

# Keeping David from Bathsheba: the Four-Star General's Staff as Nathan

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*ABSTRACT Readers of reports on ethical failures by four-star general officers must wonder, 'Don't they have staffs to ensure that the general follows ethics rules?' The Department of Defense publishes robust ethics guidance in several documents; however, a staff's best efforts to implement this guidance may fail to make an impression on a senior leader who is subject to the 'Bathsheba syndrome,' an allusion by Ludwig and Longenecker (1993) to the biblical account where the prophet Nathan rebuked King David for his moral failings. This paper proposes a methodology to enable senior headquarters staffs to play the role of Nathan in supporting ethical behaviors by high-level officers. It examines the mechanisms that embed ethical behavior within members of those staffs in carrying out their three principal roles of advising, scheduling and transporting the four-star officer. The authors offer a framework based on an ethical infrastructure of organizational climate proposed by Tenbrunsel, Smith-Crowe, and Umphress (2003); it focuses the staff's daily efforts to mitigate risk across seven ethical 'danger areas' that threaten ethical failures by senior officers.*

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## **‘Keeping David from Bathsheba: the Four-Star General’s Staff as Nathan’**

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American citizens and uniformed service members continue to read reports of ethical failures by senior general and flag officers. They rightly wonder about a series of questions: ‘Don’t officers have a staff to keep them out of trouble?’ ‘Isn’t there ethics guidance the staff is supposed to follow when they make travel arrangements for the general?’ ‘Why didn’t they know that the admiral shouldn’t meet with that person during official business?’ Ethics guidance does exist in the Department of Defense (DoD), under the umbrella of the *Joint Ethics Regulation* (JER) (DoD 2011) and its complementary *Joint Travel Regulations* (JTR) (PDTTAC 2014).<sup>1</sup> These publications provide specific prohibitions and establish expectations to preclude unauthorized actions and potentially unethical behavior. Staff members should consult these guidelines as they go about the daily business of supporting their senior officers. The three important duties of such a staff are to advise on policies and decisions; to schedule attendance at official and unofficial events; and to arrange transportation for these events.

Unfortunately, the ‘advise-schedule-transport’ activities present vulnerabilities to the ethical performance of duties for senior officers and their headquarters. In practice, senior officers and their staffs do not always agree on how to interpret and apply the JER and JTR guidance. A 2012 report by the DoD Inspector General (DoDIG 2012c: 1–4) substantiated misconduct by Army General William ‘Kip’ Ward regarding official travel including improper use of a government motor vehicle, abuse of government funds, and misuse of his official position as commander of United States Africa Command from 2007 to 2011. The report reveals warnings by two key members of his staff—the staff judge advocate (SJA, or legal adviser) and executive officer (XO)—about General Ward’s travel and attendance at certain events. The

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official report (2012c: 10–11, 16, 20, 36, 46, 51) exposes an attitude of ‘do whatever it takes to support the boss’ that improperly shaped the advice by other members of General Ward’s staff. He chose to accept this advice despite the warnings of the SJA and XO; the subsequent Inspector General report led to his official censure (Holman 2012). General Ward is far from being the only senior military officer caught in the ethical spotlight. The missteps of Admiral James Stavridis at U.S. European Command during 2009–2011 and of other senior officers are catalogued in the DoD *Encyclopedia of Ethical Failure* (DoD 2015) and a variety of other investigation findings (DoDIG 2012b).

As leaders in the profession of arms, general and flag officers are ultimately responsible for their own decisions and conduct. They, like any leader in a position of high-level authority, are vulnerable to falling prey to the moral trap called the ‘Bathsheba syndrome.’ Ludwig and Longenecker (1993: 265) coined that term to explain how leaders who have become accustomed to success often think that societal and organizational norms do not apply to them. Subsequently, successful leaders reach for ‘forbidden fruit,’ succumbing to the temptation offered by access to valuable information and control over organizational resources. King David was confronted with his misdeeds by the prophet Nathan in the biblical story about Bathsheba; however, staffs do a disservice to their general officers if they cannot shield them from ethical temptation before they commit a misstep.

Two initiatives are suggested for empowering the senior headquarters staff. First, a framework is proposed for addressing seven ethical ‘danger areas’ frequently encountered in senior officer headquarters and establishing the role of two key staff officers who are well-positioned to act as Nathan. Second, the paper emphasizes the importance of the senior officer in

setting an organizational climate in the headquarters where ethical behavior is the expected norm. Building an ‘ethical infrastructure’ proposed by behavioral ethics scholars Tenbrunsel et al. (2003) provides a way for senior officers to do so. The success of these initiatives first requires an understanding of the military headquarters environment.

