

Revolt of the generals: a case study in professional ethics

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Key concepts

- Examines the ethical issues associated with situations where military professionals feel impelled to express public dissent regarding orders from political leaders. Focuses on situations where the clearly foreseeable adverse consequences of obeying orders are so great that prudence expects the 'normal' rules of professional conduct to be set aside.
- Develops the argument in terms of (1) a hypothetical applying to a serving general officer, and (2) discussion of the principles involved.

Main points

- The issue arises from a recent incident in which a number of recently-retired US senior officers, almost all of whom had been in the inner circle of policy formulation for the war in Iraq, publicly criticised Administration policy and Secretary Rumsfeld in particular. Such 'public criticism and dissent from such a large number of highly-placed military leaders immediately following their service is without precedent'.
- The two possible extremes of interpretation are as follows: (1) retired officers are still technically part of the military and, in any case, military people should stay out of political matters entirely; and (2) such behaviour represents the highest standards of military professionalism.
- **The hypothetical.** You are a general officer who has given repeated advice to political leadership regarding the military feasibility of operational and strategic goals, but the administration has chosen a course of action that, in your opinion, is doomed to fail. You have done your best to carry out the administration's bidding. But, two years into the deployment, it is not only evident that your judgement was correct but it has become obvious that continuance of current policy is likely to lead to highly undesirable consequences. What are you going to do, what are your options?
- Distinguishes four categories of issues which imply different grades of ethical difficulty: obeying orders will involve (1) minimal moral discomfort, (2) substantial moral discomfort, (3) significantly compromise of one's moral standards, and (4) activities the officer cannot perform for moral reasons. **The dilemma arises with categories 2 and 3.**
- Further complicated by the Nuremberg trials having distinguished three distinct categories of war crimes: (1) violations of the laws of war and crimes against humanity, (2) planning, preparation, initiation of or waging a war... in violation of international treaties..., (3) participation in a common plan or conspiracy for the accomplishment of any of the acts above. **Again, the dilemma arises with categories 2 and 3.**
- Cites the opinion of others that there is a strong case for a general officer faced with such dilemmas to resign and speak out immediately instead of merely retiring. To do otherwise indicates deficiency in either **prudence** (i.e., lacked wisdom to see the full importance of the issues at the time that he/she resigned), **courage** (i.e., too timid), or **temperance** (i.e., too concerned about his/her position on the team or of future opportunities).
- Concludes that, 'if the intellectual component of military professional means anything, it encompasses rare cases of unambiguous bad military judgements that promise to have disastrous consequences. In such cases the obligations of military professionals, precisely because they are professionals and not merely obedient bureaucrats, need to exceed the conduct governed by rules derived from more routine contexts', and that this applies to retired officers as well as those on active duty.
- Further concludes that there are no absolute rules that can be used to govern professional behaviour. Rather, one has to rely on the three Aristotelian virtues (above), for which there is no rule except that 'we know virtue when we see it'.