

FEATURE ARTICLES

Still Lying to Ourselves: A Retrospective Look at Dishonesty in the Army Profession

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In 2015, the U.S. Army War College quietly posted a monograph entitled *Lying to Ourselves: Dishonesty in the Army Profession* to its public website (Wong & Gerras, 2015). The reaction to the study, inside and outside the Army, was loud and immediate—and for good reason. In the study, we posited that in the routine performance of their duties as leaders and commanders, most U.S. Army officers lie. We placed the blame for this finding on the Army’s penchant to deluge individuals and units with training and compliance requirements despite the obvious unfeasibility of executing all of them. Deception was encouraged and sanctioned by the Army institution as subordinates were forced to prioritize which requirements would be done to standard and which would only be reported as done to standard.

We went on to point out that mistruths had become so commonplace that there was seldom any ethical angst, deep soul-searching, or righteous outrage when routine dishonesty was encountered. Decisions to lie were not viewed as ethical choices because of the effects of *ethical fading*—when the “moral colors of an ethical decision fade

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into bleached hues that are void of moral implications” (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004, p. 224; see also Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011, p. 30-31). Ethical fading allows Army officers to convince themselves that considerations of right or wrong are not applicable to decisions that in any other circumstances would be ethical dilemmas. This is not so much because officers lack a moral foundation or adequate ethics training, but because psychological processes and influencing factors subtly neutralize the “ethics” from an ethical dilemma. Morally wrong behavior is transformed into socially acceptable conduct by dimming the glare and guilt of the ethical spotlight. The result is that untruthfulness is surprisingly common in the U.S. Army—and by implication, the larger U.S. military—even though members of the profession are loath to admit it.

We wrote *Lying to Ourselves* with a purpose captured in the study’s final sentences (Wong & Gerras, 2015):

The Army urgently needs to address the corrupting influence of dishonesty in the Army profession. This monograph is but one small step towards initiating that conversation and perhaps stimulating a modicum of action. (p.33)

In the following pages, we examine if the study accomplished or at least made progress in its intended goal. Since release of the study, the Army appears to

have gone through two general phases of reaction and is now in a third phase of organizational response.

Phase I: Denying the Obvious

The morning after the monograph appeared online, the *Washington Post* featured an article entitled, “Lying in the Army is Common, Army War College Study Says” (Lamothe, 2015). CNN followed with a headline proclaiming, “Study: U.S. Army Officers Lie Routinely” (Diamond, 2015). Both articles focused on the shocking notion that many Army officers were lying and neither focused much attention on the underlying ethical fading encouraged by the Army institution and described in the study. Dozens of other media outlets followed suit. The *Army Times* published a more comprehensive article, but interestingly accompanied the piece with a profile picture of an officer with a prominent Pinocchio-like nose (Lilley, 2015).

Although advance copies of the monograph had been sent to the Chief of Staff of the Army, as well as the heads of the Army legislative liaison and public affairs offices, the media attention appeared to have caught many in the senior Army leadership off guard. For example, one email sent to us by a senior Army decision maker asked, “Just how twisted is the media take on your research?” Without the benefit of reading the study, senior Army leaders appeared to be perceiving the study as a sensational and spurious attack on the

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Army profession. Their reaction centered more on minimizing the damage done to the Army's reputation than taking the time to address the validity of the issues raised in the study.

In hindsight, this should have been expected. Three factors appeared to be affecting the senior leader, and thus, the institutional Army initial reaction to the study. First, senior officers were largely reacting to not-so-flattering media coverage, not the study itself. Senior leaders tend to have tightly orchestrated schedules and lack the discretionary time to analytically examine a 34-page monograph. Thus, familiarity with the study was restricted to the narrow interpretation offered by the media. This became more obvious as conversations with many senior officers reflected awareness of the existence of the study, but relatively little understanding of the content.

A second factor was the institutional role of Army senior leaders. In a time of declining budgets and increased apprehension over public support of the military in general—and the Army in particular—senior leaders were very sensitive to potential threats to the Army's image and narrative. Damage control, rather than searching for solutions, was the initial top priority. Although the intent of the study was to better the profession by examining its detrimental organizational culture, many senior leaders apparently felt a more pressing responsibility to steward the profession by rebutting any perceived attacks.