### **The Senior Officer and the Staff**

The military profession and, more importantly, the American public expect ethical behavior from general and flag officers, regardless of the number of stars and the status of that officer as a commander or a senior staff officer. Having an ethical framework for the staff will prove useful to address the most complex organizational case facing a senior officer—the American four-star general or admiral who commands one of three types of headquarters. Each command is a large, multifaceted organization, which the senior officer is charged explicitly by the Secretary of Defense to lead and steward its resources, while maintaining the special trust and confidence of the profession of arms.

These types of command are: (1) the nine U.S. unified combatant commands in the United States and Germany (see Obama 2011); (2) the U.S. sub-unified command and multinational headquarters in the Republic of Korea (USFK n.d.); and (3) top-level commands within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO n.d.). Figure 1 depicts a notional—but not uncommon—composition (CJCS 2013: Ch. IV; CAC 2014a: Ch. 2) of the *command group* and the *personal* and *support staffs* in a joint four-star command (the roles of these three entities will be addressed in detail later).<sup>2</sup>

Notional Command Group (different services and nations)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commander (4-star)</li> <li>• Chief of Staff (3-star)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deputy Commander (4-star/3-star)</li> <li>• Deputy Chief(s) of Staff (2-star)</li> <li>• Assistant Chief of Staff (O-6)</li> </ul>
Notional Personal Staff (usually U.S. multi-service)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Political Adviser (senior civilian)</li> <li>• Secretary of the Joint Staff (O-6)</li> <li>• Inspector General (O-6)</li> <li>• Public Affairs Officer (O-6)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Senior Enlisted Adviser (E-9)</li> <li>• <b>Staff Judge Advocate (O-6)</b></li> <li>• <b>Chaplain (O-6)</b></li> <li>• <b>Protocol Officer (civilian)</b></li> </ul>
Notional Support Staff (different services and nations)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Special Assistant (O-6)</b> (travels with commander)</li> <li>• Chief, Commander's Action Group (O-6) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aides-de-camp (O-4)</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Flag Writer (enlisted)</li> <li>• Driver(s) (enlisted)</li> <li>• Community Liaison Officer (civilian) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interpreter(s)(civilian)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Executive Officer (O-6)</b> ("calendar czar")</li> <li>• Speechwriter (O-3 to O-5)</li> <li>• Enlisted Aide(s)</li> <li>• Communications Team (enlisted)</li> <li>• Personal Security Detail (enlisted)</li> </ul>
O-6: colonel/(Navy) captain	O-5: lieutenant colonel/commander
O-4: major/lieutenant commander	O-3: captain/(Navy) lieutenant
E-9: sergeant major/chief master sergeant/master chief petty officer	

**Figure 1. Notional staff manning for a joint multinational 4-star command**

There is no question that a senior officer in charge of a high-level command composed of a single military service (for example, U.S. Army Pacific or the Air Force's Tactical Air Command or the Navy's Third Fleet) faces many of the same challenges. However, the three types of multi-service four-star commands chosen for this paper present the highest complexity in two important aspects of a headquarters' mission: *staff manning* and *external relationships*, where both are contributors to ethical challenges.

First, the four-star command group and the personal and support staffs are manned by officers, noncommissioned officers and civilian employees from any of the five military services—Army, Marine Corps, Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard. While they all take the same oath of allegiance to the U.S. Constitution, members of each military service are socialized into their particular organizational culture and its approach to solving problems and interacting with people (see Builder 1989; Cerjan 1994; Gerras et al. 2008). If the four-star headquarters is located overseas, some staff members may be assigned from the host-nation military and civilian defense establishment, or may be foreign national employees of the U.S. government. Foreign national employees bring their own worldview and workplace regulations to the organizational climate of the staff. Additionally, military members from another nation operate not only within their national worldview but also under the influence of their particular military organizational culture.

Second, four-star commanders and their staffs routinely interact with people at the political–strategic level. These external agents range from civil government and military officials (U.S., allied, host nation, competitor) to distinguished visitors (DV) across the spectrum of civil society. DVs present ethical challenges unique to their identity; they may be academics, cultural and entertainment celebrities, leaders of commercial industry and volunteer service agencies, and revered national personalities. Whether the DVs know it or not, the U.S. four-star officers are constrained in such encounters by a host of policies, regulations and laws; among them are the foundational JER and JTR but more importantly, a Status of Forces Agreement with the host nation’s government. Again, these commands illustrate the most complex case; many of the

same challenges confront lower-ranking general-officer commanders and their staffs in other headquarters.

Although the men and women staffing these commands come from different U.S. military service cultures, their organizational ethical foundations are very similar to Army ethics command policy. Accordingly, the discussion and recommendations in this paper are Army-centric, but they apply equally to members of *any* of the military services who work in high-level staff groups. This discussion presents the role of Nathan in the biblical story before demonstrating the framework to empower staff officers to act like him.

