Teaching Notes

TAILHOOK '91
AND THE U.S. NAVY

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It is the early 1990s, and the Navy is experiencing significant change. There is increasing pressure to assimilate women into the full array of occupational opportunities. In this context, Lt. Paula Coughlin reports that she has been sexually harassed at the 1991 annual symposium of the Tailhook Association. Further, the Association itself acknowledges widespread harassment and property destruction at the Symposium. These reports gain notoriety – first within the naval hierarchy and then through the national media. Two official naval investigations ensue, but despite a significant outpouring of time and financial resources, the investigation turns up only two suspects. The Department of Defense then conducts another, more thorough investigation that leads to the citation of over 140 junior aviators for participating in the harassment and other unbecoming conduct. Several top leaders of the Navy, including the Secretary of the Navy, the Navy Judge Advocate General, the Navy Inspector General, and the Chief of Naval Operations either retire early, resign, or are reassigned to less prestigious posts.

An overview of the Kenan Institute for Ethics's Institutions in Crisis framework, in which this case was created to illustrate, accompanies these teaching notes.

Target Audience

Courses in

> Organizational Studies
> Military History
> Organizational Behavior
> Decision Science
> Ethics
> Public Policy
> Public Management
> Sociology
> Crisis Management

Learning Objectives

1. Familiarize students with structural contributors to crisis in a large institutional setting.
2. Develop an awareness of the public and private dimensions of organizational culture.
3. Gain insight into the internal operations of military as an institution.
4. Explore how external influences affect the internal dynamics of an organization.

Case Brief

It is the early 1990s, and the Navy is experiencing significant change: Its mission is changing from asserting oceanic dominance during the Cold War to supporting strategically other armed forces in regional deployments. There is increasing pressure from elements both within, and especially outside of the Navy, to assimilate women into the full array of occupational opportunities. In this context, Lt. Paula Coughlin reports that she has been sexually harassed at the 1991 annual symposium of the Tailhook Association, a non-profit, auxiliary organization with an official mission to educate the public about the importance of sea-based aviation and foster the esprit de corps among naval aviators. Further, the Association itself acknowledges widespread harassment and property destruction at the Symposium. These reports gain notoriety -- first within the naval hierarchy and then through the national media. Two official naval investigations ensue, led by the Naval Investigative Service and Navy Inspector General. Despite a significant outpouring of time and financial resources, the investigations turn up only two suspects. The Department of Defense (DoD) then steps in and conducts another, more thorough investigation that leads to the citation of over 140 junior aviators for participating in the harassment and other unbecoming conduct. Several top leaders of the Navy, including the Secretary of the Navy, the Navy Judge Advocate General, the Navy Inspector General, and the Chief of Naval Operations either retire early, resign, or are reassigned to less prestigious posts.

Suggested Comments & Questions to Initiate Class Discussion

On the professional status and social expectations of military officers:

Samuel Huntington, the famed military historian, has written about officers as "professional managers of violence." They are the people with whom the civilian authority has placed trust and granted permission to bear arms. Don

Snider, a former officer and current professor of political science at the U.S. Military Academy (West Point), reflects on the unique role officers play in American society:

> [O]fficers develop, maintain, and carry through time the unique elements of the profession essential for the military to be accorded high professional status by American society . . . Officers, particularly while on active duty, fulfill the representative function of the military to civil society. They are the ones who received a commission, a warrant, from society to be its agent and to act on its behalf, and it is logical for society to expect individual accountability . . . [I]t is the responsibility of the officer corps to serve such that they strengthen the claim of the service on the affections of the American people.[1]

Unlike most military officers, naval air officers command relatively few people. Typically these pilots have little interaction with civilian society in their official roles.

Ask the students: What do you think are society's expectations of military officers? Do Huntington and Snider's perspectives resonate with you? Are the expectations that Snider and Huntington elucidate appropriate for naval aviation officers? Or does the fact that they often don't have people reporting to them and their roles offer only limited interaction with civilian society lead to a different set of expectations from those of other officers in the military?

On exploring the cultural differences between the military and civilians:

Since the inception of the all-volunteer force in 1973, participation in the military across class segments has dwindled. Therefore fewer members of congress and policy makers have had experiences in the military and/or can relate to its internal logic. In an article that seems to foreshadow the consequences of this split, James Kitfield reports that "[in] the past 25 years, the number of lawmakers with some military training has also declined steadily from 77 per cent to 34.8 per cent."[2] Further, he goes on to say:

> An opinion-making class unfamiliar with the mores of the military has broad consequences for a superpower such as the United States, from the kind of equipment it procures to the way it fights its wars. If the civilian elite cannot   grasp the unique vantage point of the armed forces, then it is unlikely to appreciate – or trust – the judgment of the military top brass in crucial matters of national security.[3]

Ask the students: Do you see a gap between civilian and military expectations in this case study? In what areas? (Two that come to mind are gender integration and officer behavior.) Do you think the gap contributed to the sense of "crisis"?

