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USAWC Student Awards Program

Re-examining the Enlightenment: Origins of Mission Command and Ethical Reasoning

by

Lieutenant Colonel Andrew W. Jones
United States Army Reserve

Under the Direction of:
Professor Vanya Etimova Bellinger



United States Army War College
Class of 2017

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REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE			Form Approved--OMB No. 0704-0188		
The public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing the burden, to Department of Defense, Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports (0704-0188), 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to any penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number. PLEASE DO NOT RETURN YOUR FORM TO THE ABOVE ADDRESS.					
1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 01-04-2017		2. REPORT TYPE STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT		3. DATES COVERED (From - To)	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Re-examining the Enlightenment: Origins of Mission Command and Ethical Reasoning			5a. CONTRACT NUMBER		
			5b. GRANT NUMBER		
			5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER		
6. AUTHOR(S) Lieutenant Colonel Andrew W. Jones United States Army Reserve			5d. PROJECT NUMBER		
			5e. TASK NUMBER		
			5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER		
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Professor Vanya Etimova Bellinger			8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER		
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) U.S. Army War College, 122 Forbes Avenue, Carlisle, PA 17013			10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)		
			11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)		
12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Distribution A: Approved for Public Release. Distribution is Unlimited. To the best of my knowledge this SRP accurately depicts USG and/or DoD policy & contains no classified information or aggregation of information that poses an operations security risk. Author: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PA: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES Word Count: 5941					
14. ABSTRACT Within society and its military, the complexities of 21st century life embroil leaders in ethical and command dilemmas. From the Commander in Chief down to the newest lieutenant, all take an oath to support and defend the Constitution often without knowing the origins of its most fundamental principles. As United States Army leadership continues to stress the tenets of Mission Command, values, and ethics in their professional military education (PME) curriculum, and struggle with how to apply these in their formations, one question resonates in the halls of senior military institutions: why do we overlook the Age of Enlightenment in explaining these concepts? Re-examining the Enlightenment as a means to broaden an understanding of Mission Command, values, and ethical reasoning cannot be underestimated in the future development of the Army officer corps. Reconnecting with the foundational principles of liberty, fraternity, tolerance, trust, and self-awareness, to name a few, through the prism of those who brought these enduring principles into the light will only enhance critical thinking and leadership studies.					
15. SUBJECT TERMS Values, Leadership, Historiography					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 29	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT UU	b. ABSTRACT UU	c. THIS PAGE UU			19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (w/ area code)

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(5941 words)

Abstract

Within society and its military, the complexities of 21st century life embroil leaders in ethical and command dilemmas. From the Commander in Chief down to the newest lieutenant, all take an oath to support and defend the Constitution often without knowing the origins of its most fundamental principles. As United States Army leadership continues to stress the tenets of Mission Command, values, and ethics in their professional military education (PME) curriculum, and struggle with how to apply these in their formations, one question resonates in the halls of senior military institutions: why do we overlook the Age of Enlightenment in explaining these concepts? Re-examining the Enlightenment as a means to broaden an understanding of Mission Command, values, and ethical reasoning cannot be underestimated in the future development of the Army officer corps. Reconnecting with the foundational principles of liberty, fraternity, tolerance, trust, and self-awareness, to name a few, through the prism of those who brought these enduring principles into the light will only enhance critical thinking and leadership studies.

Re-examining the Enlightenment: Origins of Mission Command and Ethical Reasoning

Both as a society and its military, we are increasingly embroiled in ethical and command dilemmas. From the Commander in Chief down to the newest lieutenant, all take an oath to support and defend the Constitution often without knowing the origins of its most fundamental principles. As United States Army leadership continues to stress the tenets of Mission Command, values, and ethics in their professional military education (PME) curriculum, and struggle with how to apply them in their formations, one question resonates in the halls of senior military institutions: why do we overlook the Age of Enlightenment in explaining these concepts?

If renown historian Gordon Wood's axiom "without knowing where you came from...it's hard to know where you are going" is true, an examination of the writers of the Enlightenment, roughly 1650 to 1776 becomes the most critical study to 21st century military leadership in gaining an understanding of modern political, military and social thought.¹ Defining and articulating our national purpose drives policy formulation and provides a vision of the future. Might we lose our strategic way and national identity without knowing the sources of all of our enduring beliefs, ethics, and values? This study will argue that understanding the Enlightenment's contribution to the drafting of the Constitution and founding of the first Continental Army is instrumental in plotting our future as a nation and its military.