### **Who is Nathan?**

The ‘Bathsheba syndrome’ originates with the account in the Bible’s book of 2 Samuel (2 Sam. 11:1–6 English Standard Version) where King David abuses the power of his office to covet the wife of one of his officers who was away on campaign, a woman named Bathsheba. To prevent her husband from discovering David’s affair, the king compounded his moral failing by arranging for the husband to be posted at the most dangerous point in a battle, where he was killed (2 Sam. 11:14–17). David did not begin his career on the throne of Israel and Judah this way, but rather as a man renowned for his humility and moral character. However, his ethical judgment faltered as his success increased and David might have been corrupted wholly if not for the remonstrance of the prophet Nathan.

A prophet is usually associated with delivering divinely inspired revelations. No such celestial connection is needed, however, for the risky business of delivering bad news to a superior; the common trope ‘speaking truth to power’ demands only a person who is confident he is acting righteously. In this vein, the prophet Nathan forcefully reproved his king, David, for

his sins of adultery and manslaughter with candor and vigor, yet with respect (2 Sam. 12:1–12). However, Nathan’s intent was not simply to admonish David for his reprehensible actions but to transform him into a more humble and ethical leader; arguably, his rebuke set the stage for the rest of David’s career as Israel’s greatest king. A modern Nathan has the same obligation to a senior officer—to promote adherence to the high standards of the military profession through proactive ethical conversations.

General Ward’s ethical lapses were not as grave as those committed by David, but to apply the analogy of Nathan and David, military scholars Stallard and Sanger (2014: 43) ask, ‘Could [General Ward’s] career and reputation have been saved by a subordinate who reproved him? We cannot know the answer, but what we know is that a four-star general’s misconduct was enabled by personnel who should have known better.’ For the sequence of ethical missteps, there were ‘acts of commission (by others who join in) and omission (in which others fail to take personal responsibility to address ethical violations)’ (Allen 2015b: 25). Consequently, a general officer needs his or her Nathan to *preempt* potential wrongdoing, rather than simply condemn it after the fact.

Begin with the premise that senior commanders want to carry out their duties in an ethical manner. To this end, they depend on three groups of people mentioned earlier, all of whom mostly report directly to the commanders: other general/flag officers who make up their *command group*; the next tier of officials on their *personal staff*, including the senior enlisted adviser; and their *support staff* (sometimes called the ‘front-office’ staff).<sup>3</sup> Between them, the two staff entities specifically carry out those three principal duties previously delineated: *advise* the commander on policies and decisions, *schedule* attendance at events, and *transport* him or



her to and from these event venues. All three duties carry a high risk of ethical peril without persistent attention by the commander and the staff.

Clear expectations of ‘what right looks like’ are published in the U.S. Code of Federal Regulations as the *Standards of Ethical Conduct for Employees of the Executive Branch* (the *Standards*) (CFR 2011) and amplified for the DoD by the *Joint Ethics Regulation*. The authors selected five of the fourteen principles from the *Standards*’ comprehensive listing of ‘basic obligations of public service’ that illustrate the significant ethical behaviors requiring the focus of general officers and their staffs:

- (1) Public service is a public trust, requiring employees to place loyalty to the Constitution, the laws and *ethical principles* [italics added] above private gain.
- (4) An employee shall not...solicit or accept any gift or other item of monetary value from any person or entity seeking official action from, doing business with, or conducting activities regulated by the employee’s agency, or whose interests may be substantially affected by the performance or nonperformance of the employee’s duties.
- (8) Employees shall act impartially and not give preferential treatment to any private organization or individual.
- (9) Employees shall protect and conserve Federal property and shall not use it for other than authorized activities.
- (14) Employees shall endeavor to avoid any actions creating the appearance that they are violating the law or the ethical standards set forth in this part...

These five principles for government employees suggest the nucleus of a framework to align staff effectiveness with ethics.

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## **A Framework to Empower the Staff to Speak as Nathan**

Returning to the biblical analogy, how can the four-star officer's staff members play the role of Nathan to confront the vulnerabilities of their commander as David? A 2013 review of Army Senior Leader training (DA 2013) prompted by ethical lapses in that demographic recommended 'training front-office staffs' to reinforce ethical behavior among senior leaders. Tenbrunsel and colleagues (2003: 294) maintain, 'Individuals seek out information in their environment regarding appropriate behavior so they can behave appropriately.' Both of these needs can be satisfied by a framework of embedded ethical 'best practices' that reliably allow the commander's staff to address the five bedrock ethical principles selected from the *Standards for Ethical Conduct*.

