

The Concept of “Calling” and its Relevance to the Military Professional Study #4

The Military Profession: A Unique Calling

The war criminal, the aggressor, the practitioner of genocide and the terrorist are not fading from the scene. In such a world, only the presence of effective military forces makes possible the maintenance of relative peace and security in international politics. Voluntary service in support of that relative peace is a self-sacrificial Christian calling.

—Martin L. Cook

“Why don’t you consider the military? It’s more than a job—it’s an honorable profession that would help you develop discipline, get you started on saving for college, and give you an opportunity to get involved in something bigger than yourself—serving your country—like your grandfather and I did.” So begins one of many similar conversations between fathers and their high school junior or senior in search of a “way ahead” for their life.

This study will probe deep into what lies behind many similar conversations. In particular, the study first reviews recent assertions that military service is becoming “just a job.” Next, the study affirms that the military profession is indeed a calling. The study then goes one step further and demonstrates that military service is a calling unlike any other.

Just Another Job?

In recent decades, experts contended that the profession of arms was in the process of slipping from its status as a calling down to the ranks of occupations. In the late 1970s, for example, military sociologist Dr. Charles Moskos noted that actual and potential members of the military, like those in unionized jobs, seemed to be more concerned about extrinsic motivators than service.¹ Then Air Force Chief of Staff General David C. Jones admitted,

The military way of life and a military career traditionally have been regarded by our society as a calling. The calling was buttressed by the value embodied in “duty, honor, country” and a life style where the institution, with the support of society, took care of its own. Yet we are seeing a fundamental shift in the motivational bases of the military system away from a calling toward an occupation—“just another job”—where the first priority readily could become self interest rather than the organization and the job to be done.²

Nevertheless, Jones affirmed that the Air Force is “much more than just another occupational choice in the job market. *It is a way of life.*”³ He challenged recruiters to

¹ Charles C. Moskos, “The All-Volunteer Military: Calling, Profession, or Occupation?” *Parameters, Journal of the US Army War College* 7, no. 1 (1977).

² David C. Jones, “The Air Force Is a Way of Life,” *Air Force Magazine* 60, no. 5 (1977), 49.

³ *Ibid.*, 51.

base their appeals not on monetary incentives, but on a higher sense of values manifest in the devotion and professionalism of Air Force people.”⁴ During this era, Gary Hinkle (Major, USAF) wrote an ACSC research paper that examined this question: “Is the military profession a calling in the traditional sense, or is it becoming just an occupation?” By “calling in the traditional sense,” Hinkle meant a “profession of the highest sort,” and used Moskos’ definition of a calling as a profession that “transcends self-interest and is associated with the ideals of self-sacrifice and dedication.”⁵ His study concluded that “while occupational trends are evident, these trends are limited due to the nature of the military mission and do not change the distinctive nature of military life substantially.”⁶ It should be noted that Hinkle’s study did not emphasize the spiritual basis for the concept of calling.

Despite Hinkle’s conclusion, evidences of a “professional to occupational slip” continued to appear. In 1994, retired Canadian Forces chaplain Arthur Gans claimed that in the modern military, “the idea of service has disappeared as the occupational model has taken over.”⁷ Gans claimed that a key reason for this shift was the “what’s in it for me” mentality.⁸ Naval surface warfare officer (SWO) LT CDR Gregory Zacharski agrees: “judging by the way the naval profession is marketed, material benefits seem to be the primary motivators. The Navy should put far more emphasis on the less tangible, more intrinsic motivators.”⁹ In his award-winning essay entitled “It’s More than a Trade,” LT Thomas R. Williams II, another SWO, takes a slightly different tack, focusing not on those considering the profession, but on those who are already members. He attributes the Navy’s problems with retaining junior officers to the gap between their perception and the reality of their profession: the current trend is to concentrate more on “technical and functional expertise at the expense of the more intangible concepts of what it means to be a professional.”¹⁰ In other words, junior officers tend to lose sight of the “forest” for the “trees;” the real reason for their service gets overshadowed by the myriad technical details of mastering their weapon systems and bureaucratic procedures. The project directors of the landmark anthology *The Future of the Army Profession* (2002) made similar observations regarding the pre-9/11 Army: “the Army’s bureaucratic nature outweighs and compromises its professional nature ... in practice [and] in the minds of the officer corps.”¹¹ The author suspects similar tendencies in the Air Force, due to the amount of time and effort it takes to master this service’s highly technical systems; this is a topic for further study.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Gary R. Hinkle and Air University (U.S.). Air Command and Staff College., *The Military Profession: Calling or Occupation?* (Maxwell AFB, AL: 1978), 9-10.

