



# An Interview with Michael G. Mullen

**JFQ:** *A recent essay in the foreign policy journal Orbis is critical of the general understanding of the classical code of American military ethics. The author [LtCol Frank Hoffman, USMCR] asserts that it is no longer taught, modeled, or enforced and that it has consequently eroded since the Marshall/Eisenhower era. It further observes that the U.S. military is unique in that it meets all the requirements of a profession (learning, barriers to entry, promotion criteria, social responsibility, and so forth), save a printed code of ethics. Do you agree, and would it be appropriate to charter National Defense University to fashion such a draft code for your consideration?*

**Admiral Mullen:** Well, you've touched upon a critical issue, really, a bedrock issue for our military. I certainly agree with the author's premise that we need to pay more attention to the study of civil-military relations in this country. I believe our connection to the Ameri-

can people is vital, not just to the Service itself, but to the health of our nation writ large. We all have to constantly monitor that relationship and never take it for granted. As a "Vietnam Baby" myself, I know the difference it makes—for every citizen—when that relationship is not as strong as it should be. It's a big deal.

I think the author is also right to observe that the complexities of war today do not lend themselves—and in fact may never have lent themselves—to a neat and orderly separation of civilian control between the levels of war. I recall reading in many histories of the Civil War, in fact, about how very much Abraham Lincoln involved himself in operational and even tactical decisions. His impact was obviously pivotal in the outcome of that war. And civilian influence and control is just as critical—perhaps even more critical—today.

As I have argued, right here on the pages of *JFQ*, the military must remain apolitical and

must always observe, indeed hold sacred, the principle of civilian control of the military. We execute policy. We do not make it or advocate for it. That said, I realize my role is advising policy as Chairman, but that advice is always private. And once the decision is made, we move out. That's what our military does, and we do it well.

I would agree that we do need more of a focus on military ethics and civil-military relations in our schoolhouses. And we are taking a look at that right now. But I am not sure we need to draft up a new code, though I would certainly be willing to consider it.

We've done exceedingly well without one to date.

There's a lot of internal talk about leadership in our military, all the time. If you were to stand quietly in the back and listen to a BCT [Brigade Combat Team] commander's or a ship captain's words in front of his or her troops,

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**Admiral Michael G. Mullen, USN, is Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.**

**Colonel David H. Gurney, USMC (Ret.), and Dr. Jeffrey D. Smotherman of *Joint Force Quarterly* interviewed Admiral Mullen at his Pentagon office.**



ADM Mullen addresses 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors Gala, Washington, DC, March 31, 2009

DOD (Chad J. McNealey)

you are going to hear about ethical behavior and leadership. That is important. And that is where our greatness lies—in our people, and in their knowledge of how critically important their duties are, and above all, in their desire to serve a cause greater than themselves.

**JFQ:** *Rank carries responsibilities as well as privileges. Every junior officer learns that commanders are responsible for everything their unit does or fails to do. Principles and practices nevertheless fail to mesh when commanders and their trusted subordinates fail in important responsibilities. The fiasco that surfaced at Abu Ghraib prison in 2004 is a prominent recent example. Brigadier General Janis Karpinski, USA, reverted to colonel after the dust settled; one colonel was relieved of command; and one lieutenant colonel received a reprimand. No other commissioned officers in the chain of command were sanctioned. In sharp contrast, seven enlisted men and women (one an Army private) received dishonorable discharges and prison sentences. Are steps required to remedy inequitable penalties at all levels of command—not just in the high-profile cases that bring discredit to our nation?*

**Admiral Mullen:** There is no doubt that Abu Ghraib was a stain on our national character, and it reminded us yet again of the power of our actions. The incidents there likely inspired many young men and women to fight against us, and they still do, as a matter of fact.

I don't want to spend much time focusing on a specific case, but this issue does bring up something dear to me, and that's accountability. I'm a big believer in it, and always have been. It's a critical part of how I grew up in the Service. And I believe that accountability has to go from the top all the way to the bottom of the chain of command, in everything we do. Not just in criminal cases of misconduct. But everything.

I think we have taken steps in the recent past to demonstrate that sort of accountability. Just consider some tough decisions Secretary [of Defense Robert] Gates has made with Air Force and Army leadership. For that matter, consider Admiral Fox Fallon [William J. Fallon, U.S. Central Command commander, March 2007–March 2008], a great friend and colleague of mine, who I believe held himself accountable in the most noble of ways.

Accountability is a part of our fabric, part of our military institution. Again, history bears this out—when accountability is maintained and enforced, institutions thrive and

excel. When we lose sight of that, however, we see people lose their way. I don't believe people—by that I mean their character, their needs and wants—have changed all that much over the course of human history. Yes, technology and the means of warfare have evolved at a faster rate than ever, but the reasons people make decisions to follow certain people and rules never change.