As for closing knowledge gaps in strategy development, Tami Biddle concurs that "critique is surely an important one that ought to inform pedagogy, not only in the PME system, but beyond."² Likewise, without crediting those great thinkers that came before the American and French Revolutions and who paved the way for American political,

military and social values, our studies do not create the necessary linkage to this rich historiography's true heritage. These great minds laid the groundwork for revolutionary thinking—both within society, their governments, and military circles. Enlightenment philosophers and military theorists built the foundation for the American Revolution, the Constitution, and our strategic values: freedom, democracy, and human rights.³

This study will introduce and discuss several key topics in an evolving historiography outlined in many modern and historical primary and secondary sources, and will demonstrate their influence in the development of modern strategic thought. To accomplish this, an exposition and reinterpretation of historical sources of the past six decades will be necessary. The historiographical analysis will encompass approximately the first one-third of this research project. The exposition, analysis, and reinterpretation of multiple primary and secondary historical sources as the origins of modern U.S. strategic thinking will complete the final two-thirds of the study. Areas of concentration will include (but are not limited to) the origins of Mission Command, Army Values, and ethical reasoning from the writings of Rousseau, Locke, Maurice de Saxe, and the Comte de Guibert (among others).

The Enlightenment, or Age of Reason, is understood as the transition period between the Medieval (Feudal) era and modernity. On the heels of the Renaissance and Reformation, it served as an age of science, philosophy, and reason where societal structures and traditional constructs (religious, political, and economic) became increasingly challenged. This enthusiasm for progress and its redefinition of the inherent rights of human beings ultimately led to political upheaval throughout Europe. For the

purposes of this study, the Age of Enlightenment will be defined as the period between the middle of the seventeenth century to the American War of Independence.

Countless historians have dedicated volumes and their lifelong intellectual pursuits to the study of the great political, social, and cultural changes that occurred during revolutions in North America and France during the last quarter of the 18th century. However, few have ventured to place the Enlightenment as a pivotal turning point in the history of military science, tactics, and the art of warfare itself. Indeed, Russell Weigley, Brian Bond, and other modern military historians are quick to credit the subsequent influence of Napoleon Bonaparte as well as nineteenth-century military philosophers Carl von Clausewitz (1780-1831) and Antoine-Henri Jomini (1779-1869) as the fathers of modern warfare.⁴ This study intends to challenge this trend and to stimulate thought and dialogue on the role of the Enlightenment as a keystone to understanding Mission Command, values, and ethics.

Historiography

Beginning a study of the Enlightenment and considering the formidable amount of literature available can be daunting at best. However, in narrowing the focus to how the writings of this era serve as a foundation for modern military strategic concepts (i.e. Mission Command, values and ethical reasoning), then the search quickly narrows and becomes manageable. There are few topics of study richer in primary source material than the Enlightenment. The present will just scratch the surface and can only be based on a cumulative analysis using research and thoughts of a select few primary and relevant secondary source authors. Nevertheless, more attention will be given here to secondary source works that have best captured the spirit of the primary source works. To succeed at such a study would require a comparative analysis of a broad spectrum

of historical writings that collectively identify the similarities, differences, strengths, and weaknesses of this evolution. With this in mind, let us proceed to examine the sources most readily available and their evolving interpretation of the citizen armies of the Revolution.

Among the most notable works on the influence of the Enlightenment on the formation of American thought include the historical works of Gordon Wood, Gertrude Himmelfarb, and Jonathan Israel. Gordon Wood is identified by his peers as an “American institution” and perhaps the most prominent and prolific American historian of the last forty years.⁵ In *The Idea of America* and *The Creation of the American Republic*, Wood looks to understand not only how the Enlightenment influenced American history and thought, but how the American Revolution was the original test bed of enlightened ideals.⁶ In doing so, he “links his earlier themes to an even larger transformation of an entire culture in its deepest values and purposes.”⁷ As his works apply to our present theme, Wood understood the Enlightenment as a bridge “to hold men personally and morally responsible for their actions” and instrumental in cultivating a culture of values and ethical actions.⁸

