

Concern Grows Over Top Military Officers' Ethics

WASHINGTON — Along with a steady diet of books on leadership and management, the reading list at military “charm schools” that groom officers for ascending to general or admiral includes an essay, “The Bathsheba Syndrome: The Ethical Failure of Successful Leaders,” that recalls the moral failure of the Old Testament’s King David, who ordered a soldier on a mission of certain death — solely for the chance to take his wife, Bathsheba.

The not-so-subtle message: Be careful out there, and act better.

Despite the warnings, a worryingly large number of senior officers have been investigated and even fired for poor judgment, malfeasance and sexual improprieties or sexual violence — and that is just in the last year.

Gen. William Ward of the Army, known as Kip, the first officer to open the new Africa Command, came under scrutiny for allegations of misusing tens of thousands of government dollars for travel and lodging.

Brig. Gen. Jeffrey A. Sinclair, a former deputy commander of the 82nd Airborne Division in Afghanistan, is confronting the military equivalent of a grand jury to decide [whether he should stand trial](#) for adultery, sexual misconduct and forcible sodomy, stemming from relationships with five women.

James H. Johnson III, a former commander of the 173rd Airborne Brigade, was expelled from the Army, fined and reduced in rank to lieutenant colonel from colonel after being [convicted of bigamy](#) and fraud stemming from an

improper relationship with an Iraqi woman and business dealings with her family.

The Air Force is struggling to recover [from a scandal](#) at its basic training center at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, where six male instructors were charged with crimes including rape and adultery after female recruits told of sexual harassment and sexual assault.

In the Navy, Rear Adm. Charles M. Gaouette [was relieved of command](#) of the Stennis aircraft carrier strike group — remarkably while the task force was deployed in the Middle East. Officials said that the move was ordered after “inappropriate leadership judgment.” No other details were given.

While there is no evidence that [David H. Petraeus](#) had an extramarital affair while serving as one of the nation’s most celebrated generals, his resignation last week as director of the Central Intelligence Agency — a job President Obama said he could take only if he left the Army — was a sobering reminder of the kind of inappropriate behavior that has cast a shadow over the military’s highest ranks.

Those concerns were only heightened on Tuesday when it was revealed that Gen. John R. Allen, the top American and NATO commander in Afghanistan, is under investigation for what a senior defense official said was “inappropriate communication” with Jill Kelley, the woman in Tampa, Fla., who was seen as a rival for Mr. Petraeus’s attentions by Paula Broadwell, who had an extramarital affair with Mr. Petraeus.

The episodes have prompted concern that something may be broken, or at least fractured, across the military’s culture of leadership. Some wonder

whether its top officers have forgotten the lessons of Bathsheba: The crown of command should not be worn with arrogance, and while rank has its privileges, remember that infallibility and entitlement are not among them.

David S. Maxwell, a retired Army colonel now serving as associate director for security studies at Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University, said that the instances of failed or flawed leadership “are tragic and serious,” but that he doubts there are more today, on a relative scale, than in the past.

Mr. Maxwell noted that Abraham Lincoln and Franklin D. Roosevelt, both wartime presidents, fired many more generals than Presidents George W. Bush or Obama. “These general and flag officers are humans,” he said. “Faced with stress, and a very complex combat environment, people make mistakes. These incidents do not represent the vast majority of our senior leaders.”

Like the troops, wartime commanders are separated from family for long periods, and the weight of responsibility — in a business where the metric of failure is a body bag, not the bottom line — bears heavily.

Still, with drivers and staff, private quarters and guaranteed hot meals, the lifestyle of the top echelon of commanders on the battlefield offers a significant buffer from the hourly rigors of frontline combat endured by the troops. So explanations differ for the lapses.

Paul V. Kane, a Marine Corps Reserve gunnery sergeant who is an Iraq veteran and former fellow of Harvard University’s International Security Program, believes the military is not the only institution facing a problem.

“The country is suffering a crisis of leadership — in politics, in business and in the church, as well as in the military,” he said. “We have lots of leaders, but we have a national deficit in true leadership.”

He acknowledged that the post-9/11 stress on the military, from enlisted personnel to commanders, has fractured the very souls of people in uniform. “When you pull people out of family life, repeatedly, over the course of a decade, you are going to fray their most basic relationships with spouses, with children, with their own personal code,” Mr. Kane said.

Other national security experts warn that a decade of conflict shouldered by an all-volunteer force has separated those in uniform — about 1 percent of society — from the rest of the citizenry. Such a “military apart” is not healthy for the nation because the fighting force may begin to believe it operates under rules that are different from those the rest of civilian society follows, and perhaps with a separate set of benefits, as well.

“Our military is holding itself to a higher standard than the rest of American society,” said [Kori N. Schake](#), an associate professor at West Point who has held senior policy positions at the Departments of State and Defense.

“That is beautiful and noble,” she added. “But it’s also disconcerting. Sometimes military people talk about being a Praetorian Guard at our national bacchanal. That’s actually quite dangerous for them to consider themselves different and better.”

In extreme cases, say some military officers and Pentagon officials, the result of this “military apart” is that commanders may come to view their sacrifice as earning them the right to disregard rules of conduct.

They note that if anything positive emerges from an era of increased scrutiny of misbehavior, it will be an invigorated effort to hold the officer corps to account for the way troops are led in combat, for the way the treasury is spent, for the way military leaders wear the mask of command.

And they warn that the problem may get worse before it gets better. While most of the more notable improprieties have been alleged against officers of the ground forces, the Navy, which has not been the fulcrum of the wars of the last decade, is also showing strain. A [study](#) by the Navy Times found more than 20 commanding officers were fired this year for inappropriate behavior and misconduct.

“The Navy’s time in the stress tester is coming,” said Peter D. Feaver, a [professor of political science](#) at Duke University. “The number of ships is dropping. The number of tours will increase. Reliance on the Navy instead of the Army to back up foreign policy will become greater over the next decade than the last. If the Navy is cracking under a past decade of strain, what will it mean for the Navy when it is in the hot seat?”