

ETHICS AND INSIGHTS

Honor and Truth

George Lober

OVER DINNER THE OTHER NIGHT, A FRIEND ASKED ME, IN LIGHT OF MY recent retirement, what I learned about the students I taught over the past 18 years—the majority of whom were military officers or civilians engaged in some form of counterinsurgency or counterterrorism activity across the globe. It was an interesting question, and one I admit I was reluctant to answer, partly because what I learned *about* my students is inseparable from what I learned *from* them—and what I learned from them is impossible to express casually over dinner. But the question hung in the air, so I muttered something deliberately opaque and changed the topic.

Later on, I thought about my reaction and the answer that I should have given. I should have said that, among other things, I learned that those men and women live lives of profound ethical contradictions, some of which cannot be reconciled. And if I was being completely honest, I would have added: Not the least contradictory is their relationship with Honor and Truth.

Let me offer two disparate examples of what I mean.

An overwhelming majority of the students I have taught cling to the role of the “silent professional” encouraged by their military or security-enforcement cultures. They keep secret the personal truths of their professional experience—what they know, what they have done, what they have witnessed—and they do so at times even at the risk of their reputations and careers.

As a case in point, imagine that you are one of the four students I taught who were directly involved in a mission that resulted in a highly publicized civilian death (or deaths), a mission that upon its completion quickly mushroomed beyond your control into an international incident. Imagine that during that mission, and preceding the civilian death, a host of unforeseen circumstances and general confusion erupted, so that despite your best efforts to follow protocol and the rules of engagement and to make the best possible decisions in an extraordinarily chaotic, stressful environment, the death occurred anyway. Then imagine that you report all of this to your chain of command, either immediately upon discovering the death or upon returning from the mission. You acknowledge everything that was in your control and everything that was not. You are absolutely truthful. And the truth is that there was no way you could have anticipated and prevented that death.

Nevertheless, as the public controversy over what happened grows, your competency comes into question, your reputation within your own organization becomes tarnished, and pressure grows from within and outside the organization to hold you accountable. Critics demand that you receive some form of disciplinary action, ranging from loss of position, to demotion, to denial of future promotion, to imprisonment if found guilty by either a civilian or military court. And although the decision your higher-ups eventually reach allows you

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to remain within the organization, the news sources' incorrect conclusions regarding the incident travel across the globe. False information and rumor continue to be presented as fact. As a result, not only do your name and career incur further damage, but your personal relationships become strained.

In considering this situation, one question that strikes me is whether the moment ever arrives when you would consider speaking out publicly in your own defense to set the record straight. If you were among the four students I have taught who found themselves in similar circumstances, you would answer, "No."

As a point of honor, you would, in fact, choose to say nothing beyond what you reported through official channels. You would choose to shield your personal truth of what actually happened from public examination, keeping that knowledge private because of your commitment to being a "silent professional." Beyond official inquiry into the incident, you would share your story—your truth—with only an extremely small circle of highly trusted confidants. And you would hold to that commitment despite recurring invitations to defend yourself in public or to cash in financially by revealing your side of the story.

In that regard, by honoring your commitment to stoic silence, you would be no different from the overwhelming majority of the students I've taught: men and women who view with disapprobation those in their service communities who break ranks with the professional culture of silence and sell their stories—their personal truths—to publishers for profit. The majority of those I've taught perceive professional reticence as equivalent to honoring a promise—an indicator of one's ethical integrity.

Now imagine, in contrast, that you direct that same profound sense of honor toward communicating the truth. Imagine also that you work in an environment where you are challenged every day by a seemingly endless deluge of training and bureaucratic requirements that impede your ability to do the very best job you can. Imagine that these requirements obstruct your ability to accomplish your primary tasks, despite the fact that many of them—and sometimes it feels like most of them—are only tangentially related to your primary duties and responsibilities. How do you handle that situation? How do you cope with the unreasonable demands on your time and the unnecessary restrictions on your performance? Do you lie about accomplishing some of them? Do you communicate a falsehood by simply checking a box for a requirement you did not fulfill, or by slow-rolling an assigned task you deem unnecessary? Do you blow off some requirements or ignore impeding policies in order to do your job?