A history of ideas becomes the central theme of author Gertrude Himmelfarb. Although more renown for her prolific writing on English and Victorian history, Himmelfarb applies her vast knowledge of the impact of the Enlightenment on values and civic virtue in her 2008 publication *The Roads to Modernity: The British, French and American Enlightenments*.⁹ As a neo-conservative historian, Himmelfarb praises the British and American Enlightenment for their focus on virtue and values while scorning the extremism of the French Enlightenment. One of the truly unique and thought-

provoking points of this work is the debate on the origin of the term “Enlightenment” which is often attributed to the early 20th century, whereas Himmelfarb argues was derived from Lord Shaftesbury’s *Inquiry Concerning Virtue or Merit* published in the late 18th century.¹⁰

In stark contrast to Himmelfarb, British historian Jonathan Israel argues that the Enlightenment was more ideological and philosophical by nature: a revolution of minds and a breaking from history and tradition. However, Israel emphasizes that despite its conceptual origins, that this revolutionary cognition “was not just a theoretical possibility but something real,” and became a type of insurgency to ameliorate “the state of mankind.”¹¹ Radical ideas, considered blasphemy in the courts of kings and Rome, spread like a wildfire through the *sages* and intellectual elites who saw status quo as failure and progress the future. Israel notes that the message was “wide-ranging and multifaceted” as the ideas of the *philosophes* took hold in the “economic, technological, political, medical, and administrative” landscape of Europe.¹² Likewise, and applicable to this study, it infiltrated military circles with discussions of how this would impact formations legally, morally, and educationally.

Let’s next turn now attention to several *philosophes* of the Enlightenment that can be argued to have most influenced modern American military values and thinking. Francois-Marie Arouet, born in Paris in 1649 of a family of the lowest nobility, aspired from his youth to be a writer and adopted the pen name of “Voltaire.” His prolific writing of poetry and prose could in themselves cast Voltaire as one of the great 18th century men of letters; however, it was in his philosophic writings where he is most recognized today outside of France. French historian Guillaume de Syon describes him as a

prominent figure in redefining the human condition in history saying that “Voltaire recast historiography in both factual and analytical terms.”¹³

In his seminal historical works, *The Age of Louis XIV* (1751) and *Essay on the Customs and the Spirit of the Nations* (1756), Voltaire becomes one of the earliest revisionist historians.¹⁴ By avoiding traditional historical viewpoints (political leaders, military exploits, biographies, etc.), and focusing on social history (religious intolerance, culture, and economics), Voltaire opened the eyes of the masses. Promoting religious tolerance, free speech, and a free press, he challenged autocracy’s very foundation. His writings also found their way into the American colonies and caught the attention of several prominent American leaders to include Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin. Although Voltaire was skeptical about democracy (government of the masses), his ideas became the fundamental principles of the Bill of Rights and U.S. Constitution.

In Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Social Contract* (1762), we find another well-read primary work of significant influence to the Founders of the United States.¹⁵ Similar to John Locke, Rousseau focused on the idea of a social contract as the fundamental principle governing societies to include the military as a reflection of its society. Thomas Paine, author of *The Rights of Man* (1792), took particular interest in Rousseau and credits him as an inspiration of his revolutionary pamphlet *Common Sense* (1776). Any student of the Enlightenment would be well served to add *Keystones of Democracy: The Second Treatise of Government, The Social Contract, Rights of Man* to their professional reading list.¹⁶ Within this compilation, students of the origins of democracy

and democratic values have at their disposal Rousseau, Locke, and Paine, and are able to conduct a side-by-side comparative review and critical analysis.

When looking for military applications of the Enlightenment, several key primary source documents rise to the top of the list. Within the U.S. Armed Forces, the works of Maurice, Comte de Saxe and Jacques Antoine Hippolyte, Comte de Guibert are not well known. Russell Weigley, Brian Bond, and other modern military historians whose writing are commonplace in Staff and War Colleges make cursory mention of their ideas, but tend to focus more on the 19th century writings of Carl von Clausewitz and Antoine-Henri Jomini. Despite this oversight, Guibert and Saxe were incredibly revolutionary and enlightened theorists of their age and merit attention for their contributions to both the Napoleonic armies and their application to modern armies.