Seven ethical 'danger areas' seem to be consistently present in the public ethical failures of four-star officers; Figure 2 maps each danger area to one or more of the five *Standards* principles. This framework poses questions for consideration by the personal and support staffs to inform execution of their 'advise-schedule-transport' duties in support of the commander.

Ethical Danger Area for Commander	Staff Questions	"Nathan" cautions
<b>1. Participation in an unofficial event (hosted by a nongovernment entity)</b> <i>Standards principles (4), (8)</i>	+ If the general accepts the invitation to this unofficial event, will his/her presence imply endorsement of the event's theme and agenda? of the hosting organization itself? + Could non-U.S. government personnel appear to be gaining unethical access to the commander? + Could acceptance of gifts or sponsored travel offered by the host violate the JER or JTR?	+ When in doubt, decline invitation. + Consider attending event in personal leave status and not in uniform. + Pay for travel expenses with personal funds. + Reimburse U.S. government if necessary. + Follow JER guidelines for handling gifts. + Follow JTR guidelines for funding travel.
<b>2. Participation in an official event hosted by a government entity</b> <i>Standard principle (14)</i>	+ For each leg of travel, should status be "official duty" or "personal leave"? + Are we scheduling this official event solely to provide justification for official duty status? + Are we scheduling this official event after the fact? + Should the commander's spouse attend?	+ When in doubt, take personal leave. + Pay for travel expenses with personal funds. + Reimburse U.S. government if necessary. + Follow JTR guidelines for funding travel.
<b>3. Use of official vehicle</b> <i>Standards principles (9), (14)</i>	+ Is there a bona fide official purpose for the travel?	+ Avoid inventing such a purpose simply to transport commander's nonmilitary spouse, a distinguished visitor or the visitor's spouse. + When in doubt, use a personal vehicle or a vehicle rented with personal funds. + Ask for volunteers to serve as drivers or escorts for visitors. + Remember: The commander's spouse is not authorized an assigned driver.
<b>4. Use of official aircraft (rotary and fixed-wing)</b> <i>Standards principles (9), (14)</i>	+ Is there a bona fide official purpose for the travel? + Are appropriate DoD, service and local regulations on authorized and prioritized passengers (both U.S. government officials and non-government personnel) being followed?	+ Avoid inventing such a purpose simply to transport commander's nonmilitary spouse or the spouse of a distinguished visitor. + When in doubt, use a vehicle. + Purchase personal airline ticket. + Reimburse U.S. government for travel. + Make judicious decisions regarding use of the commander's helicopter.
<b>5. Procurement of furnishings for office and official residence</b> <i>Standards principles (9), (14)</i>	+ Is the purchase of commercial items necessary for conduct of official duties? + Is the acquisition solely for convenience or personal comfort?	+ Consider using U.S. government equipment or furniture, or the commander's personal funds.
<b>6. Use of Official Representation Funds (ORF) for entertainment</b> <i>Standards principles (9), (14)</i>	+ Are appropriate DoD and service regulations regarding authorized guests and categories of expenses being followed?	+ When in doubt, do not invite a person or spend official funds. + Consider using commander's personal funds, or funds from an authorized non-U.S. government source.
<b>7. Personal services by U.S. government personnel</b> <i>Standards principle (14)</i>	+ Is the action taken on behalf of the commander, or his/her spouse, related to official duties, or for personal convenience?	+ Commander or spouse accomplishes the task personally, or uses personal funds. + Does each U.S. government person traveling in official party serve a valid official function?

**Figure 2. Ethical 'Danger Areas' for the Staff to Address**

While these questions seem commonsense, pressures of time and loyalty to the general officer can tempt the staff planners to justify actions that do not always meet the ethical tests. The Army's legal journal, *The Army Lawyer*, already offers detailed guidance for staff attorneys who conduct legal reviews of these danger areas, and for aides-de-camp to consult as they handle myriad support duties for their general (see Schillinger 2015; Hummel 2009). This framework is a complementary instrument to enable speaking truth to power, as Nathan did so forcefully to David. In contrast to Nathan's *ex post* remonstrance, two officers on the four-star staff are especially suited to influence the general's decision-making before an event.

### **Nathans in the Headquarters**

The commander's *special assistant* (SA) and *executive officer* (XO) are senior colonels possessing unique attributes that specially equip them as the primary Nathan counselors for organizational ethics. They are typically graduates of a senior-level professional military education institution (such as the Army War College) and former brigade-level commanders. Accordingly, they have dealt with the complexities of leading 3000–5000 soldiers under conditions of uncertainty; the Army frequently has identified officers in these 'king-maker' billets as candidates for promotion to brigadier general. The SA and XO enjoy unique access to the commander's state of mind, habits of thinking, and strategy to accomplish the command vision.<sup>4</sup>

The special assistant is the commander's constant shadow when traveling outside the headquarters. She is the 'briefcase and cellphone carrier,' the ever-present scribe at the commander's meetings, who distributes sensitive tasks across the broader staff and subordinate units within the command (frequently on time-critical issues). In concert, a commander's action group (CAG) manned by strategic planners who serve as the general's personal 'think-tank'

often provides the SA with context and research on sensitive topics to inform her advice to the general. The CAG often doubles as the travel planners for the commander (a duty identified in the framework as a primary risk for ethical missteps).

