



THIS WEEK'S FEATURE

Rather Be 'Righter' Than Better

How Institutional Pride Has Replaced Accountability in our Military's Leadership Culture

Lt Col (Ret) Ryan Sweazey

Walk the Talk Foundation — President & Founder

Every leader in the Department of War will tell you, without hesitation, that they want their organization to improve.

Ask any general officer, any senior executive, any flag officer at a change of command, and you'll hear some version of the same pledge: *we're committed to getting better*.

Here's the problem. Improvement requires an admission that something, right now, is not good enough. You cannot fix what you refuse to acknowledge is broken. That's not opinion — it's just how cause and effect works.

So follow the logic all the way through: if the admission never comes — if every critique is met with a denial, a deflection, or a counterattack instead of a "you're right, let's fix it" — was any of that talk about improvement ever real to begin with? Or was it just something leaders say, the way you say "we should get lunch sometime," with no actual intention of following through?

That's the conundrum sitting at the center of this piece. Somewhere along the way, a significant number of the people entrusted with leading our military and caring for our veterans decided they would rather be *righter* than *better*. Rather be seen as correct, competent, and beyond reproach than actually incorporate the criticism that would make the institution — and the people inside it — better off.

This is not a story about a few bad actors. It's a story about a pattern, and patterns are more useful than anecdotes because they tell you something about the system, not just the individual. This piece will walk through why that pattern exists, why our own leadership development pipeline does nothing to interrupt it, three recent examples of it in action, and why — despite how convenient it would be to pin this on one administration or one political party — this problem belongs to no one and everyone at the same time.

WHEN THE JOB BECOMES THE SELF

In a previous piece, "[When Pride in Mission Undermines the Mission](#)", we explored a specific psychological trap that's especially dangerous in institutions built around service, sacrifice, and identity — the military chief among them.

The trap works like this: when a person ties their sense of self-worth too tightly to their job, title, or organization, any criticism of that job, title, or organization stops registering as professional feedback. It registers as a personal attack. Sociologists call this role identity — the tendency for people to internalize the roles they repeatedly perform until those roles become woven into their sense of self.¹ Organizational research shows the same pattern: people who strongly identify with their organization tend to experience its successes and failures as personal experiences, not abstract outcomes.²



Once that fusion happens, the reaction that follows is not surprising. It's not a character flaw unique to the person involved. It is, frankly, exactly what psychology would predict. Because careers also mean income, stability, and status, a challenge to one's work can feel like a threat to survival itself — and people are strongly motivated to protect their sense of competence when it's threatened. The social psychologist Zeva Kunda's research on motivated reasoning shows people routinely interpret information in ways that preserve their identity and prior beliefs rather than in ways that are simply accurate.³ The result is a familiar menu of behaviors: concerns get minimized, reframed, or redirected; the motives of the person raising them get questioned instead of the substance of what they raised; cooperation slows; narratives shift just enough to preserve the existing account of events. In more extreme cases, this hardens into something closer to gaslighting, stonewalling, or full on reprisal.⁴

None of this requires malice. Much of it traces back to ordinary psychological mechanisms built to reduce cognitive dissonance — the discomfort of holding information that conflicts with one's self-image.⁵ But understandable does not mean harmless. When protecting identity becomes the priority, protecting the mission becomes secondary.

This matters enormously in an institution like the military, where identity and mission are deliberately, intentionally fused from day one of basic training onward. That fusion is often a feature, not a bug — it's part of what builds cohesion and sacrifice. But it comes with a cost, and the cost is this: the better an institution is at making people feel like the mission is them, the harder it becomes for the people running that institution to hear that the mission has problems without hearing it as an attack on their own worth.

Worth noting, too, is what the earlier piece called the "Inspector General Paradox": the offices specifically built to surface misconduct and mismanagement depend on people willing to raise uncomfortable concerns — yet those same complainants are frequently perceived not as contributors to accountability, but as disruptors "rocking the boat." Once that perception sets in, energy shifts away from the substance of the complaint and toward managing the person who raised it.⁶ A mechanism designed to protect institutional integrity ends up triggering institutional defensiveness instead. Keep that dynamic in mind — it shows up directly in Example 3 below.