On the fighter pilot sub-culture:

Draw the students' attention to footnote 25 on page 7, in which Bill McMichael describes the stress that fighter pilots experience on the job and suggests one of the unofficial functions of the Tailhook Association's symposium.

The naval aviation community would be considered to have a "strong culture" according to Edgar Schein of MIT

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[1] Snider, Don. "An Uniformed Debate on Military Culture." *Orbis.* Winter 1999. pp. 11-26. p. 23f.
[2] Kitfield, James. "Standing apart." *National Journal.* Vol. 13, Iss. 24. pp. 1350-1359. (from Proquest document that doesn't provide accurate page numbers on its print outs).
[3] Ibid.

because naval aviators have "shared important intense experiences."[4] Landing jets on sea carriers is a dangerous profession, a group with one of the highest mortality rates in the armed forces.

The Navy culture itself was known for wild partying in ports abroad. McMichael summarizes the sentiment: "The Navy's unwritten law is time-honored: What happens on cruise stays on cruise. The same unwritten law applied for Tailhook. It was a port call in Vegas."[5]

Ask the students: Do you think such a dangerous profession requires social outlets like the Tailhook symposia? In addition to allowing the aviators to blow off steam, what other "unofficial" functions might the Tailhook symposia serve? How do those unofficial functions compare to the official mission of the organization? (p. 5)

Suggestions for Discussion Questions & Potential Responses

1) The military is often touted as being a harbinger of racial integration. However, many perceive it to have been lagging behind large swathes of American society regarding gender integration. Many in the military today argue that their primary imperative is to be ready for battle and that perceived social imperatives like gender integration should be pursued only to the extent that they don't interfere with the primary function of combat-readiness. What is the role of the military in promoting social change? Is gender integration fundamentally different than racial integration?

> Combat-readiness may not necessarily preclude gender integration.

> Perhaps the military's racial integration wasn't as smooth as we tend to think it was today.

> Gender integration, as we currently pursue it, requires the additional financial resources for constructing additional barracks, bathrooms, berths on a ship, etc. Racial integration was more efficient in that it allowed for the consolidation of accommodation space.

2) As the military moved, and continues to move, toward being more team-based and technologically-oriented, individual "heroic" positions, like those of infantrymen and fighter pilots, are becoming less essential for mission success. For example, the United States Navy now uses drone planes, or unmanned aircraft, for surveillance. Previously, these surveillance missions would have been accomplished using people, rather than technology. Around the time of Tailhook '91, some male naval aviators also expressed fear that women would take their "billets" – their spots – in aviation. Some anthropologists and sociologists might argue that when a group feels threatened, that group may reiterate and assert its identity. Can you think of other situations in which this pattern has played out? Does this theory help explain the behavior at Tailhook '91?

> Yes, especially given Saturday's flag panel in which Adm. Dunleavy responded that he would do as Congress instructed him regarding women in combat aviation (see p. 9). The threat to the billets was clear and perhaps the evening's behavior was exacerbated by the tone set earlier that afternoon.

> Possibly. It isn't clear that behavior at the Tailhook symposia changed radically from, say 1985 to 1991 (p.9). Although in 1991, there was greater pressure toward full gender integration (p. 5).

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[4] Schein, Edgar. "Organizational Culture," *American Psychologist,* February 1990. Quoted in Snider, p. 13.
[5] Ibid., 28

3) As the Cold War ended and it was clear that the United States dominated the world's oceans, the role of the Navy became less clear. In the late 1980s, the Navy was actively trying to re-create its mission and assert its strategic importance within the country's armed forces portfolio. How might have the Navy's waning power, its sub-par performance in the Gulf War, and its mission uncertainty contributed to its initial reaction (in the form of the first reports issued by the NIS and IG) to the Tailhook '91 scandal (see pp. 1-3)?

> It isn't clear how the mission transition that the Navy was experiencing directly led to a poor initial investigation headed by the Navy. It is possible that the Navy's leadership was reluctant to draw attention to itself had the investigation been conducted in a more thorough manner. To have a more effective investigation, Navy leadership likely would have needed to intervene at the squadron level, which would have caused significant challenges to the command's authority.

4) Had the Tailhook '91 scandal occurred in non-military setting and the junior officers' trials held in civilian courts, what might the outcome have been? Would the junior officers who participated in the gauntlet likely have faced criminal prosecution? Was it ethically appropriate that most of the junior officers weren't disciplined (pp. 18-20)? Was it is appropriate to enter into legal proceedings under military jurisdiction, given that the convention was sponsored by a private non-profit and attended by off-base and off-duty officers?