Finally, a third factor influencing the initial reaction of senior officers to the study may have been based on their limited recent personal contact with much of the phenomena described in the monograph. While the study described a culture of crushing requirements and oppressive compliance, many senior officers had risen above that level of life long ago as they progressed

through their careers. For example, captains and other junior officers across the Army could relate to the overabundance of compliance documentation that, over the years, had been added to a soldier's simple act of requesting leave. Such accompanying documentation had grown to include a Travel Risk Planning System (TRiPS) assessment—an online questionnaire asking questions such as “Will you check the weather before departure?” Unfortunately, nearly all soldiers viewed TRiPS as a bureaucratic waste of time rather than an accurate appraisal. As one captain noted:

The focus for pretty much damn near every soldier is, “Hey, I just need to get this done so I can get my leave form in and get it approved.” So what do you do? You know what answers the survey wants. You click those answers. And it's sad, but it's the way it works. (Wong & Gerras, 2015, p. 10)

Senior officers desiring to take leave, on the other hand, were rarely required to submit little more than a one-page leave request, and often turned to their staffs to handle all administrative requirements.

The unfamiliarity of senior officers with the study's findings, their tendency to defend the Army's reputation, and their lack of awareness of the inundation of requirements placed on the force led one two-star division commander to wave the monograph before an auditorium full of officers and ask, “Does anyone buy this [crap]?” After being answered by silence, he continued, “I didn't think so. Now let's get on with more important topics.”

While the early reaction for many senior officers was one of denial, more junior officers—usually lieutenant colonel and below—seemed to have a different initial reaction. Junior officers appeared to have read the

monograph in large numbers and were quite familiar with the content of the study. One reason for junior officers taking the time to read the monograph may have been that they have more discretionary time than senior officers. But another factor was the familiarity of junior officers with social and online media. While there are few official Army outlets to conduct interactive discussions and debates on the profession, there are many active and dynamic online forums where current Army topics are considered and examined. Online venues such as *War on the Rocks*, *Task and Purpose*, and *Doctrine Man* were quick to feature the study and led to the tens of thousands of downloads of the monograph.

It was not unusual for all the officers in a battalion to download the study, read its assertions, and then conduct a professional development session discussing their perspectives and reactions. Interestingly, the most common initial reaction of the junior officer cohort was not one of denial or anger, but rather relief—and often amusement—that the debilitating culture of dishonesty was finally revealed. To many junior officers toiling in the Army’s formations, the study exposed what they considered to be an open secret. Because they lived and worked in the culture described in the monograph, they marveled not at the study’s arguments, but rather that it had taken so long for anyone to point out the obvious. For example, one commenter in *Doctrine Man* succinctly stated, “In other news, water is wet.”

The first phase in the reaction of the Army to *Lying to Ourselves* revealed a split between the senior and junior levels of the Army. At the lower levels, the study was met with surprise that it took a study to point out what should have been evident to all—that a culture of dishonesty plagues the Army. At the senior levels, the study was met largely with surprise and defensiveness

at an apparent assault on the profession. As weeks passed, a second phase began as senior leaders took the time to read—or at least be briefed on—the findings of the monograph.

Phase II: The Army Takes Notice

The second phase emerged with the monograph gaining attention as it became an easy-to-navigate reading for a discussion on the military profession. At the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, the Superintendent encouraged the Corps of Cadets to debate the study’s issues in the classroom, in informal discussions with mentors, and among themselves. The commander of United States European Command, a four-star Air Force general, instructed officers in his command to read the study and discuss the implications for the command, and for their respective branches of the military. Meanwhile, across the Army, hundreds of units were conducting professional development sessions with the study as the main topic. From Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) cadets to colonels at the U.S. Army War College, *Lying to Ourselves* became an integral part of the readings for classes in ethics and leadership.

Despite discussion and debate across the force, many officers in the Army wanted more than just talking. For example, a presentation on *Lying to Ourselves* to the senior leaders of the Judge Advocate General (JAG) Corps resulted in this comment from one colonel:

Would have REALLY liked to have followed [the Lying to Ourselves presentation] with a block of discussion about what it means for our Corps and what we need to be doing about it. One of the biggest problems with our Army was presented to the senior leaders of the Corps—considered the conscience of the Army—and then we thanked

[the study authors] and continued on our way without addressing the elephant in the room—What can WE do to change a culture of self-deceit? (Anonymous, n.d.)

The growing frustration that the time for action was overdue was reflected in an email sent in by an officer observing the situation from his unit:

Is my perception correct that the Army appreciated your work, but has done little to nothing to actually address the problem? What have you learned since publication—would you strengthen or temper the original piece? (Anonymous, n.d.)

At the higher levels, senior leaders and their staffs eventually began to confront the actual contents of the study. One of the early signals of this shift came from then Secretary of the Army John McHugh who was asked for his perspective on the study. “Are we asking our soldiers to do too much in insufficient time? I do think it’s a legitimate question,” Secretary McHugh responded. “I suspect some smart, appropriate housecleaning on our regulatory requirements for training would serve a useful purpose.” Concerning a possible reduction of training requirements, McHugh later added, “I believe, from what I know about the issue right now, that there’s some gains to be made in that area” (Thompson, 2015).

