

“The Case Against Honor,” or “Should Honor be an Army Value?”

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Imagine you are walking down a hallway to an important engagement when a stranger accidentally bumps into you and then crudely insults you. Two onlookers watch for your reaction with interest. What would you do? Surprisingly, this simple thought experiment has much to tell us about American culture, crime, presidential decision-making, and why honor has no place in a civilized society, much less in the official Army Values.

Honor, compared to the other values, is uniquely difficult to define. The Army’s definition instructs soldiers to “live up to Army values” and “make honor a matter of daily living” (“Army Values”) aligning with other published definitions that emphasize adherence to a moral code (Gabriel 1982, 157). But these definitions are inadequate. Since the Army Values themselves are presumably meant to be such a moral code, either we are defining honor solely in terms of the other values (which tells us nothing about honor itself), or we are giving soldiers license to follow their own moral code (which may or may not be a good one). Other attempts to define honor only add to the confusion; try explaining “constancy, harmony, and refinement of the natural virtues of greatness of mind and extended benevolence” to teenage recruits (Westhusing 2003, 195). Cicero suggests that honor is the virtue that inspires soldiers to fight: an “impulse from our soul towards true renown and reputation...” (Cicero 1927, 213). This definition has several merits that the others do not: it is easy to understand; it does not refer back

to the term being defined; it distinguishes honor from other virtues, rather than defining it as merely consisting of sub-values; and, it agrees with common sense. It is also the most pernicious.

Since no one can agree on a precise definition of honor, there is room for soldiers to interpret it as Cicero did and incorporate a concern for reputation into their value systems. Far from being a harmless and subjective construal of a murky concept, social scientists have shown that “cultures of honor” are unconsciously developed under predictable circumstances, and these cultures inevitably have tragic but predictable effects on society.

Anthropologists have long noticed that farming cultures are more peaceful than their pastoral cousins, on account of the fact that it is much easier to steal a few goats than a few acres of land. Farmers benefit more from being cooperative than from making off with a few bushels of wheat (Nisbett 1996, 89). But herdsmen are incentivized to steal their neighbors’ flocks because a single foray can increase one’s net worth many times over—and if a raider is going to risk retaliation by the flock’s owner anyway, it makes good economic sense to murder him as well (and of course, his helpless family, who have just become witnesses). In the millennia preceding the invention of modern police forces, a shepherd’s best strategy for discouraging these would-be raiders was to ensure that everyone knew he would respond to any attempt on his life or property with swift and violent retribution. Just as importantly, his hair-trigger for violence had to be ready if anyone even *suggested* that he wasn’t willing to defend himself. In other words, if they *impugned his honor* (Nisbett 1996, 4-7). This reputational logic may also give rise to other cultural norms over time; for example, observing strict rules for polite behavior

(as in Southern hospitality or the Pashtuns' Pashtunwali) minimizes the chances of offending someone and thereby provoking a violent response (Nisbett 1996, 38).

When immigrants from honor cultures settled parts of America, they sometimes brought with them their herding economies and the value systems needed to sustain them, and those systems have in many cases survived to the present day (Nisbett 1996, 9). Although few of us still have to worry about deterring rustlers or dueling uppity rivals, cultures of honor probably persist because renouncing them would be seen as a shameful admission of weakness; nobody wants to be the first one to invite aggression by announcing that he will respond to challengers by turning the other cheek (Nisbett 1996, 91-92).

Honor is not merely a relic of our past; reputational logic often kicks in wherever a state is unable to guarantee physical safety (Nisbett 1996, 90-91). That is why, for example, drug dealers value honor. Since they cannot call upon the courts to adjudicate disputes or the police to protect them, a zone of anarchy emerges that encourages members to meet the slightest affronts with brutal retaliation. Contrary to popular belief, drug cartels do not usually mutilate their enemies because they find sadism gratifying for its own sake but because horrific violence is a more powerful deterrent to law enforcement and rival cartels. Honor also explains the otherwise puzzling phenomenon of men killing each other over a pool table or parking space. Even if an argument concerns something utterly trivial, backing down from a fight (especially in front of an audience) can irrevocably damage one's reputation (Pinker 2011, 102).

Social psychologists have investigated these theories about honor and found scientific evidence to substantiate them. Recall the thought experiment about a stranger

bumping into and insulting you in the hallway. Richard Nisbett and his colleagues actually tested people under precisely these conditions, enlisting a confederate to “accidentally” bump into and insult the subjects. In a series of experiments conducted immediately after the hallway incident, they found that individuals raised in a culture of honor responded differently than their peers in a number of significant ways, both behaviorally and physiologically. They stiffened up their handshakes with the interviewers and, when asked how they thought others perceived them, rated their own “manliness” as diminished. Their saliva contained higher levels of cortisol and testosterone, hormones that regulate stress, dominance, and aggression. And in another experiment—again, completed shortly after the insult was delivered—the psychologists assigned a 250-pound confederate to walk briskly towards the subjects down a narrow hallway in what resembled a game of “chicken.” Subjects from cultures of honor waited until the last moment (about three feet away) before allowing the burly confederate to pass, while other subjects turned aside much earlier (nine feet away). Perhaps most disturbingly of all, when subjects were given the beginning of a story and asked to complete it, honorable men wrote violent endings (1996, 42-53). Taken together, these results suggest that a typical man of honor responds to insults by behaving more aggressively and emotionally than he otherwise would.

Saliva samples and contrived scenarios, however, can only tell us so much about what happens in the real world, so Nisbett and his team analyzed US Department of Justice statistics to determine if honor actually causes people to commit more violence. They found that homicides committed for instrumental reasons (in the course of a robbery, for example) were about evenly distributed throughout the country, but

homicides involving arguments, insults, lovers' triangles, and other interpersonal conflicts *were* significantly more frequent in areas where cultures of honor persisted (1996, 13-20). Surveys on attitudes toward violence and reputation confirmed the difference—men from honor cultures believed it was justifiable to fight an acquaintance who had just implied that his wife had “loose morals,” to give just one of many examples (Nisbett 1996, 25-35).

And the effects of growing up in a culture of honor extend far beyond homicides committed by individuals. Allan Dafoe and Devin Caughey conducted a study that convincingly shows that even US Presidents raised to have a heightened concern for “reputation for resolve” were more likely to use force and to achieve victory in military conflicts but less willing to withdraw from ongoing military disputes. Crucially, achieving “victory” does not mean that the overall outcome was a net positive for the national security of the United States; it only means that the United States prevailed militarily (2016, 343). If honor affects presidential policy deliberations, it must affect a great many soldiers and decision-makers throughout the armed forces.

There is no reason to keep honor as an Army Value when better alternatives exist, considering the most defensible parts of an honorable character are already covered by values like selfless service, integrity, and personal courage. In addition to impacting countless everyday interactions between soldiers, honor clouds the judgment of leaders trying to accomplish the Army's core mission: to judiciously and dispassionately apply violence to problems that will admit no other solution. How many instances of soldier misbehavior might have been avoided if pugnacious challengers were met with amusement rather than wounded pride? And how much harm has been caused by

leaders who, even unconsciously, misapplied violence to a problem because their sense of personal or national honor quietly demanded it?

The United States has experienced a steady increase in honor-related violence since 2013 (FBI 2017), both demonstrating how persistently honor can cling to a society and underscoring the urgent need for cultural change. The US Army, as one of the most powerful institutions remaining that valorizes honor, is in a position to lead the charge.

References

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