Scale all of this up from one servicemember to an entire flag officer corps, an entire senior executive service, an entire department — and you get an institution that is structurally allergic to hearing it's wrong, even when being wrong is costing lives.

WHEN THE JOB BECOMES THE SELF

Here's a question worth sitting with: where, exactly, in Professional Military Education (PME) is an officer or senior enlisted leader taught to recognize cognitive dissonance? Where are they taught to identify the specific logical fallacies — ad hominem, appeal to authority, motivated reasoning, the sunk cost fallacy — that show up constantly in institutional self-defense?

The honest answer is: mostly nowhere. PME curricula are dense with strategy, operational art, logistics, joint doctrine, ethics case studies, and command philosophy. All of that matters. None of it teaches a leader how to catch themselves in the act of rationalizing.

We laid this out in detail in *"Twenty-Six Years Wasn't Enough to Teach Me How to Think. I Am Not Alone."*⁷ — twenty-six years in uniform, including an Air Force Academy commission, and not one of those years included formal instruction in how to catch oneself mid-rationalization. What that piece catalogs is a recurring set of reasoning failures that surface constantly in conversations with military and DoD leadership: false dichotomies that treat an officer's good record and a substantiated allegation against them as mutually exclusive rather than simply both true;⁸ credentialing — "in my thirty-one



years of service" — deployed not as context but as a conversation-ending appeal to authority;⁹ and the reflexive "you've never commanded, so you can't judge," which collapses the validity of a critique into the résumé of the person offering it rather than the substance of the argument itself.¹⁰ None of these are exotic errors. They are the standard, well-documented contents of any undergraduate critical-thinking syllabus — and nowhere in the career pipeline that produces flag officers and senior enlisted advisors are they taught, tested, or corrected.

These are not one-off's anymore — they are systemic, and they produce predictable results:

- **Leaders who can't tell the difference between rationalizing and reasoning.** Without training in how motivated reasoning actually works, a leader defending their organization and a leader defending the truth feel identical from the inside. Both feel like conviction. Only one of them is.
- **An inability to separate "defending the institution" from "defending the truth."** When those two things get confused, defending the institution starts to feel like the honorable, loyal thing to do — even when it requires misrepresenting facts.
- **A command climate that reproduces itself.** Subordinates watch how senior leaders respond to criticism and learn, quickly, what gets rewarded. If defensiveness and image management get rewarded, that's what rises.

Contrast this with how seriously the military takes physical readiness, marksmanship, or land navigation — skills drilled, tested, and retested throughout a career. Metacognition — thinking about your own thinking, catching your own biases before they calcify into institutional talking points — gets none of that rigor. It's treated as a personality trait some leaders happen to have, rather than a skill that can and should be taught.

Until that changes, we shouldn't be surprised when senior leaders respond to legitimate criticism the same way an untrained mind always responds to a threat to its identity: not by examining it, but by repelling it.

CASE STUDIES: INSTITUTIONAL DEFENSIVENESS IN ACTION

Abstract argument only goes so far. Here are three recent examples of exactly this dynamic playing out — one from the very top of the civilian and military chain of command, one from the very top of the enlisted advocacy chain, and one from the civilian bureaucracy tasked with transparency.

Example 1: Trump and Hegseth vs. the Families of the USS Abraham Lincoln

The first example plays out at the very top of the chain — the Commander-in-Chief and the Secretary of War — and it involves real, documented harm to thousands of sailors and Marines.

The USS Abraham Lincoln's deployment stretched past 260 consecutive days at sea, extended well beyond a normal rotation as part of operations tied to the conflict with Iran.¹¹ As the deployment dragged on, families and sailors began describing deteriorating conditions to reporters: inadequate food supplies, non-working plumbing, and a worsening mental health situation among the roughly 5,000 sailors and Marines aboard — including unconfirmed reports that multiple sailors had attempted to jump overboard.¹²

The response from the top of the chain of command was not to investigate or acknowledge. Secretary Pete Hegseth told NPR that media reports about conditions aboard the ship had been "misrepresented."¹³ When a reporter asked President Trump directly whether the deployment had gone on too long, his answer was blunt: "No. No. Not nearly long enough."¹⁴

Families didn't take it quietly. One grandmother, whose grandson was aboard the ship, told reporters that Trump "needs to be ashamed of himself to let them suffer the way that they're doing," adding, "they're over there fighting for our country."



