Military Honor in the Twenty-First Century: Some Contemporary Challenges

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FRANCISCO LOBO, MAY 25 2021

'We use words like honor, code, loyalty. We use these words as the backbone of a life spent defending something. You use them as a punchline!' This is a quote from Jack Nicholson's famous 'You can't handle the truth' speech in the film 'A few good men'. In the scene set in a court martial, Nicholson's character, USMC Colonel Jessup, admonishes his cross-examiner who is more lawyer than naval officer and who doesn't seem to grasp the complexities of modern military work, including its core values such as honor. Colonel Jessup thinks that civilians don't understand honor. They use it as a punchline. Or as Falstaff, the main character of Verdi's eponymous opera, snidely remarks: 'Che dunque l'onore? Una parola!' ('What, then, is honor? A word!').

Are Falstaff and Jessup right? Is honor for most of us just a word, a punchline? Do we even use it anymore as a concept in real life? According to Kwame Anthony Appiah, author of 'The Honor Code', 'We may think we have finished with honor, but honor isn't finished with us'. Indeed, Appiah postulates that the concept of honor has always been at the center of our deep moral need for recognition and respect of our shared human dignity. Thus, honor is not just the province of the military, although some, like Colonel Jessup or military ethicist Peter Olsthoorn, do believe that the military might be 'the last stronghold of honor' in modern life. But even if we agree that honor feels more at home in the military, it still faces some contemporary challenges within that milieu that need to be addressed. These challenges are both of a conceptual and practical nature.

To begin with, military honor does not have a fixed definition. Although it is clearly stated as a military value or virtue by the armies of some countries – such as the United States, Chile, and Japan – in several modern militaries honor does not even feature among their set of core values and virtues. One reason for this is that military honor has a rather dark history in some countries, such as Germany, where the SS official motto was 'My Honor is Loyalty' ('Meine Ehre heißt Treue'). Another reason might be because honor is sometimes associated or equated with other military virtues, such as honesty and integrity. And this protean nature of military honor might spring precisely from a lack of conceptual clarity surrounding the term.

Within the specialized literature on military ethics, scholars like Paul Robinson point out the difference between 'internal honor' (i.e., a sense of integrity stemming from acting according to one's own conscience) and 'external honor' (i.e., social prestige and reputation). Robinson posits that the virtues of prowess, courage, loyalty, and truthfulness 'form the unchanging core of military honour'. For other authors, like Sidney Axinn and Michael Ignatieff, military honor involves not just honesty and selflessness, but also showing restraint and respect towards civilians and even the enemy. Further, according to Shannon French and Larry May, a sense of honor is what separates the military from mere killers, as the former are proudly held to a higher ethical standard of behavior than the rest of society.

Now, many of these definitional nuances connect with some current empirical challenges bearing on the practice of military honor. To name only two, the militaries of both Australia and the U.S. have been recently affected by events that could be looked at through the prism of military honor to gain a clearer perspective.

In December of 2020, a damning report on misconduct by Australian Special Forces in Afghanistan was released.

The inquiry, otherwise known as the Brereton Report, documents 39 unlawful killings and instances of cruel treatment between 2005 and 2016, perpetrated by Australia's most trusted and prestigious elite soldiers. Consequently, Australian authorities appointed a special investigator to prosecute potential criminal liabilities arising from the events recounted in the report. The report further encloses an annex containing the ethical assessment of David Whetham, Director of the Centre for Military Ethics at King's College London. According to Whetham, the abuses were committed as a result of a gradual erosion of professional standards due to a deleterious sense of exceptionalism among special forces units where a 'warrior mentality' was allowed to fester.

But what is it that ultimately separates the 'warrior' from the 'professional soldier'? Although never mentioned as a virtue or value throughout the Brereton Report – at least not in the non-redacted parts made available to the public – I believe that military honor is a key notion that can help us draw the line. Even though we train and pay for special forces to go to war, as a society we believe that there are limits to what can be done in our name even in the heat of battle, and therefore we want them to behave like soldiers rather than warriors. We believe in the Law of Armed Conflict and in broader *in bello* moral standards, including the restraints that Axinn and Ignatieff think form an integral part of military honor. In other words, military honor is what separates a professional soldier, who observes the rules in the name of society, from a mere warrior, who only seeks to kill regardless of what they are fighting (or who they are fighting) for.

A second practical challenge to contemporary military honor also refers to misconduct by military personnel, this time with regard to sexual violence within the ranks of the U.S. military. In early May of 2021, General Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the U.S. Department of Defense, declared that he would no longer oppose a proposal to take decisions on sexual assault and sexual harassment prosecution out of the hands of commanders, due to the recalcitrant nature of sexual violence and concerns over the impartiality of commanders when deciding whether or not to prosecute the cases. One of such cases is the recent murder of Specialist Vanessa Guillen at Fort Hood, Texas, who had been sexually harassed before she was killed by a fellow soldier. Reporting on these recent developments and on the pervasiveness of sexual violence in the U.S. military, John Ismay concludes that: 'While there is momentum behind such a policy change compared with years past, it's unclear when Congress might take up the issue and put it to a vote'.

In light of this second challenge, we may ask: what does military honor demand when facing the problem of sexual violence within the armed forces? If we return to French's and May's idea of military honor as a higher ethical standard of behavior, then the answer is clear: military honor requires not only that women in the armed forces receive treatment equal to what they are entitled to in civil society; the military must do even better. As Kate Germano and David G. Smith have pointed out, 'gender equity in the military is a form of civic justice'. And the data shows that the U.S. armed forces are dramatically falling short of the expectations that come with military honor in this sense, not only in terms of sexual violence prevention, but also regarding gender equality more broadly.. This concern is what recently prompted Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin to order the creation of an Independent Review Commission on Sexual Assault in the Military.

Admittedly, in a highly traditional environment such as the military, some might say that a quaint concept like military honor is simply not equipped to harbor modern notions of justice and equality, including accountability for war crimes and human rights violations or the prevention and prosecution of sexual violence – honor being, after all, but a simple word, 'una parola'. But I believe that societies can adopt what Ronald Dworkin called an 'interpretive attitude' toward honor, in particular military honor. Dworkin used the concept of 'courtesy' to illustrate how social values evolve on account of an interpretive attitude that develops around a given practice, meaning that participants in the practice assume that it has some value or point and that what the practice requires is actually sensitive to that point or purpose. Thus, the recipients of our courtesy may evolve from nobility, the elderly, women, and so forth, depending on what we believe better advances the purpose of the practice.

And so, after grappling with all these definitional and practical challenges, here is the 'punchline': I conclude that military honor is a concept that elicits an interpretive attitude and therefore can evolve to accommodate new contents and meanings, for instance, professionalism and restraint in the conduction of hostilities and an enhanced sense of fairness in the treatment of all military personnel. Honor might be only a word, but it is probably one of the most

important words we have – one that we would have inscribed in the hearts of our military men and women more than any medal, award, or decoration.

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