The executive officer is the gatekeeper for the commander's time, the manager of the general's calendar. The XO is the first point of contact for requests by persons from across the 'strata of importance' for access to the general. Experience equips him to exercise discretion and judgment in the acceptance or rejection of such requests.

The SA and the XO supervise the remainder of the front-office staff personnel and usually some of the personal staff members. They are both heavily involved in the scheduling and transportation of the four-star officer and, where applicable, his or her spouse traveling in an official capacity.<sup>5</sup> Three other officers with expert knowledge in specialized areas bolster the work of the SA and XO in their 'advise' staff role, and are equipped to assume the mantle of Nathan in their respective domains.

The commander's *staff judge advocate* provides legal advice both broad- and fine-grained. The 'JAG' renders the former on the commander's thinking about planning and policy to accomplish the organization's mission while delivering the latter on the legality of specific instances in the 'schedule' and 'transport' roles executed by other support staff members. She backstops the staff's thinking and planning within each of the seven ethical danger areas (and in myriad issues of operational importance to the headquarters).

The command *chaplain* offers a specialized moral sounding board for the commander—and other senior staff personnel. Formally trained in ethics, this officer often fills the role of neutral evaluator of a course of action. The chaplain can also add a spiritual dimension to the

Nathan role, reflecting a modern analogue of the original's religious office of chief priest and prophet.

Finally, the *protocol officer* plans and carries out the robust schedule of ceremonies and social functions inherent in a four-star command. He is an expert in the regulations that govern the expenditure of official representation ('entertainment') funds and the use of official vehicles, military helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft. The protocol officer's Nathan opportunities frequently arise during the giving and receiving of official gifts between the general and those who host and visit him. His judgment, coupled with ethics analysis by the staff judge advocate, can prevent ethical violations such as the improper acceptance of gifts that resulted in disciplinary action against Lieutenant General Joseph Fil, the commander of U.S. Eighth Army in Korea (if and when the senior officer chooses to heed this advice).<sup>6</sup>

### **Empowering Nathan**

The XO normally leads scheduled calendar reviews (both short and long term) to address the commander's involvement in events generated by internal and external organizational demands. A subset of these 'scrub sessions' are travel itinerary planning and reviews. Both activities involve a majority of the support staff and members of the personal staff, depending on the intensity of the projected events. For example, a trip to Washington to deliver testimony before a Congressional committee would engage more staff members and intellectual energy than hosting a dinner in the commander's residence for a visiting chief of defense staff from a partner nation. The calendar and the travel plans are the forum where ethical scrutiny by all of the staff is brought to bear.

Let us apply the 'danger areas' framework in Figure 2 to vet a notional case of travel by a four-star general. For this example, the commander of U.S. European Command must travel

from the headquarters in Germany to attend a meeting in the Pentagon hosted by the Secretary of Defense for all four-star regional commanders across the globe. At the same time, the commander's spouse has been invited to speak at a military family education conference, also in Washington, DC, that is sponsored by the Department of the Army. Further, the couple received an invitation to a women's college in North Carolina to take part in a panel discussion about leadership a few days after their Washington engagements. They will return to Germany the following day traveling through Washington. The women's college is located in the same city where two of the commander's adult children live (with grandchildren). The staff must consider the ethical ramifications of each event separately; an examination of the framework quickly reveals the applicable 'danger areas' for each leg of the itinerary.

Travel between:	Danger Area
• Overseas headquarters and Washington, DC	2, 3, 4, 7
• Hotel in Washington and the Pentagon	2, 3, 7
• Hotel in Washington and the family conference	2, 3, 7
• Washington, DC and North Carolina	1, 3, 4, 7

The Pentagon meeting and the education conference are legitimate official events that can be supported by travel with official aircraft and cars for the commander and his spouse. Their event in North Carolina, however, will require some in-depth scrutiny; while their presence for a leadership discussion may benefit all attendees, the proximity of their children and grandchildren could be perceived as the primary reason for the visit. The general's staff must consider whether the commander should take personal leave and pay for commercial air travel to conform to