And this is the thanks they get?"¹⁵ Other family members called the president's comments simply shameful.¹⁶

Then something interesting happened — the official narrative cracked from within. Adm. Brad Cooper, commander of U.S. Central Command, visited the Lincoln directly and, after touring the ship, acknowledged there had in fact been real problems with food supply and hot water. He characterized the issues as "old news" that had already been addressed¹⁷ — but even that partial admission directly contradicted the blanket "misrepresented" framing coming from the Secretary of War. It is difficult to simultaneously claim a story was misrepresented and also confirm the core facts underlying it.

Sen. Ruben Gallego, an Arizona Democrat and Marine Corps veteran, summarized the response bluntly as "a true lack of leadership."¹⁸

This example matters for the broader argument in a specific way: it shows that even when an official within the chain of command — someone who actually walked the ship and talked to sailors — validates the substance of a criticism, the top of the chain doesn't correct course. The denial holds anyway; easier to blame "America-hating media" than give even a modicum of admission of responsibility / culpability. That's not a communications failure — it's the pattern working exactly as this piece argues it works: saving face is the real Mission #1.

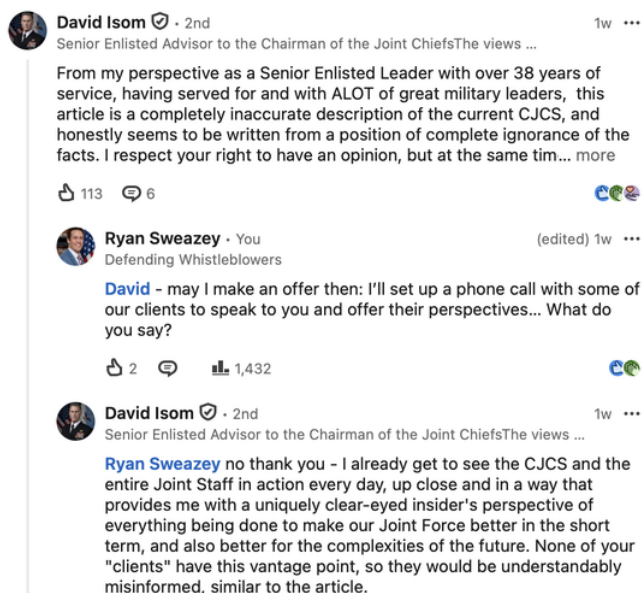
Example 2: The Chairman, the SEAC, and "You're Simply Misinformed"

The exchange started simply enough: a piece was published criticizing the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff — the nation's highest-ranking military officer — for failing to exercise the kind of bold, visible leadership the position demands.

The response came not from the Chairman himself, but from David Isom, the Senior Enlisted Advisor to the Chairman (SEAC). Writing publicly, Isom called the article "a completely inaccurate description of the current CJCS," adding that it "seems to be written from a position of complete ignorance of the facts" — leaning on his 38 years of service and daily proximity to leadership as the basis for dismissal, rather than engaging with a single one of the substantive claims raised.

So an offer was extended: set up a call between Isom and some of the servicemembers and families who'd shared their perspectives — people living the reality being discussed, outside his own chain of command.

He declined. His reasoning: his own "clear-eyed insider's perspective" of the Joint Staff already gave him better visibility than outside voices could offer, and those voices would be "understandably misinformed, similar to the article."





It's worth being precise about what makes this exchange more than just an official getting prickly online. According to the Joint Chiefs of Staff's own official description of the role, the SEAC exists to "provide critical guidance on... enlisted development, force health, and readiness," to serve as "a direct link between the CJCS and the Joint Force, ensuring perspectives are represented at the highest levels," and specifically to strengthen "the Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) communication chain, ensuring enlisted voices are heard."¹⁹ That is not incidental language — that is the stated purpose of the position.

