

# The Military's Sexual Assault Problem and Solutions

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The problem of sexual assault is not new in the military. Sadly, it has been around for decades, and senior leaders have been discussing how to address the problem for the same amount of time. Given the fact that the number of sexual assaults throughout DoD in fiscal year 2012 rose to approximately 26,000, we have clearly failed to properly address this issue. Equally disturbing is that the discourse around the subject remains largely unchanged. Unless there is a focused, driven and consistent effort to change the Army's culture with regard to sexual assault, the current trends will continue. The Chief of Staff of the Army, GEN Raymond T. Odierno, has stated, "It is time we take on the fight against sexual assault and sexual harassment as our primary mission. It is up to every one of us, civilian and soldier, general officer to private, to solve this problem within our ranks."

Clearly, hours and hours of slide decks and one-way briefings are not the answer. Helping servicemembers (young and not so young) to better understand who they are (identity, self-awareness and self-management), socializing them into the unique military profession, and helping them internalize and understand respect for others are a good start. As GEN Odierno stated in his message to the Army, "There are no bystanders in this effort."

It is time to stop using the terms *sexual assault* and *sexual harassment* in the same sentence and addressing these behaviors under the same umbrella. Assault and harassment are apples and oranges. Both are harmful, but one is much worse. Lumping these two types of misconduct together undermines the seriousness of sexual assault. While there is no doubt that creating hostile work environments and quid pro quo demands for sexual favors are a scourge and have an incred-

ibly detrimental effect on the force, they fall far short of rape and sexual assault. Behaviors that fall into the category of sexual harassment are certainly bad, disrespectful and harmful, but they do not rise to the level of crime identified as assault against another person. In addition, there is a large spectrum of behaviors—many of which are not criminal—that fall under the umbrella of sexual harassment. There are a number of gray areas in sexual harassment that are often misunderstood or behaviors that need to be "educated" away (like using cultural terms such as *honey*, *baby*, *darling* or *sweetie*).

We are not making light of behaviors that are in this category. We just think the problem of sexual assault is so insidious and harmful to what the military as a profession stands for that it needs singular focus—that is, priority of effort.

Servicemembers sexually assault other servicemembers for many reasons, and just as in civilian society, it is often not about sex but about power, a lack of respect, and a "me" culture and identity.

The millennial generation of soldiers has done something that no other generation has ever accomplished, namely, to fight two separate wars for more than 10 years with an all-volunteer force. They have, without question, risen to the challenge and calling of their nation. They are young, pragmatic, smart and hopeful, and they realize that they are capable of powerful change in the world. They are also arguably the most entitled generation America has ever produced. They have been heralded for their social intelligence and offered a seat at the table of world change, but too often they have not been respected once they got there. Having fought admirably over and over again, they now find themselves home and faced with the fact that they have contributed to their society in the most important way they ever will and have felt the power of living as intensely as they ever will. Now they

search to feel that powerful once again. They are in their mid-20s and have been to combat, but now they are being told that they have no experience with which to weigh in on the decisions and choices that their leaders are making. In addition, having served years and years in combat zones, where there is a great deal of freedom and autonomy, some servicemembers may have developed an inflated or exponential belief in personal freedom and autonomy, resulting in an "I can do whatever I want and get whatever I want" attitude.

Another important consideration for Millennials is their desire to be popular. The Internet and social networking contribute in important ways to this wish and can result in a pattern of sociological behaviors that are outside the norm. How else can one explain the senseless behavior of the Ohio high school football players laughing, joking and *filming* a rape? This generation of young people feels autonomous, entitled and empowered while seemingly (and erroneously) remaining anonymous. Importantly, it is the generation of their senior leaders who, as parents, raised and nurtured these young people. We are responsible for much of their outlook on the world, for their powerful contributions and for the sense of entitlement they possess. We created them. It will take both generations to end sexual assault in the ranks.

To be clear, we are in no way rationalizing or excusing the criminal behavior that is sexual assault. We are trying to better understand the "why" in order to be better able to come up with workable solutions.

Part of the problem is that young people who join the military are simply a reflection of, and a random sample of, society. As such, the military has to work harder to socialize and bring these young people into the profession of arms. With only one percent of the population serving in uniform, it can no longer be assumed that a servicemember will automatically "get it." We

must identify exactly what the differences between military and civilian life are: What specifically makes military life different from civilian culture? We must describe these differences in behavioral terms, not lofty or philosophical ideals. The seven Army Values are superb and appropriate, but they are just words until operationalized into observable behaviors. Army leadership at all levels must describe the Warrior Ethos and Army Values in words and deeds that resonate with soldiers without sacrificing their importance to the profession as a whole.

Equally important and germane to this topic is an understanding of why members of the military are held to a higher or different behavioral standard from civilians. This point relates to the previous point about culture and socialization, and it cannot be emphasized enough. Life in the military is different from life in the civilian world—*very* different. These differences must be highlighted daily, especially with new recruits and younger servicemembers. The media bombards the masses with mixed messages about the inappropriate, disrespectful and often illegal actions of celebrities, athletes, politicians and others. Such behavior (including drug and alcohol abuse; infidelity; and disrespect because of race, ethnicity or gender), which is unacceptable in the military, points to the cultural differences and battles that must be won.

To win these battles, and in response to GEN Odierno's requirement to end sexual assault, the military needs to take a more deliberate, collective ap-

proach to policing its own ranks. We must begin active intervention at every level with regard to sexual assault. Since most of the assaults that are perpetrated in the military are either witnessed by or in the proximity of other servicemembers, we need to highlight, encourage and support active bystander intervention, a means of preventing what is known as the bystander effect.

The bystander effect is a well-known social psychological phenomenon that refers to people standing around and watching, or having knowledge of, a crime or assault and not acting to stop it. One of the most famous examples of the bystander effect was an assault in March 1964 in New York City, when Catherine (Kitty) Genovese was attacked and stabbed to death over a roughly 30-minute period, while 38 people witnessed the crime and did nothing. There are numerous reasons (both conscious and unconscious) to explain why people do not like to get involved to stop unethical or criminal behavior. Some of these reasons include our litigious society and a "live and let live" or "it's not my responsibility" mentality. Of course, these are just reasons—or excuses.

The military must use the lessons of the bystander effect to educate, train and develop its members to ensure they are never inactive observers of sexual assault and other situations in which there are fellow soldiers in crisis. Commands must develop and reinforce an operational culture within the ranks that makes it admirable and expected to intervene in situations in which soldiers

perceive another in crisis. Using the Warrior Ethos requirement to "never leave a fallen comrade," units can role-play social emergency situations such as sexual assault, drunk driving and suicidal ideations, practicing what right and wrong look like. Just as perfecting how to operate weapons systems requires hours of practice, so too does practicing actions that often are not the norm or are uncomfortable, like bystander intervention.

Servicemembers, like all humans, have the capacity to think before they act. Being at a party with lots of alcohol and loud music does not negate the need to think and act appropriately. Being around women or men wearing suggestive clothing does not negate the need to think and act appropriately. Being downrange, where many garrison rules don't exist (or are not enforced), does not negate the need to think and act appropriately. The need to think (be self-aware) and act appropriately (self-manage) is not a part-time thing; it is a full-time thing.

Let's get after it. □

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