*Standards* principle (14): 'Employees shall endeavor to avoid any actions creating the

appearance that they are violating the law or the ethical standards set forth in this part ...' (CFR 2011: 101(b)(14)). Finally, the personal-services 'danger area' demands vigilance by the commander's SA throughout the trip. She must ensure that military personnel in the official party (especially the driver or aide-de-camp) 'perform only official military duties, rather than "duties that inure solely to the personal benefit" of the general officer' (Hummel 2009: 22).<sup>7</sup>

The preceding example would involve much more detailed analysis and consultation of specific ethics guidance than this broad outline represents. Nevertheless, the 'danger areas' derived from the *Standards* provide a useful framework to help the staff ensure they have addressed all aspects of the travel. A caveat is in order. The use of this tool—and all the diligence of the SA and XO in their Nathan roles—will not necessarily buffer the commander from ethical 'Bathsheba's' unless he or she demands this ethical rigor as the norm for 'the way things get done' in the organization. Building an 'ethical infrastructure' as proposed by Tenbrunsel and colleagues (2003) would help the commander achieve such an ethical climate.

### **Ethical Culture and Climate Drives Nathan**

An organization's ethical *climate*, however, is preceded by its ethical *culture*. To understand how to shape climate, a short review of Army organizational ethical culture is in order. Individual soldiers arrive at their job on the four-star staff socialized with their organizational (service) ethical culture—a foundation of ethical norms that guide their actions regardless of their job or location. Organizational scholars Treviño et al. (2006: 966) define ethical culture as 'a slice of the organizational culture that influences employees' ethical behavior through formal and informal organizational structures and systems.' While each armed service has its own code, the Army recently presented its desired organizational culture as the *Army Ethic*.



Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 1, *The Army Profession*, sets forth its foundational organizational principles. This document defines the *Army Ethic* (CAC 2015: 1-2) as ‘the evolving set of laws, values, and beliefs, embedded within the Army culture of trust that motivates and guides the conduct of Army professionals bound together in common moral purpose.’ For its uniformed and civilian members, the *Army Ethic* is based on the Army values (U.S. Army n.d.) of *loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage*. Army members recite these values in both the Soldier’s Creed and the Army Civilian Corps Creed, which are appendices to the *Army Ethic* (CAC 2015: B-3, B-4).

To embed the *Army Ethic* within its members, the Army employs the dual implements of education and training. The Center for the Army Profession and Ethic develops ethics curricular materials (Toffler 2015: 1) to provide a consistent message across the Army schools at the heart of both professional military education and the Army Civilian Education System. The institutional Army (DA 2014: 186) mandates early ethics training for Army officers, enlisted soldiers and Army civilians during their induction to the military profession. Unit commanders reinforce this organizational ethical culture through annual refresher training in ethics, supplemented by periodic reinforcement to address specific topics of concern.

However, research in behavioral ethics demonstrates consistently that an organization’s localized ethical climate, modeled by leaders and organizational members who hold each other accountable, is a far more powerful ethical embedding mechanism than the sweeping catholicity of organizational culture. An astute observer of the Army’s leadership trends, retired Lieutenant General Walter F. Ulmer, Jr., offered this timeless insight in 1987:

Climate, like leadership, is more easily felt than defined. Climate represents the collective impact of policies, expectations, priorities, operations values, management techniques,

and leadership styles on motivation to get the job done right. ... the shared feeling, a perception among members of a unit about what life is like. (10-11)

With the persistence of ethical failures, some scholars assert that the Army's ethical culture embedding efforts do not guarantee an ethical climate. One author (Allen 2015a: 82) argues that commanders should be required to administer academically rigorous surveys to measure the climate.

### **An 'Ethical Infrastructure' that Supports Nathan**

Commanders create an organizational ethical climate within their particular staff groups—a localized construct that informs the staff members of 'how we ethically do our business here.' Treviño and colleagues (2006: 966) describe ethical climate as 'a shared perception among organization members regarding the criteria (e.g., egoism, benevolence, and principle) and focus (e.g., individual, group, society) of ethical reasoning within an organization.'<sup>9</sup> Organizational scholar Edgar Schein (2010) posits that leaders use *primary embedding mechanisms* and *secondary reinforcement mechanisms* to shape their organizational cultures and climates.<sup>10</sup>

Tenbrunsel and colleagues propose an 'ethical infrastructure' of three concentric and reinforcing circles to focus these embedding mechanisms. From the outermost ring to the central circle, they are labeled *organizational climates*, *informal systems* and *formal systems* (2003: 287). The concentric nature of this construct depicts that the power of each element to stimulate ethical behavior is greatest at the outer ring and diminishes as one moves toward the center; therefore, the middle and outer rings are 'more influential in affecting ethical behavior' (ibid.: 301). Accordingly, the *organizational climate* established by four-star commanders and the

*informal systems* in their headquarters are more important than any *formal systems* to enable the ethical functioning of their staffs; the central circle does not figure in the following discussion.