Israeli historian Azar Gat provides a unique and refreshing perspective on the place of the French military Enlightenment in history attributing much to Saxe and Guibert in laying the groundwork for the military revolution of the 19th century. Gat defines the Enlightenment as pivotal in “shaping the terms in which military thinkers consider the theory of war,” and a failure to understand or recognize its contribution results “in a narrow, unhistorical understanding” of modern strategy.¹⁷ Never in history had so many generals and military theorists put pen to paper creating a wealth of literature for future generations. Jomini openly credited Saxe and Enlightenment theorists as providing the foundation of his theories, as Gat eloquently states: “Jomini only reiterated the characteristic attitude of almost all the military thinkers of the Enlightenment, including de Saxe.”¹⁸

Saxe's *Mes Rêveries* remains among the finest works of the Enlightenment dedicated to defining a systemic change by creating the ideal army through an evolving role of top-down leadership. Translated as "My Dreams," it should be required reading for any military leader as it "testifies to a powerful intelligence and an incredible vision of future warfare."¹⁹ Historian Jon Manchip White provides one of the few biographical histories of Saxe depicting a man of aristocratic origin who dreamed of an army where well-trained leadership cared more for their formation than titles and where soldiers trusted leaders to act ethically, morally, and legally.²⁰ Across the channel, the British Marshal Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington, carried a copy of Saxe's *Rêveries* and used its concepts to defeat the great Napoleon Bonaparte.²¹

At the tender age of 21, after watching his father's campaigns in the Seven Years' War (1756-1763), the Comte de Guibert shook the world with the groundbreaking *Essai général de tactique*.²² Though the title may suggest that this tome is confined to the tactical sphere, Weigley explains that Guibert had a much broader audience:

His book's title, in fact, was by no means intended to confine his scope to tactics. In his day, the term grand tactics usually encompassed what we call strategy, a word barely beginning to enter the military lexicon; and to Guibert himself, the tactics of his title encompassed the whole art of war, including the organization and recruitment of armies and their relations to society and the state.²³

Echoing Saxe that feudal armies and leadership were obsolete, Guibert sounded the "call for a new kind of army, ideally a people's army."²⁴ As the first call for democracy in arms, its strategic implications may be considered the foundation of every modern, western military. It is important to note, however, that as the Revolution approached,

Guibert began to fear the destructive potential of “releasing the unreason of crowds of ordinary men into the waging of war” and disavowed this idea.²⁵

There is a vast and varied literature that explores the nature of the Enlightenment as it pertains to its formative thought within the American military, specifically Mission Command, ethical reasoning, and values. A substantive examination of this literature is beyond the scope of this study. For our purposes, it is important to keep in mind a few general points that emerge from these works when thinking about the possibilities of permeating enlightened ideas into our military schools: 1) understanding their context in history; 2) determining modern relevance of the ideas; and 3) ensuring linkage to current doctrine. Keep these in mind as we transition from historiography to a rudimentary understanding and conceptual application.

The Enlightenment and Mission Command

In an article published in “The Military Review” in 2013, retired Colonel Clinton J. Ancker III provides a wonderful history of the concept of Mission Command.²⁶ Ancker explains that Mission Command has most likely always existed in one form or another in U.S. Army dogma; however, he focuses his study after 1905—when the Army began publishing written doctrine in service manuals. Throughout the 20th century, as U.S. forces engaged in global conflicts, the necessity to decentralize the Army’s ability to execute orders became harshly evident. As forces deployed into two theaters of operation in the Global War on Terror, “Mission Command became official Army doctrine with the 2003 publication of Field Manual (FM) 6-0.”²⁷ It further evolved into Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-0 published in 2012, where it stands today as among the many forms of unread, misunderstood, or misinterpreted forms of current Army Doctrine.²⁸

Of course, it is read, understood, and appreciated by those brilliant minds dedicated to publishing doctrine, and those motivated individuals attending the finest Army leadership institutions. Ironically, most leaders and troops grasp the concept of Mission Command without having read doctrinal manuals. Exercising “disciplined initiative” by adapting “to rapidly changing situations” while accepting “prudent risk” would be an accurate summation of the American Way of War.²⁹ So why does Mission Command feel right to U.S. Army leaders as part of our inherent leadership tradition? Evidence provided previously suggests that this is not a modern concept. Army leadership teaches that it is “imprinted into the DNA of the profession in arms,” and has been so since the formation of our nation.³⁰ A brief look into the genesis of Mission Command in the U.S. Army is essential to understanding why it works.