> The military has a long tradition of having a separate judicial system. Had the annualTailhook symposium been considered a civilian event, it seems unlikely that a serious investigation would have occurred given the breadth of geographic dispersion of the participants and the level of severity of the offenses. If the harassment complaint had made its way into the civilian court system, then likely some of the officers would have faced criminal charges. The logic of the civilian system would not have been able to effectively address some of the structural issues that had allowed this behavior to be considered permissible by the hierarchy for so many years.

5) Does the fact that some women went through the gauntlet voluntarily and chafed at being called "victims" of sexual assault and harassment matter (see footnote 54)?

> Yes, because it may point to how deeply inculcated the logic of the Tailhook symposium's party behavior went. Some women who were likely equal in rank to the men assaulting them didn't seem to acknowledge that what happened to them was wrong. They internalized a logic that suggested, at least in that setting, that it was okay to be harassed.

> No, there are lots of different reasons why individual women might not want to have that label, and their preference for a descriptive noun doesn't change what actually occurred.

Additional Readings and References

Snider, Don. "An Uninformed Debate on Military Culture." *Orbis*. Winter 1999. pp. 11-26.
> Provides a wonderful overview of different ways to characterize and categorize military culture, especially in light of recent recognition of the widening gap between military and civilian culture. Also describes the importance of military officers to civilian accountability structure.

Hillen, John. "Must U.S. Military Culture Reform?" in *America the Vulnerable: Our Military Problems and How to Fix Them*, ed. John F. Lehman and Harvey Sicherman. Philadelphia: Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2002.
> Describes the functional, legal, and social imperatives for change in the military culture, and identifies

tensions between social imperatives (like gender equity) and functional imperatives to provide security for the nation.

Kitfield, James. "Standing Apart." *National Journal.* June 13, 1998. Vol. 30, Iss. 24. p. 1350.
Describes the growing gap in ideology and experience between civilian legislators and policymakers and the military.

Overview of Institutions in Crisis Framework

In response to a series of notable public scandals – accounting fraud at Enron, plagiarism at *The New York Times*, torture at Abu Ghraib, sexual abuse in the Catholic Church, and steroid use in baseball – the Kenan Institute for Ethics organized an interdisciplinary group of two dozen faculty and graduate students from across Duke University and the United States to examine ethical crisis and change. Based on interdisciplinary scholarship, we have developed a set of hypotheses about what makes institutions more susceptible to crisis and amenable to redress. We've identified five key attributes of institutional ethos: accountability, organizational structure, social contract, identity, and mission.

Accountability refers to how explicitly or implicitly expectations are communicated and enforced within an institution's hierarchy. Militaries with their strict, clearly defined chains of command have explicit accountability regimes while universities, which foster considerable organizational autonomy among professional spheres, tend toward more implicit accountability regimes.

Organizational Structure ranges from hierarchical to horizontal. The Catholic Church, for example, is a hierarchical organization, while Islam often assumes a more horizontal or network form. Dissent – political or ideological – is more routine in network forms and may help diffuse crises before they reach a critical stage. In contrast, a crisis anywhere in a hierarchical organization represents a more systemic crisis. Hierarchical organizations, like organizations with explicit accountability regimes are, however, more amenable to speedy intervention following a crisis.

Social Contract refers to the formal or informal relationship an institution has with its stakeholders. Military and business institutions, for instance, have formal social contracts with their stakeholders while higher education institutions have more informal social contracts with their stakeholders. Ethical crises – understood in part as violations of the social contract – are more readily observed in military and business institutions, and there are formal (if difficult to negotiate) channels for efforts to address such violations. In higher education, the social contract is loosely held amongst a variety of constituencies – students, faculty, parents, alumni, government regulators, civil society – which makes swift identification and remediation of an ethical crisis more difficult.

Identity refers to an affective sense of belonging that institutions generate and perpetuate. Identity can be a more or less salient component of institutional culture and can span the spectrum from strong to weak. Business organizations typically have weaker affective identities than religious organizations. Islamic institutions in the United States, for example, represent a strong sense of communal belonging that is coupled with a decentralized and diffused organizational structure. This combination of strong identity and weak structure has enabled Islamic institutions to respond well to the tensions and strains of a post-9/11 America.

Mission refers to the implicit and diffuse or explicit and detailed statement of being and purpose. What does an institution actually *say* it does? Business organizations tend to have explicit and detailed mission statements and deviations from the mission are more quickly observed and addressed. Higher education institutions, by contrast, tend to have implicit and diffuse mission statements such that while crises may arise less frequently they may also be far more difficult to confront and remediate.

While moments of ethical crises offer opportunities for reflection, there is little consensus about the best strategies to create effective change in these moments. Indeed, organizations often do the very things that we know don't work in moments of crisis. So, *how do institutions learn to prepare for, respond to, or recover from ethical crises?* Our cases seek to answer this question by illuminating how structural conditions make institutions both more or less susceptible to ethical crisis and more or less able to respond once an ethical crisis occurs.