties. A more holistic and pedagogically sound technique would be to *discuss and dialogue* on this subject, *as part of a situational training exercise*, with a focus on the three lenses listed above and across various

permutations of situations. Then leaders will begin to understand the complexities of such moral decision-making. Again, moral education and development is best integrated into the fabric of our school houses, training centers, and operational units, versus conducting stand-alone “ethics classes.” By doing so are we sending a message that “now we are focusing on ethics training, and later we will be training on house-clearing operations -- and there is no overlap between the two”. Bold yet concrete steps at such integration could include adding a 6th *moral factors* paragraph to the operations order, at least for use in training exercises; or adding a standard moral review to the after action review format.

In sum, just as the Army has started to focus on growing adaptive and flexible soldiers and leaders for this new COIN environment, so too must we start to intentionally focus on growing soldiers and leaders to self-author their behavior with a strong moral compass – authentic leaders. The ability for such self-authorship, however, is a developed capacity and is at the heart of what is termed authentic leadership. Authentic leaders are those that are highly developed and self-aware and have the ability and willpower to act in accordance with their core values and beliefs. Thus, it is a tall order to develop soldiers and leaders to the extent that they are in fact able to integrate various factors and grapple with how those factors relate to who they are and their identity. Ultimately, however, such capacity is required at all levels of leadership, and certainly in our most senior leaders; highlighting the need for purposive accelerated development.

LANGUAGE FOR THE DIALOG

Our final point is that to engage in a robust and meaningful dialog as an Army about our Army ethic, our culture, and the moral development of our members, we need a common language so that we may effectively communicate and ultimately create a “common moral operating picture.” We have attempted to offer here some terminology and frameworks that we hope will serve as a starting point for that clarification.

CONCLUSION

Our goal for this paper was to serve as a “think piece” and conversation-starter for conferees, and more ideally, for our Army. In it we offer few solutions yet pose many problems and dilemmas to consider as we pursue advancing the PME of the Army and the moral-ethical development of its soldiers and leaders. We hope that some of the concepts and frameworks discussed here will prompt heated dialog, debates, and ultimately refinement. What is clear is that the Army and its leaders must take a more active and programmatic approach to accelerating the education and development of soldiers and leaders of character. To accomplish this we must develop a framework for and focus more attention and resources toward character development vice competence development. This would require a mental-model and cultural shift across our force.

In closing, stemming from some of the concepts in this paper we offer the below set of seven questions as a starting point to hopefully engage and capture the imagination of the conferees and the Army and generate many more questions and discussions.

1. What do we believe in as an Army (i.e., professional military ethic) and how do those beliefs influence our thoughts and behaviors in both peacetime and war?
2. Why do we have these beliefs and are they applicable and proper for the future of the force?
3. Are there topics in our Army that are explicitly or implicitly “off-limits” to discussion? Why is that? Will we be better off discussing these topics?
4. Do we want to recruit and select members that have the proclivity to inculcate the Army values and beliefs or encourage a broad set of beliefs? How do we recruit such people?
5. By what processes, systems, and methods do we educate and develop members across all ranks and components to inculcate these beliefs?
6. How do we educate and develop members to become authentic leaders who can self-author their behavior and operate in contexts where professional ethics cannot provide clear answers?
7. How do we build unit climates and cultures nested at all levels of the Army that promote the moral development of unit members and provide the moral resources to sustain ethical behavior during protracted conflict?