According to the Army’s Mission Command website, “Mission Command was born out of necessity in the 19th Century,” and refers to it as a Prussian concept.³¹ This might explain why so much attention and focus in our institutional training is placed on Clausewitz. This study in no way intends to take away from the genius of Clausewitz as a theorist or practitioner; however, it will demonstrate that the Age of Reason preceding the American Revolution and Clausewitz provided a new philosophical framework enabling everything that followed. Without the concepts and philosophies of the Enlightenment, Mission Command could not exist. In other words, the key principles of Mission Command (mutual trust, shared understanding, and disciplined initiative) work far better in armies of free societies, under the auspices of democracy, practiced by citizen soldiers of their respective nations.

The birth of the American Army in 1775 predates Clausewitz and Jomini. In the eyes of the European continent, it in no way resembled a real Army. Without the tradition and experience of mercenary troops and Noble officers, colonial military leaders became the punch line in European jokes and inspired only ire and disdain. Recognizing their inexperience and unique circumstances, they turned to the same philosophies that inspired them to pursue freedom from Mother England. Within the context of the Enlightenment, they “sought freedom for all people and justified it with rationally defined ideas of self-governance, natural rights, common law—all departing from a history of theocracy, tyranny, and the divine right of kings.”³² This departure from all things traditionally tyrannical led them to think innovatively about how to raise an army and practice the art of war. Having the freedom to create a unique defense apparatus combining centralized and decentralized planning and execution within democratic institutions revolutionized the art of war. We maintain this tradition of innovation today as our strategic necessity requires flexibility, agility, and adaptability to navigate the unknown, complex environments of future warfare. Secretary Ash Carter provided context to this heritage by emphasizing that the “one constant has been that our military’s people have always mastered change with excellence.”³³

Continental soldiers shared a solemn trust as vanguards of a revolutionary crusade that, as Thomas Paine assured them in *Common Sense*, could “begin the world over again.”³⁴ This new beginning of a nation, its army, and finding its way of war had to be built upon three founding Enlightenment principles: trust, professionalism, and initiative. Customarily, prior to America’s War of Independence, the corps of officers was linked to noble birth and title with the highest positions being secured by the great

families surrounding the monarch.³⁵ These noblemen felt general enmity, disdain, and absolute mistrust for the troops they commanded. Generally speaking, troops had been historically either mercenaries for hire or forced into service by some form of feudal conscription. One of the reasons that European Armies did not consider the Continental Army a true military force was the unorthodox and unconventional use of citizen soldiers and militias.

The American, and later French, revolutionary landscape became ideal to test Guibert's proposed use of a "national, citizen army, which, because of their pride and cohesion, would have nothing to fear from the mercenary armies of other countries."³⁶ Fundamentally, as perhaps the single most important building block to modern armies, this concept embodies the absolute spirit of the Enlightenment: social advancement. In other words, "Enlightenment thinkers implied that people...after grasping the 'foundations' of knowledge, achieve a relatively unambiguous understanding of the external world and could use this to transform the social conditions of their existence."³⁷ Tying a sense of national pride and belonging to the defense of the nation and its goals opened doors throughout our nation's history for the armed forces to serve as a test bed for social change and become an embodiment of democracy in arms. In the latter half of the 20th century, the U.S. Army took this concept of citizen soldier one step further becoming one of the first global powers to turn from conscription to an all-volunteer force.³⁸

When people serve together, voluntarily, with a common purpose, they can achieve the necessary trust and shared understanding for Mission Command to be successful. Although no one thought this possible in feudal armies, Rousseau

emphasized this as the key ingredient for a social contract, and it correlates perfectly to military applications. “This act of association creates a moral and collective body...receiving from this act its unity, its common identity, its life and its will.”³⁹ As citizens raise their right hand and swear, or affirm, an oath to support and defend the Constitution, to bear allegiance and true faith, and obey orders, they become part of the U.S. military social contract which builds the foundation of Mission Command.⁴⁰ “The framers understood that an oath itself, in a broader sense, committed officeholders to the purposes of the Constitution—its structure, its philosophy, and its preservation.”⁴¹

More than any other component of the military DNA of the United States, the Constitution stands as transcendental Enlightenment thought personified in our social contract. Richard Kohn wrote:

It is the foundation that defines and determines how the country has defended itself for the past two centuries and defends itself today; it authorizes the institutions created for national security, the structure in which those institutions and their people operate, the process by which the institutions interact with each other, and the overall manner in which the nation is expected to prepare for, enter into, conduct, and end its military conflicts.⁴²

Framers sought a government by the people, for the people, where individuals would be encouraged to govern themselves through shared values and common goals. Likewise, those who defend these principles on the battlefield would necessarily require the ability to apply these same concepts in their formations.