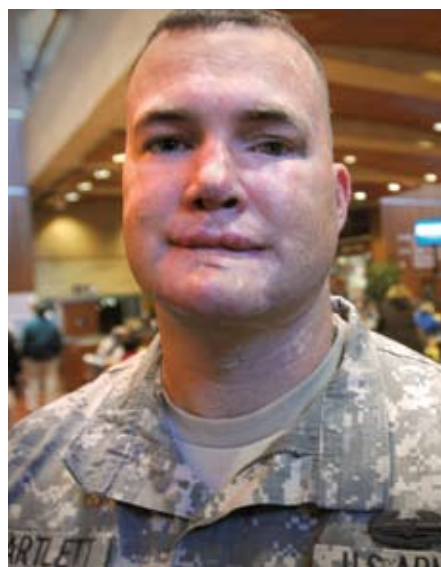
And holding oneself accountable for your actions and decisions, as individuals and institutions, is a big part of recognizing what we know to be honorable and effective and true, now and throughout the ages.

**JFQ:** *General Carter Ham, USA, and Brigadier General Gary S. Patton, USA, are heroes to vast numbers of Service personnel*

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*after speaking publicly about the counseling they sought following emotional trauma suffered during the Iraq War. You have also been active in advocating support to military personnel with both seen and unseen injuries. Should changes be made in the way we care for our wounded warriors during and beyond their transition to civilian life?*

**Admiral Mullen:** First, I want to tell you that I applaud General Ham and General



**Survivor of 2005 roadside bombing in Baghdad, SGT Robert Bartlett, USA, has undergone over 40 surgeries and perseveres through an arduous regimen of therapy**

Patton for the courage to stand up and talk about this. It's critically important for leaders to do that. The example they set is overwhelming, as you mentioned. Yet there is still a stigma attached to mental health issues that I believe won't be eliminated without more leaders asking for the help they need.

Other than winning our nation's wars, we have no greater mission than taking care of our wounded and the families of the fallen, for life. We've made progress, but we have far to go. Many military bases are developing robust treatment centers, and we are still learning a lot about PTS [post-traumatic stress] and TBI [traumatic brain injury], and other "unseen" wounds. I've taken recent trips to Fort Campbell, Fort Hood, and Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, and I've got to tell you, there is a lot of excitement there and a lot of investment—needed investment—in providing our soldiers, the wounded, and their families the gold standard of care they richly deserve.

But we have much left to do in order to improve the way we care for our wounded, their families, and the families of the fallen. The system we have today, even in our eighth year of war, is one still designed for peacetime. It's still too slow.

To me, it's about ability rather than disability, and a comprehensive approach, instead of merely compensation. No doubt, there is a lot being done right now, by a lot of good-hearted people, and I thank them for all they do. But we as leaders need to find better ways to fill the gaps between the Veterans Administration, the Department of Defense, and the many NGOs [nongovernmental organizations] all across the Nation who are ready to help. I call them a great "sea of goodwill"—and they are out there in significant numbers—but we need to find out how to best connect to all those people and organizations who have the talent and time and compassion to help and unite them under a banner of care that fits best.

We must never forget the families of the fallen. Their emptiness is one the rest of us will never fully know, one that can never be fully filled. I have learned a great deal from groups like TAPS [Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors], who provide so much to those families to help them cope, not just with grief but life skills that enable them to finally create again after dealing with so much anguish and loss.

Yet there is so much more we can and must do. Our commitment to these families can't be just a seminar or a program or some

form of monetary compensation, although those things are all important—it must be about a real commitment, for life. No one has given more to the rest of us than these families. And we are rich enough as a Nation to ensure they have that kind of commitment.

**JFQ:** *It has been observed that “jointness” is undermined by the reality that Service loyalty features in the retention and promotion of senior officers. Poor knowledge of joint doctrine, lack of objectivity, and poor cooperation in the face of joint-Service interest conflicts are occasionally observed under the current system. Why shouldn’t the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff have a greater voice in the selection of two-, three-, and four-star flag officers in each of the Services?*

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**Admiral Mullen:** The Chairman’s role is essentially twofold: to act as senior military advisor to the President and Secretary of Defense, and to represent more than 2 million men and women in uniform. That’s the job, and it’s a big one. It’s where my focus ought to be.

But I happen to believe our selection process serves us extremely well. The Title 10 authorities given to the Service chiefs, having been a Service chief myself, to select, train, and promote their officer corps is entirely appropriate, in my view.

The system works. And it’s borne out in the incredibly talented crop of leaders who are promoted year after year. So I do fully support the joint duty requirements in the law and observed by promotion boards. Those standards are producing for us the right kind of leaders who will eventually make general or flag rank.