If you're among a considerable number of the students I have taught over the past 18 years, your answer to these questions is "Yes," and my inevitable response is "Why?"

Let me be clear: the vast majority of the hundreds of students who have been in my classes over the years have been noble men and women, both military and civilian, who fully embrace the concepts of honor and decency. They truly believe that their word is their bond and that living a life of integrity requires living as closely as possible to their core moral—and in some cases, religious—principles. In addition, many of them are graduates of military academies across the globe, and most of these academies share a similar honor code that shuns

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lying and espouses truth-telling. So why would these same individuals, who value their sense of honor and commitment highly enough to silently endure calumny on a searing scale, also violate their honor and commitment to the truth to negotiate an organizational bureaucracy?

The answer, I believe, is complicated and not entirely reconcilable. It begins with the fact that, if most of my students can find any general consensus around some positive aspect of lying and deceit, it comes when discussing the pressures involved in serving within an immense bureaucracy. Such pressures, they tell me, result from a constant stream of ever-increasing training requirements, restrictive policies, and leadership demands, which lead many of them to conclude that they have no choice but to occasionally deceive or lie so they can accomplish their primary mission. This assertion is borne out by the 2015 United States Army War College report by Leonard Wong and Stephen J. Gerras, *Lying to Ourselves*.¹ In it, the authors identify almost all the frustrations my students have expressed over the years and conclude that “untruthfulness is surprisingly common in the military” as the result of a burdensome environment of ever-increasing requirements and obstructive policies.²

As evidence, Wong and Gerras cite a 2002 analysis, which concluded that company commanders had to find ways “to fit 297 days of required training into 256 training days,” and a 2012 Inspector General’s report, which indicated that all 16 Army companies that were inspected as part of the Army Force Generation process were unable to complete all of the required training and tasks.³

Because of “the Army’s tendency toward zero defect,” however, the authors suggest that reporting any non-compliance was not then—and presumably is not now—a viable option.⁴ The authors contend that military leaders instead face a limited series of options, ranging from “hand-waving, fudging, massaging, or checking the box” to “evasion and deception.”⁵ As they firmly state, “in the routine performance of their duties as leaders and commanders, US Army officers lie.”⁶

The report further alleges that whether in garrison or downrange, soldiers are confronted with a flood of cumbersome bureaucratic requirements and potential ethical confrontations, which result in what Wong and Gerras

call *ethical fading*, whereby the “moral colors of an ethical decision fade into bleached hues that are void of moral implications.”⁷ Or in less poetic terms, “ethical fading allows us to convince ourselves that considerations of right or wrong are not applicable to decisions that in any other circumstances would be ethical dilemmas.”⁸

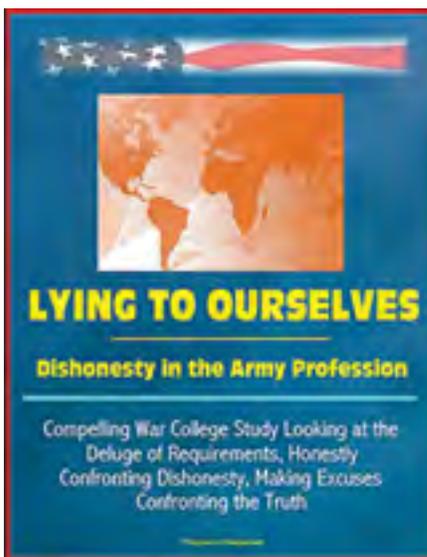
How does this ethical fading occur? The report argues that it occurs when expressions such as “checking the box,” “giving them what they want,” “prioritizing,” “accepting prudent risks,” and “good leadership” become justifications for deliberately resorting to falsehoods.⁹ Perhaps worse, however, the report suggests that the actual outcome for the perpetrators is an ethical *numbing*, a disengagement from the deceit generated by their signatures and false statements, and the rationalization that compromising one’s personal and professional honor is merely a “means to maneuver through the Army bureaucracy.”¹⁰

