

# Ephemeral Ethics

By Col. Daniel Smith (Ret.) | May 20, 2005

In 1975, polls showed that only 20% of the U.S. population age 18-29 trusted the Pentagon. That number tended upward through the next quarter century until, by 2000, the military stood head and shoulders above every other national institution in the public's trust. A March 2003 poll of 1,200 college undergraduates by the Harvard Institute of Politics found that 75% said the military would "do the right thing" most or all of the time. Gallup reported a similar finding a year later.

That level of trust seems to have crashed—"big time."

If so, the underlying cause may lie in the broader society of a decade or more ago. With economic pressures growing and two-income families more common, neighbors had less time and energy to interact. Trust on the interpersonal level declined, a trend reinforced by accelerated loss of faith in government, which seemed incapable of meeting both current needs and preserving opportunities for a better future for future generations. The "politics of mistrust" divided the nation, among ordinary citizens as well as the elites who operated in the ephemeral realms where national policy is formulated, where the nation's reputation should blend with national interests, where acts confirm or subvert words and ideals.

Divisions are inherent in a democracy, but not divisions so deep that trust in the overall system, let alone in specific institutions, is lost. Yet that is where the U.S. seems to find itself six months after the 2004 elections.

Whether this "trust deficit" is temporary or not is hard to gauge. Recent polls asking about trust in public institutions are scarce. The Edelman "Annual Trust Barometer" poll released in January 2005 indicated that mistrust of government is on the rise. Edelman, a public relations firm, interviewed 1,500 leaders in eight countries (U.S., Canada, Brazil, Japan, Britain, France, Germany, China) and found that nongovernmental organizations "are now the most trusted institution" everywhere except in China. In contrast, government, both executive and the legislative, plummeted in esteem. This finding was echoed in a March 17, 2005 Harris Survey poll that saw a 15% drop in the U.S. public's confidence in

Pentagon leadership—the largest one-year drop for any institution in the 38 years Harris has asked the public to rate institutions.

## Torture, Accountability, and (Mis)Trust

The obvious explanation for this unprecedented decrease is the Iraq cauldron in general and the hell inflicted by "eight bad apples" in Abu Ghraib in particular. But such an "explanation" is simplistic as well as insufficient. A March 2005 State Department report to the UN Committee Against Torture points directly to a military-wide failure of both individual ethical behavior and professional standards. The report acknowledged that 190 incidents of detainee abuse by U.S. military and other government employees had been substantiated. Penalties meted out to those who committed breaches included 30 courts-martial, 46 nonjudicial punishments, 15 reprimands and administrative actions, separations, or other steps—to which must be added a reduction in rank (from brigadier general to colonel) for a reserve general, one additional non-judicial punishment (letter of reprimand and a fine) for a colonel, and 180 days in jail and a dishonorable discharge for an enlisted specialist.

That abuse and even torture occurred in numerous locations in Afghanistan and Iraq and at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, points to either a systemic problem—for which the military hierarchy should be accountable for leadership failures—or a deliberate undermining of international law and mores that fostered an aura of impunity—for which the Pentagon's civilian hierarchy and very senior Bush administration policymakers should be held to account. But

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none of the 14 completed enquiries into torture and other prisoner abuse has pursued either of these options; at most, the reports that have entered the public domain have spoken of “missed opportunities” and confusing revisions in the list of “approved” psychological and physical interrogation techniques issued to field units by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez.

With the senior command levels so easily escaping all accountability—including administrative penalties for failures of leadership—when troops in their command egregiously violate such fundamental laws of war as the Geneva Conventions, it should not surprise anyone to find the following (or similar) headlines in major newspapers: “Pentagon Analyst Charged With Disclosing Military Secrets;” “Audit of Iraq Spending Spurs Criminal Probe;” and “Ammo Seized in Colombia; Two G.I. Suspects Arrested”—within which the reporter noted that five U.S. military personnel had been arrested five weeks earlier for cocaine smuggling. What might be surprising is that all three stories broke on the same day: May 5, 2005.

These reports were followed on May 12 by another describing a drug bust (“U.S. Soldiers, Law Officers Snared in Border Drug Sting”) in which military personnel running drugs brazenly wore uniforms and drove military vehicles. And parents then were treated to accounts of military recruiters advising teens to forge documents and lie on application forms. Investigations have resulted in the reassignment of eight recruiters (another eight “bad apples?”), and

Recruiting Command will take a day off for training on military ethics.

Training may help on the fringes, but more directed action by the U.S. public is needed if the nation is to pierce the aura of impunity with which senior civilian and military personnel have endeavored to surround themselves. The republic deserves—and it is entitled to demand from the commander in chief and the Secretary of Defense on down—the practice of the highest personal ethic and professional standards in all matters pertaining to the commonweal. It is no accident that we describe the military as a “service,” for it is endowed with the people’s authority and trust. Any whose actions or inactions violate this trust also violate the ethic of service—at which point the people need to revoke and reclaim their mandate.

The prevalence of ephemeral ethics today argues for the people to act.

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Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPIF), a joint project of the International Relations Center (IRC, formerly Interhemispheric Resource Center, online at [www.irc-online.org](http://www.irc-online.org)) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at [www.ips-dc.org](http://www.ips-dc.org)). ©2005. All rights reserved.

**Foreign Policy In Focus**

“A Think Tank Without Walls”

Recommended citation:

Col. Daniel Smith (Ret.), “Ephemeral Ethics,” (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, May 20, 2005).

Web location:

<http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2005/0505ethics.html>

Production Information:

Writer: Col. Daniel Smith (Ret.)

Editor: John Gershman, IRC

Layout: Tonya Cannariato, IRC

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