I take issue with the premise that jointness has been undermined by Service loyalty. There always will be Service-specific loyalties. Some of that is good. There should be some degree of that. We as a nation are best served when each Service is an expert at its mission. But the truth is we are the most joint we’ve ever been after almost 8 years of war, and, by all accounts, we have been performing magnificently. So I am confident that we have the right focus. We’re moving in the right direction. And it’s some-

thing I, especially in my current job, watch very closely to ensure we continue to do so.

**JFQ:** *We frequently receive manuscripts from field-grade officers on civil-military relations that relate post-Goldwater-Nichols [Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986] examples of combatant commanders behaving at the expense, or even in subtle defiance, of policy. Should changes be made to the relationship between combatant commanders and the Office of the Secretary of Defense to ensure that policy is carried out vigorously?*

**Admiral Mullen:** Let me start by saying that I believe that it is good to speak out. It is essential for us as leaders that our people feel free to speak out on these matters—and they

healthy command relationships, and it’s working the way that it should.

I do think that we need something like a Goldwater-Nichols for the interagency. I am not convinced that we have it right yet for all instruments of our national power as far as integration and coordination across the board. I believe the President’s new Afghanistan-Pakistan strategy really gets to the issue with respect to a greater emphasis on civilian capacity.

We can’t succeed without generating civilian capacity in Afghanistan, so the President’s regional strategy is certainly a step in the right direction. And it is not going to happen overnight. Other departments in the interagency haven’t had the recruitment, haven’t offered the enablers and benefits



do, trust me. Many of our people out there have seen combat and been deployed two, three, even four and five times. They have earned the right to express their opinions. In fact, senior officers need to spend even more time listening to them and considering what they have to say.

When I put on my first star, I received a congratulations letter telling me that I would now “always eat well and never hear the truth again.” So I travel—I like to travel a lot—because it is really the only way I have found to really get to the truth: by talking to the folks downrange.

That said, I don’t think we need changes with respect to command relationships. And I am not aware of Active-duty senior leaders acting in defiance. As I have said before, we in the military execute policy. We should continue to do so and to better understand our place in the process. Goldwater-Nichols established

like we have for the military, such as indigenous health care or an appropriate level of life insurance. What we need—and I’ll use Afghanistan as an example—is an “Expeditionary Workforce” in our government. As a government, we need to figure out how to resource and sustain these efforts because balance between civilian and military efforts is so critically important.

**JFQ:** *The New York Times recently drew attention to the seemingly conflicted roles among former general and flag officers of, on the one hand, being strategic analysts on television and, on the other hand, being on boards of directors or otherwise representing defense contractors. Are you troubled by the apparent conflicts of interest involved in some of the activities of former generals and admirals? If so, what should be done about it?*



**Admiral Mullen:** I am not going to get into any specific allegation of conflict of interest. I will say this, though—which I have said many times—about the role taken in public discourse by some retired officers. One, they have the right to speak out. We should respect the fact that as retired officers, they are free to express their opinions. And two, I worry a great deal about the level of currency they have in operations they speak to. I remain concerned about the degree to which the American people confuse Active-duty representatives and retired or veteran representatives.

I think General Chuck Boyd [USAF] best summed it up when he addressed this issue during a commencement ceremony address at the Air War College in 2006. He said that the time for general and flag officers to express

With all of that being said, there is no review currently under way, and I am not prepared right now to say that any other particular thing will dominate our thinking should we go down that path.

**JFQ:** *There is broad recognition of the importance of linking popular support and military activity in counterinsurgency (so-called hearts and minds). But in the information age, combatants—even in conventional wars—are able to go directly to an opponent's population and strike at that support as well. Are we prepared to take steps to strengthen domestic civil-military comity in the event of conventional warfare? How do you, as Chairman, view the ability of the United States to break down said comity in our opponents?*

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their opinions to civilian leaders is while they are on Active duty, in the halls of power—but to do so in private, and to maintain “purity from partisanship” once *that* time is over. That speech is the gold standard on that issue, in my view, and I really do recommend it to you.

**JFQ:** *The “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy is once again in the news as special interest groups petition to alter the status quo. It is clear that no alternative—be it the status quo or any change thereto—will satisfy all parties concerned. Without intruding into specific advice that you might provide the Commander in Chief, what should be the overriding consideration influencing any decision concerning this moral dilemma? Is good order and discipline within the Armed Forces the primary consideration, or some other factor(s)?*

**Admiral Mullen:** There has been, as far as I know, no change to the law. We in the military obey the law.

I will tell you frankly, though, that the President has discussed this issue with me in broad terms—just that he is interested in looking at Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell. I have neither been asked for any specific recommendations, nor have I offered any at this point. When the tasking comes to do that, I will provide the President with my best professional advice—based on a thorough review of that law’s impact to our military readiness.