My “truth” is that nothing in the Army War College report surprises me, nor do I believe that the problems it identified are germane solely to the US Army. In my experience, the difficulties and issues that Wong and Gerras describe are common to many of my American students, regardless of their branch of service, and are shared by many of my international civilian and military students as well. What the report does not address, however, is the level of frustration that surfaces among my students as a result of being caught in such ethical binds. For some, the

ultimate consequence of feeling that if they are going to succeed professionally, they have little alternative but to compromise their integrity, is nothing less than a scarring cynicism—an outcome the philosopher Sissela Bok asserts “can have far reaching effects on both internal and external trust.”¹¹

So, on the one hand, many of the students I teach feel an absolute ethical imperative to honor their vow to protect the truth, while on the other hand they feel equally pressed at times to abandon their honor and commitment to the truth, due to the priorities of their current assignment, an unreasonable number of training requirements, and the burdensome bureaucratic environment in which they serve.

Thus I have learned that while many of them will sometimes forsake the truth and prevaricate, if not actually



lie, to circumvent the requirements and restrictions they perceive as “dumb” or “bullsh*t,” they will also shield and protect the truth of a specific experience at great emotional, social, and even professional cost to themselves—and they will do so as a point of honor.

How are these two perspectives on Honor and Truth reconcilable? Beyond a mutual inclination to protect or cloak the truth, I’m not sure they are. Nor am I sure they have to be. The philosopher Carl Ficarrotta might suggest that what I have learned about my students is that “perfectly ordinary human beings are capable of forming extremely complicated . . . dispositions,” and there is no psychological reason “to think we cannot form complex, context-sensitive moral dispositions.”¹² In other words, we are all capable of flipping certain internal ethical switches and acting according to different ethical codes depending on the situation and context.

It may be just as simple as that. It may be that untruthfulness and deceit become no big ethical deal when deployed as “work-arounds” to an impossible deluge of demands and restrictions—especially if the practice is both common and accepted. Wong and Gerras certainly suggest as much with their assertion that “much of the deception that occurs in the profession of arms is encouraged and sanctioned by the military institution.”¹³ Even so, I’m not so sure the answer is that cut-and-dried for my students. More than a few of them chafe at the need to flip such internal ethical switches, and many resent the

fact that their organizations put them in the position of having to compromise their personal honor and commitment to the truth for the sake of accomplishing their jobs, even if the practice is commonplace. The result for some, I believe, is an erosion of the truly altruistic values that drove them to serve in the first place; for others, it is a gradual transition into disillusionment and resigned acceptance.

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In the end, I think what I have learned *about* my students and what I have learned *from* them is that they live in very ethically gray professional worlds where the dilemmas they face range across a complex spectrum, and the choices they make are not always consistent, much less reconcilable. The falsification of compliance requirements in one instance and the steadfast commitment to reticence and stoicism in another are but two examples of the military’s complex relationship with Honor and Truth. But I have learned that for the men and women I teach, the effort to live an ethically consistent life is an uphill climb—just as it is for everyone—and along the way, almost all of them are doing the best they can. ❖

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

George Lober retired in 2016, after teaching for 17 years at the US Naval Postgraduate School.

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NOTES

1 Leonard Wong and Stephen J. Gerras, *Lying to Ourselves: Dishonesty in the Army Profession* (Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute and US Army War College Press, February 2015): <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/PUB1250.pdf>
 2 Ibid., ix.
 3 As cited in Wong and Gerras, *Lying to Ourselves*, 5.
 4 Wong and Gerras, *Lying to Ourselves*.
 5 Ibid., 8.
 6 Ibid.
 7 Ann E. Tenbrunsel and David M. Messick, “Ethical Fading: The Role of Self-Deception in Unethical Behavior,” *Social Justice Research* 17, no. 2 (June 2004): 224, as cited in Wong and Gerras, *Lying to Ourselves*, 31.

8 Wong and Gerras, *Lying to Ourselves*, 17.
 9 Ibid., 18.
 10 Ibid., ix.
 11 Sissela Bok, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* (New York: Vintage, 1999), Kindle edition, chap. X.
 12 J. Carl Ficarrotta, “Are Military Professionals Bound by a Higher Moral Standard?” (paper presented at the International Society of Military Ethics [formerly JSCOPE], 1998): <http://isme.tamu.edu/JSCOPE98/FICARROTTA98.HTM>
 13 Wong and Gerras, *Lying to Ourselves*, ix.