

Command Climate

By Lt. Col. Joseph Doty and Maj. Joe Gelineau

The moral compass of the Army is the PL and the CO. I told every one of my PLs that they have to set that moral standard, that once you slip to the left, you can't pull your guys back in.

—Capt. Dan Kearney, *New York Times Magazine*, February 24, 2008

In this era of persistent conflict, with the focus on counterinsurgency (COIN) operations, a unit's command climate is vital to our nation's long-term success at all levels of war—tactical, operational and strategic.

Command climate is the culture of a unit. It is the way a unit "conducts business." The leader of the organization is *solely* responsible for the organization's command climate. Commanders at all levels establish this climate by what they say and what they do. Character-based leadership is the bedrock requirement for a successful command climate.

Commanders send clear messages to their units by the way they do simple things and the things they check (an

arms room inventory, a material readiness report, appropriate use of rules of engagement and escalation of force, timely and accurate reporting of checkpoints, and so on). For example, commanders (leaders) who give cursory attention to the importance of accurate (ethical) reporting, training to standard, discipline under fire and treatment of noncombatants set a command climate that is prone to failure (or worse).

What follows is a response from a former brigade commander in Afghanistan to the question, "How much does/can command climate prevent ethical lapses (atrocities) from occurring?"

Command climate has everything to do with it, but I would define it broadly to include discipline, leadership, training and understanding of the environment as well as values: courage, respect ... there is no excuse for atrocities or indiscriminate killing—it's criminal behavior, and we are not criminals. We've lost 41 killed and 330-plus wounded without any lapses in discipline and are winning this COIN campaign.

We investigate every civilian death [according to Army regulation] 15-6 and do the right thing, be it solatia, express remorse or apologize if we were wrong for any innocent civilians killed; we obviously do not apologize for enemy killed, and we always emphasize how the enemy endangers the civilians by fighting among them. The unwillingness or decision not to do this is staggering. How can we expect to keep the population with us if we do not live American values and respect indigenous cultural values?

We were sent here to win the COIN, the center of gravity of which is the people. To do that, we live and model our American values and re-

spect Afghan values; in all we do, we seek to do no harm to the people and always do the right thing. If you do that, you retain the moral high ground, without which we lose.

Historically, there are examples of questionable command climates resulting in behaviors that are not in tune with our professional military ethic or a result of character-based leadership. An AR 15-6 investigation report, released by the Department of the Army in 2000, concluded that the command climate in Company A, 3rd Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division, serving on a peacekeeping mission in Kosovo, resulted in a West Point lieutenant (torture) and a staff sergeant (rape and murder) being involved in criminal conduct. The unit's battalion commander, also a West Point graduate, believed that his unit was only doing what the situation required. Some of this "required" behavior included grabbing ethnic Albanian women's breasts, drinking alcohol in violation of Army rules and roughing up ethnic Albanians. A unit's motto is a reflection of its command climate and a window into the way the unit conducts its business—the company's motto was "shoot 'em in the face."

In 2003 and 2004 during Operation Iraqi Freedom, the 4th Infantry Division's Lt. Col. Allen West (firing a weapon adjacent to an Iraqi detainee's head) and Lt. Col. Nate Sassaman (his subordinates throwing Iraqi detainees into the Tigris River) were involved in questionable ethical behavior, which resulted in both being released from the Army. There can be no doubt their units' command climates factored into what they did and why they did it.

Soldiers in units are going to do exactly what their leaders allow and exemplify. The most egregious case is the My Lai massacre during the Vietnam War. Appropriate questions to reflect on in this case are: Can part of the blame be placed on the fact that the locals were all "gooks"? Had the enemy been so dehumanized that this (and other) atrocities had to occur? What was the command climate in this unit?

How does a leader establish a command climate? Most importantly, a command climate is set by what the leader says and does. Leaders must set the example. Period. Soldiers watch their leaders and follow the examples they set. Equally important, the leader must set the standard and enforce the standard. Walking by or ignoring *any* violations of a unit's command climate is setting a new command climate. Commanders can set a climate that fosters open and honest communication—both up and down the chain of command. This type of leader is an approachable leader who does not shoot the messenger and fosters a climate of trust in the organization. A commander who "cuts out the knees" of people who bring him bad news will foster a climate in which the unit will hide bad news or lie about it.

Leaders also set a command climate by articulating what the core values of the unit are. Core values are those non-negotiable tenets that permeate the unit and guide everything the unit does or fails to do and the manner in which it does so. Core values are often articulated in a commander's philosophy. For core values to be most effective, they should be limited to three to five. Why only three to five? Because when a unit focuses on too much, it ends up focusing on nothing. Clarity and simplicity are paramount when establishing a command climate. For example, the following definition of discipline could be a catchy yet effective battalion phrase that articulates a command climate: "Doing what should be done, when it should be done; doing it the best it can be done; and doing it that way every time."

A unit's core values, its command climate, should not be confused or replaced with the seven Army Values (loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity and personal courage), the Soldier's Creed or the Warrior Ethos. These values, beliefs and creeds are vitally important and are the Army's strategic themes and values. At the unit level, however, it is more effective to use the KISS ("Keep It Simple, Stupid") principle and emphasize those three to five themes that will be

voiced nonstop in the unit.

Arguably, in conventional forces (not special operations), command climate is set at the battalion level. Although brigade-and-above commanders will establish a command climate, it is at the battalion level where the most profound and effective influence occurs. Battalion-level commanders are the lowest level commanders centrally selected by the Department of the Army, and they most closely "touch" and influence soldiers' attitudes and behaviors. Counterinsurgency operations, which are often decentralized at company- and platoon-level operations, highlight the importance of battalion commanders establishing and enforcing—by their presence ("leadership by walking around")—a moral/ethical command climate. Company commanders and platoon leaders are at the execution level of the battalion commander's command climate (as alluded to in the introductory quotation by Capt. Kearney).

Most importantly, if a battalion-level commander does *not* set and enforce a command climate, subclimates *will* be established by leaders in the unit. Subordinate leaders within the unit with referent and expert power (charisma) will establish subcultures that may or may not be what the unit commander desires.

Setting a moral/ethical command climate must be an *intentional* process by commanders and is a requirement to maintain the moral high ground in this era of persistent conflict. □

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