### **The Outer Ring: Organizational Climate for Ethics**

Tenbrunsel and coauthors (ibid.: 294) define *organizational climate for ethics* as ‘organizational members’ shared perceptions of “the events, practices, and procedures and the kinds of behaviors that get rewarded, supported, and expected in a setting regarding ethics”.’ In other words, members want to ‘fit in’ to their workplace and therefore learn how to perform their job within ethical norms to enhance their own professional identity while providing benefit to the organization through ethical consistency. Both of these statements are congruent with the definition of ethical climate offered by Treviño and colleagues.

*The Army Profession* (CAC 2015: A-1) reinforces the influence on climate of a leader—the four-star officer, in this case—in a passage that echoes Ulmer’s timeless wisdom:

In contrast to culture, organizational climate refers to its members’ feelings and attitudes as they interact within their teams. Climate is often driven by observed policies and practices, reflecting the leader’s character...Unlike culture that is deeply embedded, climate can be changed quickly, for example, by replacing a toxic leader or correcting dysfunctional practices.

Tenbrunsel and associates postulate that after organizational climate, *informal systems* are the most powerful embedding mechanism for ethics.

### **The Middle Ring: Informal Systems**

Informal systems are not artifacts such as command ethics policy memorandums or codes of conduct, published prominently as declarations to internal and external audiences. Such artifacts are what Schein (2010: 257) calls *reinforcing* mechanisms, which are necessary but

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insufficient to change organizational culture or climate. Rather, informal systems are signaling schemes that let members know which behaviors are rewarded and punished in the organization; these signals are primarily apparent to persons internal to the organization (Tenbrunsel et al. 2003: 288). Tenbrunsel and colleagues (ibid.: 291) further subdivide informal systems into three components: *communications*, *surveillance*, and *sanctions*. In a separate study, Tenbrunsel and Messick (1999: 704) found that the absence of an internal sanctions regime prompted individuals to cooperate simply because they knew it was behavior expected within the ethical climate. The use of the proposed ‘danger areas’ framework can provide a surveillance system. It serves the additional purpose of an *anti-sanctions* mechanism, helping the staff preclude behavior by the four-star officer that would invite *external* sanctions against the senior officer, the staff, and the organization.

Informal communications systems are defined by Tenbrunsel et al. (2003: 291) as ‘those unofficial messages that convey the ethical norms within the organization.’ These messages are disseminated through casual modes such as ‘locker-room talk,’ ‘water-cooler discussions,’ and ‘hallway conversations.’ These modes are complemented by on-the-job training, verbal nuances, and habitual actions, which round out the informal communication systems for transmitting ethical norms.<sup>11</sup> The importance of the four-star commander as the organization’s ethical exemplar is powerfully demonstrated by his informal communications.

Commanders must be paragons who pay scrupulous and visible attention to the ethical appearance of their actions and to interpretations of their speech; this focus is especially critical in their guidance to staffs working on the official calendar and travel planning. The Army’s *ADRP 7-0 Training Units and Developing Leaders* (CAC 2014: 2-4) captures the essence of informal communications by the leader thus: ‘Everything a leader does and says is scrutinized,

analyzed, and often imitated. What leaders do and say influences the behaviors, attitudes, and performance of their subordinates.’

By modeling ethical behavior, four-star officers create a climate where staffs and subordinates feel empowered to tell them when ethical threats loom. Generals can establish *why* they value this attitude in their staffs and command group by consistently referring to the ‘danger areas’ framework and asking questions at every opportunity in the ‘advise-schedule-transport’ duties routine. In other words, generals confirm that they expect their staffs to act as a Nathan *ex ante* rather than the historical Nathan’s *ex post* intervention in David’s relationship with Bathsheba. The Army as an institution likewise exhorts ‘Nathan behavior’ in this passage from *The Army Profession* (CAC 2015: 2-7):

We communicate with candor and tact, seeking shared understanding and demonstrating courage by doing what is right despite risk, uncertainty, and fear. A decision and action is right if it is ethical (consistent with the moral principles of the *Army Ethic*), effective (likely to accomplish its purpose, accepts prudent risk), and efficient (makes disciplined use of resources).

If a senior officer’s staff operates in an ethical climate motivated by an ‘ethical infrastructure’ and diligently employs the ‘danger areas’ framework, the officer will likely find resolute Nathan’s standing between him and future Bathsheba traps.

### **Recommendations**

Senior headquarters staffs who carry out the ‘advise-schedule-transport’ functions to support senior generals and admirals must operate within an ethical framework. The proposed ‘danger areas’ framework offers a way to focus this work. Its foundation on basic ethical

principles espoused in the *Standards of Ethical Conduct for Employees of the Executive Branch* safeguards it from irrelevance, short of the Army abandoning the *Army Ethic*.

