

Military Ethic

To the Editor:

The unauthorized bombings ordered by General Lavelle in Vietnam raise questions that go to the core of what some, including President Nixon, have called the military ethic.

No military organization can expect to function without discipline, the essence of which is surely the unfailing duty of obedience to the lawful orders of superiors—obedience being, in Samuel P. Huntington's definition of the military ethic, "the highest virtue of military men," and duty being, in Robert E. Lee's view, "the sublimest word in our language."

In my own view, the highest virtue of military men is not obedience, important as it is, but honor. The plebe at West Point has hardly submitted to his first military haircut when he begins to learn that an officer never compromises the straight truth, not even by quibbling, which, in more elegant discourse, may translate as "liberal interpretations." To ram that principle home, he is reminded that in time of war a commander facing literally vital decisions must be able to act with absolute confidence in the reports of his subordinates.

There is much in the so-called Lavelle incident that bears on large issues of civil-military relations in a democracy. What I am suggesting is that it bears as well on the military man's own professional standards of duty and honor in service of country. [Editorial June 23.]

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