⁶ Ibid., ii.

⁷ Arthur E. Gans, "Vocation or Job: A Warrior's Place in a Rights-Driven Society," *Canadian Defence Quarterly* 24, no. 2 (1994), 10.

⁸ Ibid., 12.

⁹ Gregory J. Zacharski, "Why Do We Serve?" U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings* 129, no. 2 (2003), 2.

¹⁰ Thomas R. Williams, II, "It's More Than a Trade," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings* 126, no. 5 (2000), 38. This essay won the Navy’s second Arleigh Burke essay contest.

¹¹ Don M. and Watkins Snider, Gayle L., "Project Conclusions," in *The Future of the Army Profession*, ed. Lloyd J. Matthews (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2002), 537.

The Military Profession as a Calling

While these recent tendencies of “drifting toward an occupation” (or bureaucracy) are troublesome, there is ample evidence that the military way of life remains a calling. In fact, in explaining their criteria for a profession, prominent military historians have used the language of calling. One of Samuel Huntington’s criteria for a profession is “a sense of responsibility to something greater than the individual.”¹² Allan Millett describes a profession as “a lifelong calling by the practitioners, who identified themselves personally with their vocational subculture.”¹³ Regarding Millett’s description, Lloyd Matthews (Col, USA ret), former editor of *Parameters*, the professional journal of the US Army War College, says “The key word here is ‘calling.’ On entering the Army, true professionals don’t simply ‘take a job.’ Instead, they ‘profess to a sacred calling,’ one that totally immerses them, along with their band of professional brethren, in a career dedicated to a single transcendent cause.”¹⁴ Matthews says that if a military professional was asked what difference it made if their service was perceived as “a mere occupation,” they would reply:

The defense of this country is too important to be left in the hands of occupational timeservers. If the nation’s defenders are not members of a true higher calling and if that calling is not accorded the reverence of taxpayers and political leaders alike, then ... the soldier’s advice will come to be depreciated, the fighting forces and their leadership will be depleted of numbers and quality, and the security of this nation will fall into jeopardy.¹⁵

Matthews describes the military profession as a “*bona fide* calling, ranking shoulder to shoulder with the long-venerated fields of medicine, law, divinity and pedagogy.”¹⁶ In fact, he states, based on his analysis of history, “A fully legitimated military profession—skilled in the art of war so that our nation’s citizens may practice the art of peace—is a necessary precondition for the flowering of all other professions.”¹⁷ In summary, the military profession certainly meshes with the secular understanding of a calling as a profession that has an air of transcendence—“something bigger than oneself.” The study next contends that an even stronger conclusion can be reached: when the military profession is evaluated in light of the biblical concept of calling, it comes forth as truly “a cut above the rest.”

A Calling Unlike Any Other

Military professionals have a calling unlike any other because of the depth of their commitment to service. Reformers taught that the purpose of each calling is “to love and serve one’s neighbor.”¹⁸ It is therefore important to ask the question, Veith says, “that the

¹² Williams, "It's More Than a Trade," 39.

¹³ Allan R. Millett, "Military Professionalism and Officership in America," *Mershon Center Briefing Paper Number Two* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State Univ, 1977), 2.