Consequently, the great military minds of the 18th century struggled with the question: how do leaders create mutually supportive formations that can quickly react to a changing environment? Enlightenment theorists turned to a systems and social science approach to create a new ideal. Through standardization, education, and training they envisioned professional leaders who through merit, not title, could build

and lead these type formations. In “My Dreams”, Maurice de Saxe laid out a vision of future warfare through the implementation of reforms in organization, discipline, and strategy.⁴³ Turning to his hero, Gustavus Adolphus, for inspiration, Saxe described maneuvers executed by professional leaders and executed by well-trained, like-minded troops providing mutual protection in an offensive, defensive, or transitioning posture. Efficient training, clothing, feeding, and paying soldiers in order to give a psychological advantage was a major concern of Saxe noting “how the smallest things influence the greatest.”⁴⁴ Through the lens of Mission Command, any modern leader understands Saxe’s premise wherein trust is intricately tied to soldier care, or in other words, when troops are “taken care of you can maintain...discipline.”⁴⁵

What feudal armies lacked, and which Mission Command demands, is professional leadership.⁴⁶ Without a trained, competent, professional officer corps, balancing “the art of command with the science of control” becomes a bridge too far.⁴⁷ Israeli historian Martin Van Creveld echoed Guibert’s assessment that during the 18th Century “the most important armed forces failed to adopt a system under which officers and commanders would be appointed and dismissed solely by their professional merit.”⁴⁸ As armies grew larger, and with the advent of Brigade and Corps formations, quality, adaptive leadership became a necessity to avoid crippling consequences to field armies. Likewise, with professionalism, modern leaders most certainly have been thrust, more than ever, into the political realm. In his recent testimony to Congress, General Daniel Allyn stated “decisive leaders strengthen the bond between our Army and the Nation and preserve our All-Volunteer Force.”⁴⁹

Citing Samuel P. Huntington's classic work *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations*, Murf Clark notes that "professionals gain expertise through prolonged education and experience."⁵⁰ Furthermore, and linking the concept of "the Army as a profession" directly to the writings of Rousseau and Voltaire, Clark continues that "officers, accordingly, must responsibly apply their expertise in a 'social context' in order to continue practicing within the profession."⁵¹ Among the first advocates of professionalizing military officership, Guibert and Saxe—both members of the nobility—ultimately undermined their system of privilege in deference to today's modern merit system. Though underappreciated, or not recognized at all, for their contribution to the advent of Mission Command, these enlightened men live on daily in the spirit of the art and science of today's greatest strategic thinkers.

Quoting Dr. Stephen R. Covey, Former Chairman Martin Dempsey summarized Mission Command as superior to all leadership tools because it moves "at the speed of trust."⁵² In practice, mastering the challenge and complexity of earning trust can only be accomplished through living the Army's core values and by absolute ethical conduct. During the Enlightenment, Locke, Voltaire, Kant, and others brought rationalism and science to ethics, extricating ethics from its religious roots in the hope that individual reason and experience would be the future guides to moral norms.⁵³ This study will now take a narrow look at how the Army can learn from and apply Enlightenment principles to better understand how to gain trust through value based, ethical leadership.

Values and Ethical Reasoning

Just as Voltaire and Guibert maintained reservations about unleashing the power of the masses in government and the military, the framers of the Constitution debated how to create checks and balances in a system that promoted freedom of action and

initiative. Fear of a large standing military plagued the founders, as did a mistrust for overreach into matters of politics. In Federalist Paper 29, Alexander Hamilton addresses the issue in the form of a question: "Where in the name of common-sense, are our fears to end if we may not trust our sons, our brothers, our neighbors, our fellow-citizens?"⁵⁴ Core values and ethical behavior, derived from family, institutionalized education systems, and reinforced daily in military thought, provided an amenable solution. These values would be shared with the American people at large, and derived from a constitutional mandate (social contract), to provide a check on the potential abuse of Mission Command. Hamilton concluded: "What shadow of danger can there be from men who are daily mingling with the rest of their countrymen and who participate with them in the same feelings, sentiments, habits and interests?"⁵⁵ Through this statement, he lays the foundation of trust through values and ethics.