Commanders' personal and persistent involvement will yield an ethical climate in their command, which in turn reinforces the use of the framework. Yet, they need to address two other specific audiences to strengthen this climate. Commanders must sensitize their spouses to legal and ethical conditions that sometimes seem even more restrictive than those aimed at the senior officers themselves. As discussed earlier, spouses have a valid role to play in the success of command missions by strengthening relationships with both civic counterparts and the spouses of other stakeholders in those missions.

Furthermore, a commander must display an unrelenting ethical tenor in conversations with, and in guidance to, the general and flag officers in the command group. They in turn would be wise to emulate these best practices within their own front-office staffs and with their subordinate commanders. After all, they are potentially only one rank or position away from their own Bathsheba event.

## **Conclusion**

David's many political, military and religious successes are stained by the ethical debasement of his adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband. General Ward (to name just one four-star) likewise envisioned and carried out many strategic achievements commensurate with the weighty responsibility of his rank; yet, his service to the Nation was overshadowed by his ethical failures detailed in the DoD Inspector General's report. This tragedy need not have happened and the front line of defense to backstop any moral slippage by the senior officer, then and now, lies with the personal and support staffs who work for every four-star general or admiral.

The hard-working military and civilian members of these staffs have been imbued with an ethical foundation through the organizational culture of their parent service, which seeks to reinforce this foundation through career-long training and education. Commanders establish their organizational ethical climate and emplace—then employ—informal communications and surveillance systems to create an environment where doing the right thing is second nature. The authors offer the proposed ‘danger areas’ framework to function as a robust informal surveillance system; it will empower the staffs to perform their role as Nathan and buttress the commander’s David against reaching for the modern-day analogues of Bathsheba.

Thanks to the prophet Nathan, David’s legacy was a united kingdom bequeathed to his son, the wise king Solomon (1 Kings 2:10–12). America expects and deserves four-star officers—in whom the military has invested so much time, education and responsibility—who will be remembered for their legacy of national service and inspiration to future members of the profession of arms. Those senior officers, then, deserve staffs prepared to be their steadfast Nathan.

## Notes

1. The DoD Office of General Counsel maintains a comprehensive collection of ‘Ethics Resources on the Web’ available at [http://www.dod.mil/dodgc/defense\\_ethics/resource\\_library/resourcesindex.html](http://www.dod.mil/dodgc/defense_ethics/resource_library/resourcesindex.html).
2. Based on personal experience of Weigle during 2007–2009 in the multinational headquarters United Nations Command/Republic of Korea-United States Combined Forces Command/U.S. Forces Korea.
3. The personal and support staffs should not be confused with the command’s coordinating staff that report through a general-officer chief of staff and advise, plan and coordinate policy and actions within the major command functions such as personnel, intelligence, operations, logistics, etc. These officers are designated by the familiar ‘G codes’ for an Army staff and ‘J codes’ for a Joint staff: G-1/J-1, G-2/J-2, G-3/J-3, G-4/J-4, etc.
4. It is worth noting that general officers often make a special request through the military personnel system for an officer who previously worked for them to be assigned as their SA or

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XO. This is an understandable effort to build their inner circle around at least one trusted subordinate with familiar bona fides. This selection does not automatically make the hand-picked officer suspect of ethical pliability but an ethical framework such as the one developed in this paper can help guard against this possibility.

5. ‘A general’s spouse can be an official traveler if he or she plays an active role in the official visit: addressing those assembled at a function; meeting with spouses of community and government leaders, foreign dignitaries or military officers who are officially meeting the general; or attending an event whose audience is mostly military families or that focuses on matters of particular concern to military families’ (DoD 2014: 15).

6. ‘We found no evidence that MG Fil sought a legal opinion regarding acceptance of the pen set, the briefcase, or the cash gift given to [him by a redacted Korean citizen]’ (DoDIG 2012a: 9).

7. See Hummel 2009 footnotes on pages 17 and 18 for details.

8. ‘Senior leaders should direct [that the Army]...incorporate or develop empirically validated research instruments to assess ethical climates and include them as part of the DoD or separate Army organizational climate survey’ (Allen 2015: 82).

9. This study devotes 49 pages to a discussion of ‘research on behavioral ethics ... primarily concerned with explaining individual behavior that occurs in the context of larger social prescriptions.’

10. Schein (2010: 230-252) posited that primary embedding mechanisms are more powerful to effect organizational change than secondary articulation and reinforcement mechanisms.

11. For reference, the formal systems in the headquarters would have identical components to the informal systems but bear different characteristics; examples might include the aforementioned policy letters (communications), inspector general investigations (surveillance) and the Uniform Code of Military Justice to prosecute ethical malfeasance (sanctions).

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