¹⁴ Lloyd J. Matthews, "Is the Military Profession Legitimate?" *Army* 44, no. 1 (1994), 21.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁸ Veith, *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life*, 39-40.

teacher of the Law asked Jesus: ‘Who is my neighbor?’ ‘Who, in this relationship, am I called to love and serve?’¹⁹ From the biblical perspective of calling, military professionals are demonstrating love for their neighbors—the American people—by enabling them to live in peace. Millett says professions also have “a service orientation in which loyalty to standards of competence and loyalty to clients’ needs are paramount.”²⁰ Matthews notes that the military professional’s clients “ultimately are the American people. Lacking military expertise themselves, they have collectively placed their solemn trust in his professional judgment, he being the guarantor of their freedom and security and the sworn upholder of the Constitution.”²¹ Matthews amplifies this thought by noting that “altruistic service to clients is nowhere stronger and more in evidence than in the military, where the incentive of a day’s hardtack and the chance to be of use stand in stark contrast to the opportunities for enrichment offered by some of the other professions.”²²

The willingness to pay the ultimate price in serving their neighbors sets the military professionals’ calling in a class by itself. Jesus said, “Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.”²³ General Sir John Hackett summed up this notion in the “unlimited liability contract.” Chaplain Gans explains that when selfish people ask “what’s in it for me?” and receive the answer “possibly death, maiming, or imprisonment,” they find it hard to respond to “a call for sacrifice... It is at this point that the difference between a job and a vocation becomes most apparent.”²⁴ Since members of the military profession “can be sent to die [in] ‘God awful’ places,” that is, because of their unlimited liability contract, they have “a sense of commitment deeper than that required ... in any other kind of work required in the civilian community.”²⁵ One week before he and 27 of his men died in the Battle of Bull Run, Major Sullivan Ballou of the Second Rhode Island Volunteers wrote a love letter to his wife, using the language of calling to demonstrate the depth of his commitment, come what may:

I have sought most closely and diligently ... for a wrong motive in thus hazarding the happiness of those I loved and I could not find one. A pure love of my country and of the principles I have often advocated before the people and ‘the name of honor that I love more than I fear death’ have called upon me, and I have obeyed.... Our movement may be one of a few days duration and full of pleasure – and it may be one of severe conflict and death to me. Not my will, but thine O God, be done. If it is necessary that I should fall on the battlefield for my country, I am ready. I have no misgivings about, or lack of confidence in, the cause in which I am engaged, and my courage does not halt or falter. I know how strongly American Civilization now leans upon the triumph of the Government, and how great a debt we owe to those who went before us through the blood and suffering of the Revolution. And I am willing – perfectly

¹⁹ Ibid., 44.

²⁰ Matthews, "Is the Military Profession Legitimate?", 22.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ John 15: 13, NIV.

²⁴ Gans, "Vocation or Job: A Warrior's Place in a Rights-Driven Society," 12.

²⁵ Ibid., 11.

willing – to lay down all my joys in this life, to help maintain this Government, and to pay that debt.²⁶

Summary

Observers of the military have claimed in recent years that there has been a tendency for military professionals to focus more on extrinsic motivators (e.g., pay, quality of life) and the bureaucratic aspects of careers than on the intrinsic motivation inherent in calling. The study began by examining some of these claims. Then, the study examined evidence for the claim that the military profession can still be considered a calling in the secular sense. Finally, the study explained that because of their unlimited liability contract—because of their depth of commitment to serve their neighbor, even unto death, wherever, whenever, however—military professionals have a unique calling in the biblical sense.

Scripture: John 15:13

Discussion:

- Which military benefits appealed to you before you joined?
- Share what “duty, honor, country” means to you personally.
- What draws you to “self-sacrifice and dedication?”
- How might your “real reason for ...service [be] overshadowed by the myriad technical details...and bureaucratic procedures?”
- Share how you see your military career as “a cut above the rest” or dedication to “a single transcendent cause.”
- What motivates you to be willing to “pay the ultimate price?”

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²⁶ Available from <http://usinfo.state.gov/usa/infousa/facts/democrac/23.htm>.