"Army culture and values must be consistent with America's traditional values embodied in the constitution and the laws governing the Nation and the Army."⁵⁶ From the moment a citizen becomes a member of the United States Army, he or she is not only required to memorize the seven Army Values, but challenged to make them part of their everyday lifestyle. Likewise, hours of training are mandated annually for a review and study of "ethics" and the consequences of unethical practices. Many see this solely as a traditional senior officer practice of the "bureaucratic technique of averting future accusations of policy error or wrongdoing by deflecting responsibility in advance."⁵⁷ However, in reality, values and ethical reasoning are the bedrock of the American soldier's heritage and history. According to Gordon Wood, "America became the first nation in the world to base its nationhood solely on Enlightenment values."⁵⁸ The same

forces that drove Manifest Destiny during the 19th century provide context for our desire to spread our national values today.

Just as Mission Command relies on the Profession of Arms, so does the development of a values based, ethical culture. Although only formulated into doctrine recently, examples of the Army Ethic trace back to the “guidance of General Washington and Congress to the Continental Army.”⁵⁹ Based on Enlightenment ideas like civic virtue and egalitarianism, core values began to emerge within the ranks. Driven by a belief that the American Army stood for something greater than monarchical aspirations, leaders saw the need to capture and institutionalize these fundamental beliefs. Starting with the 2011 Army Profession Campaign, senior leaders began to define, formalize, and articulate the importance of “our covenant with the American people.”⁶⁰

Like Mission Command, this covenant traces its origins to Rousseau’s *Social Contract* and Locke’s *Second Treatise of Government*. Locke explained that societies bind themselves to their government becoming one “body politic,” and individuals within this collective put themselves “under an obligation to everyone in that society.”⁶¹ In swearing an oath, members of the U.S. military not only take on this obligation freely, but subjugate themselves to the moral and ethical expectations of the American populace. “Strange as it may sound, a competent military profession whose practitioners are characterized by loyalty, obedience, courage, integrity, and selflessness can be a moral anchor for a parent society that sometimes founders on huge waves of moral relativism, egoism, and acquisitiveness.”⁶²

Most recent literature suggests a “breakdown in ethical behavior and in the demonstration of moral courage” especially in senior military leaders.⁶³ Nearly two decades of continuous conflict, requiring deployments in harm’s way far from family, can have an altering effect on the moral compass of our force. Though an easy scapegoat, and deserving of continued analysis, this can be seen as causal in nature, but not getting at the real problem. Some observers suggest that the Army, like the society it represents, lives in a “morally gray” world—by-products of our social circumstances—which requires a new “ethical framework” to mitigate behavioral trends.⁶⁴ Others acknowledge that this problem is as old as time and that career and competitive pressures cause leaders to compromise their standards on a regular basis.⁶⁵

Volumes have and will be filled on the complexities of human nature. As senior leaders study these complexities and look to find ways to reintroduce ethics and values back into military formations, why not return to the philosophers of the Enlightenment? Beyond the obvious that arguably, never in known history was more written dedicated to understanding human nature and its implications on society, perhaps the more convincing argument lies in reconnecting leadership with their heritage. Richard Neustadt and Ernest May describe the study of history as a means of discovering the missing puzzle pieces in our lives as a means of solving future problems.⁶⁶ Thucydides echoes this sentiment instructing readers that his work stands as a “possession for all time,” as means of “understanding of the future.”⁶⁷ U.S. leaders conduct thorough studies of Thucydides, yet the voices of the Enlightenment remain mostly ignored or disregarded when it comes to the Army’s ability to define and combat their ethical dilemma.