**Admiral Mullen:** This question strikes at the heart of the President’s new strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan because we recognize this is a very precise and delicate problem, and quite honestly we do need to get a better handle on it from a communications standpoint. This is a very big issue for all of us because the enemy is not constrained by the truth; I mean, it’s much easier to get your word out first when you can lie about it. I can tell you we are working very hard on this right now, both from a public affairs and an information operations perspective.

Let me talk for a moment on the issue, one that every time it occurs really sets us back, and that’s the issue of civilian casualties, which are a great case in point to make in this discussion. We are getting much better at trying to minimize them, but they continue to happen. And when they do occur, we have got to recognize it right up front and try to rapidly make amends, and we need to do so in a very public way.

I say it often, but it bears repeating here: in Afghanistan, the people are the center of gravity in this struggle. We know that. This whole effort is about them and their security. At the center of it all, what it really all comes down to is trust.

We can’t win—we don’t win—without earning their trust, and providing alternatives to the violent lives many are choosing right now. And we can’t earn their trust if we aren’t

credible in their eyes. As the President has said, the best weapon we have is our example.

**JFQ:** *The following question came from a lieutenant colonel in Iraq: “The ethical dilemmas of contracting in the field are worsening by the week. As we do more and more of it, the rules grow increasingly complex and we verge on the need to have a dedicated Judge Advocate General at the battalion level. The temptations to go to the fringes of the law and beyond are very real, not for the sake of personal gain, but just to accomplish the mission. My battalion S4 inherited a bad contract from the previous unit and has been spending the lion’s share of his time trying to fix it since we arrived in mid-February 2009. He has no formal training in contract law, but he is very smart and able. He is trying to get this \$500,000 project completed, but the result threatens to be a \$500,000 piece of junk that is completely unusable and a waste of taxpayer money. For an extra \$90,000, he can get the building constructed to actually meet the requirements it was originally let for. He was asked, seriously, by a field-grade officer in the Multi-National Force–Iraq contracting command if he wanted to get this project done, or if he wanted to do it legally. The legal restrictions in place make it nearly impossible to get things done to specifications. He will not compromise his integrity, but we also don’t want to lose the \$500,000 already spent.” The Armed Forces do work such as this because the inter-agency is not up to it. How can we get help with these cultural and moral incongruences?*

**Admiral Mullen:** To be honest, I am not very familiar with the specifics here, so I can’t get into too much detail. However, I can understand this lieutenant colonel’s frustration. I will only say three things on this issue.

First, we all realize the need to get a better handle on the entire contracting business. It is an issue we are all working hard on right now. But the truth is we don’t really know all the contracts out there or how much we are spending, and to be honest, where the money is all being spent. I’ve worked budgets for many years, and I know this is not an easy issue. And in my eyes, this is a big problem that we simply must get our arms around.

Second, as this relates to the interagency question, we need to integrate better and improve civilian capacity in jobs such as this where we really aren’t the right people to do it. Again, the President has taken this on directly and he, Secretary Gates, and I all recognize that most solutions to the problems

we face today are not military ones. They require a whole-of-government approach.

Finally, and this gets directly back to the question on accountability: It's an absolute. Now, I am sure this officer won't compromise his integrity, and that's key. For me, it is far better to have a project suffer than suffer any loss of our personal integrity. The ramifications of that will have far greater consequences to what we are trying to achieve.

**JFQ:** *The popular press has been heralding stress fractures in the Armed Forces and even the diagnosis of a "broken Army," with accompanying symptoms of high suicide rates, divorce, domestic violence, and other anecdotal evidence attendant to assertions of U.S. military exhaustion. In the face of this, you have observed that the Army is quite robust and that military families are in fact more resilient than reported. How do you account for this apparent divergence?*

**Admiral Mullen:** I've said it often: our forces are the best and most experienced I've seen in 45 years. Actually, I would argue our forces are the most war-tested and combat-ready ever. And every occasion I spend time with our ground forces out in the field, I am struck by the skip in their step and their morale. They know they are making a difference, and they—and their families—are proud of that.

But that doesn't mean they don't get tired. They do. They've been working very hard over the past 8 years, and they are pressed. The stresses on all our Services are real. Deborah and I travel a lot together, and she has met with thousands of families. They talk to her and what they tell her is that they are tired, but also that they are very proud of their Servicemembers and remain very dedicated to them.

We are trying to increase the dwell time, and have made some progress in that regard, and I really give Secretary Gates a lot of credit for that, as I do for his decision to end stop-loss. But it's going to take some time for all those changes to take effect. In the meantime, we need to do more to make sure when you're home, you're really home.

We must provide more of what I call "home time" because, honestly, we are eating our own seed corn here. This is an issue that we must get absolutely right. The bottom line is this: The investment we make today in securing our Servicemembers and their families and providing them a chance to breathe and have a life is quite literally an investment in the future of this country—the best we could ever possibly make. **JFQ**

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*The next issue of JFQ (Issue 55, October 2009)  
will include the winning entries  
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