The wheels of Army bureaucracy turn slowly, so it took another three years and a change in administrations before the Department of the Army took significant action. In 2018, Secretary of the Army Mark Esper began issuing memorandums modifying or eliminating training requirements across the Army. Eventually, sixteen memos were signed leading to the elimination of over forty-five Department of the Army level training and administrative requirements (Office

of the Secretary of the Army, October 2018). The first requirement listed for elimination was the TRiPS assessment required for soldiers requesting leave. A joint memo sent by the Chief of Staff of the Army and the Secretary of the Army introduced the effort to reduce requirements placed on the force:

Over time, the Army has accumulated a long list of “mandatory training” tasks, each individually put in place by well-intentioned leaders to protect the force. At this point, however, the cumulative weight of all these requirements is distracting units from training to deploy, fight, and win our Nation’s wars. . . . To address this, the Army staff is reviewing all mandatory training to determine which ones to keep, eliminate, or consolidate. (Office of the Secretary of the Army, personal communication, September 2018)

With *Lying to Ourselves* being discussed across the Army and policy changes being implemented at the highest levels, it appeared we had succeeded in our original goal of initiating conversation and stimulating action to address the culture of dishonesty in the Army. Interestingly, while our research focus was directed at the U.S. Army, other branches of the U.S. military, foreign militaries, and civilian professions began contacting us to extrapolate our findings into their organizations. Using the U.S. Army as a case study, we presented our research to diverse audiences including professional fire fighters, midshipmen at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy, cadets at the U.S. Air Force Academy, and family practice physicians.

Phase III: Mired in a Culture of Dishonesty

Lying to Ourselves spurred a critically needed dialog across the profession and senior Army leaders followed up with demonstrable policy changes. Despite those

accomplishments, a corrosive culture of dishonesty remains stubbornly steadfast in today's Army. Several factors account for this bleak assessment. First, senior leaders continue to be reluctant to address rampant dishonesty head-on. While policy changes directed by the Secretary and Chief of Staff of the Army were well-intentioned, the rationale given for eliminating requirements was not to address the culture of dishonesty, but rather to improve unit readiness. Redirecting the conversation to the genteel topic of unit readiness steers clear of the disturbing implications of widespread deceit. Until the senior levels of the Army join in the dialog concerning dishonesty, the culture will remain firmly entrenched in the Army.

Second, in the monograph we attributed the culture of dishonesty to the avalanche of requirements placed on units and individuals. In hindsight, we were only partially correct. We should have looked deeper to examine why the Army creates so many administrative, training, and compliance requirements in the first place. The Army is quick to generate requirements because it is an organization engaged in high-stakes endeavors that expects perfection—or at least continuous progress—in everything from unit readiness, to making sure soldiers on leave travel safely, to winning wars that any informed observer would classify as quagmires.

We neglected to argue in the monograph that the Army's predilection for perfection is problematic in a profession that is inherently human and in a world that is far from unblemished (Lindsay, 2021). While aspiring for perfection is admirable, individuals, units, and armies are imperfect. An expectation of constant flawlessness in all aspects of performance is fulfilled only by deception from the ranks below, and denial or delusion from the ranks above. Until the Army learns

to tolerate less-than-perfect reporting, dishonesty will continue to be the default solution for individuals and units trapped by unrealistic expectations.

Finally, in the monograph, we purposefully avoided advocating self-advancement as a primary motivation for lying. Our logic was that more leaders would acknowledge the culture of dishonesty if we sidestepped the notion that many officers lie for self-serving reasons. In retrospect, we were too quick to provide an easy escape from the introspection we desired from each Army leader. Instead of encouraging culture change by urging individuals to examine their own motives, decisions, and actions, we overemphasized organizational and policy solutions. We should have pointed out that while Army policies and regulations create an onerous environment, the decision to lie is facilitated by an individual's aspirations to succeed in the Army. Competition between peers will always create underlying pressure to tell the system what it wants to hear.

Competition between peers will always create underlying pressure to tell the system what it wants to hear.

There are two unfortunate possible implications of the current state of the Army culture. First, if the Army fails to address its never-ending pursuit of perfection, requirements will continue to be generated and passed down at all levels of the Army. Leaders across the Army will become more disillusioned and cynical as they are forced to decide which requirements will be executed and which will have to be "pencil whipped." The second possible implication is worse. As time goes on with no meaningful reprieve from the onslaught of requirements, leaders in units throughout the Army

will soothe their frustrations and cognitive dissonance by once again dimming the ethical spotlight and allowing concerns of integrity and honesty to gently fade away. With ethical fading fully restored, the Army will be able to hypocritically trumpet the nobleness of the profession while remaining mired in a culture that encourages duplicity and deceit. That implication is regrettably the exact opposite of the intended purpose of *Lying to Ourselves*.

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