As officers enter the hallowed halls of national and component staff and war colleges, they bask in the eloquent writings of Thucydides, Sun Tzu, and Clausewitz, each giving a historical perspective on the evolution of the art of warfare and military theory. Only Thucydides directly addresses ethics and values peripherally, strictly from a social and political perspective—not military—understandably so, as ancient Greece was the birthplace of ethics.⁶⁸ Still, in a lifetime of studies of the writings of the early American founders, one would be very hard pressed to find many (if any) references to Thucydides or Sun Tzu. American values evolved from the Age of Reason, not antiquity or the ancient Far East. If ethical behavior and values truly “form the framework of our profession and are nonnegotiable,” then wouldn’t shedding light on their origins be of considerable value?⁶⁹

In recent years, Army Pre-Command and Leadership schools have placed major emphasis on the importance of self-awareness. As one of the four domains of emotional intelligence, it drives leaders’ ability to navigate ethical dilemmas, and is the “foundation” to developing one’s “ideal self” as an ethical steward of the profession.⁷⁰ This very same concept, termed “self-critical awareness,” became one of the dominant tenets of the Enlightenment era. Although almost every *philosophe* of that period explored this conceptually through different lenses, among the best critical examinations of the topic come from Immanuel Kant’s *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* and *Critique of Pure Reason*.⁷¹ Kant repeatedly asked the question “what is Enlightenment” and why is it so important to achieving self-awareness? His answer was simple, yet elegant: “Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-imposed minority.”⁷²

Translated from German in various forms (minority, nonage, and “immaturity”), this awakening (emergence) from the slumber of “looking out for number one” comes through a manifestation of uncompelled good will. From Kant’s point of view, when individuals freely choose to do the right thing just because it is the right thing to do, there is a significant contribution to the overall value of humanity. Whether bound by duty, or exercising a virtuous expression of free will, choosing to honor the social contract and dedicating one’s life to a greater good through life-long learning is critical for leaders in understanding their role vis-à-vis society. Balancing self-interest with the collective will is a common thread connecting Enlightenment philosophies. Historian Nannerl Keohane eloquently summarized this collective idea as: “men acting on self-limiting impulses that would accept short-term limits on self-interest in exchange for perceived long-term gains.”⁷³

Bringing this concept back to Army Values, the idea of selfless service, personal courage, integrity, and the rest, all result from and depend upon an emergence from our Hobbesian self—where self-interest dominates our decision-making process.⁷⁴ In recognizing the common identity of all human beings, leaders can reinforce these transcendental values through example. Not just a movement of the mind, the Enlightenment provides social and political context to overcoming our natural inclinations. Enlightened leaders are able to live in a world where self-adulation is everywhere, and yet, they represent through their actions the common good and honor their profession. Through reason and self-awareness, leaders who understand where they come from, who they are, and where they are going will avoid the traps of “ethical fading.”⁷⁵

Conclusion/Recommendation

If the goal of Staff and War Colleges is to produce well rounded, strategic and critical thinkers, it is imperative to close the gap on theoretical studies between Thucydides and Clausewitz. Becoming leaders of the profession of arms requires “seeing the representative and participatory nature of thought” through a personal examination of seminal primary source material, not the reliance upon other’s interpretations.⁷⁶ Comparing history to a river, historians Richard Neustadt and Ernest May explain that “enlightening questions are the point of every method” of critical learning.⁷⁷ Fishing in the stream of history and closing knowledge gaps through a first-hand examination of the most influential works of the Enlightenment provides senior military leaders with the tools to operate in today’s volatile, ever changing, and complex environments.

Re-examining the Enlightenment as a means to broaden an understanding of Mission Command, values, and ethical reasoning cannot be underestimated in the future development of the Army officer corps. Reconnecting with the foundational principles of liberty, fraternity, tolerance, trust, and self-awareness, to name a few, through the lens of those who brought these enduring principles into the light will only enhance critical thinking and leadership studies. This study encourages incorporating blocks of instruction of both Enlightenment era military theorists and philosophers into intermediate and advanced military education systems to bridge the gap between Thucydides and Clausewitz. Furthermore, introducing the concept of “enlightened leadership” into our national strategic vision would support and reinforce the leadership competencies of character, competence, and commitment while helping to remind leaders of the stewardship and service that they provide to the American people.⁷⁸

Ultimately, the art of war and peace boils down to good leadership and a sound vision of the future. Enlightened minds will better navigate the minefields of a complex, ambiguous environment, while honoring their social contract with the American people as ethical leaders of their profession.

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