Which makes the irony hard to miss: many of the people whose voices were offered up, and turned down, are enlisted servicemembers and family members who have suffered real, life-altering harm — mental health crises, careers ended by administrative processes with little outside oversight, families exposed to contaminated water at Red Hill. The one person in the entire Department of War whose job is explicitly to make sure enlisted voices reach the top declined a direct opportunity to hear some of those voices, in favor of asserting that his own vantage point made outside perspectives unnecessary, even "misinformed."

That's not a minor communications misstep — it's the function of the office being set aside in favor of defending the image of the office.

And the substance that went unaddressed in all of this? An unchecked mental health and suicide crisis across the force. Administrative separation processes that many describe as operating with minimal outside accountability — informal "star chambers" with real power over careers and little transparency. A recruiting and retention crisis that hasn't gone away. And Red Hill — roughly 90,000 people exposed to contaminated water, still without a single military official held accountable.

None of it was engaged on the merits. All of it was waved off as the product of "ignorance."

Example 3: IG and FOIA Offices — Deflection Instead of Accountability

The third example is smaller in scale but cuts just as clean.

The criticism here was aimed not at a public figure, but at the civilian bureaucracy responsible for two of government's most basic accountability mechanisms: Inspector General offices and FOIA processing. It was laid out directly in a piece titled *"To the GS-13 Whose Salary I Just Paid,"*²⁰ published, fittingly, on Tax Day. The ask, stated plainly at the outset, was about as modest as a criticism can get: "please do your job."²¹ published, fittingly, on Tax Day. The ask, stated plainly at the outset, was about as modest as a criticism can get: "please do your job."²¹

The specifics weren't abstract. To IG civil servants, the piece asked that cases not be closed with a rushed "not substantiated" before lunch, that investigators not claim witnesses were interviewed when they weren't, and that officials stop citing Controlled Unclassified Information as a catch-all reason to withhold information that doesn't actually qualify.²² To FOIA civil servants, it named a specific, years-long backlog at the Defense Intelligence Agency and made the distinction plain: "six years is not a backlog; it is neglect."²³ It called out the practice of returning FOIA responses so heavily redacted that even the date of the document is withheld under a vague citation, and noted, correctly, that transparency is a legal requirement, not a discretionary favor.²⁴

The piece closed not with anger but with something closer to earnest hope — a statement that despite the delays and frustrations, the author still believes the civil servant matters, still believes the system is capable of producing accountability and fairness in exchange for the tax dollars that fund it.²⁵ That's a notably generous framing for a complaint. It wasn't an attack on the individual holding the job. It was a request that the job, as designed, actually get done.



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The typical taxpayer ends up contributing about \$0.84 to a typical GS-13 living in the DC area. As a former govvie, if someone told me that "they pay my salary" I'd be happy to give them their dollar back and tell them to kiss my ass and to keep the change.

Funny · 🗨️ 11 | Reply · 3 replies

The response wasn't a defense of processing times, staffing shortages, or backlog numbers. It was a personal attack — a claim that the person raising the criticism didn't pay meaningful taxes, and therefore had no real standing to complain about how government functions.

The claim was false. It was also irrelevant. Whether or not someone pays six figures in taxes has nothing to do with whether a FOIA office is doing its job, and introducing that argument does exactly one thing: it moves the conversation away from the actual failure and onto the character of the person pointing it out.

This is worth naming for what it is — a different flavor of the same defensiveness on display in Example 2. Where the SEAC's version was "everything is fine, you're just uninformed," this version is "you don't have the standing to criticize." Different tactic, same function: avoid the substance entirely.

It's also a textbook instance of the "IG Paradox" described earlier — the office exists to safeguard accountability, but rather than treating the complaint as information to act on, the response treated the complainant as the problem to be managed.

And the substance matters here specifically because of what these offices exist to do. FOIA is a statutory transparency mechanism — a legal right, not a courtesy. Inspector General offices exist for the sole purpose of providing independent oversight and accountability. When the very offices tasked with holding government accountable respond to criticism of their own performance by deflecting rather than correcting, it is a small but perfect illustration of an institution protecting itself instead of doing the job it was created to do.

"I CAN HARDLY BLAME THEM" — THE EXAMPLE SET FROM THE TOP

There's a temptation to look at Examples 1 through 3 and get angry at the individuals involved — Trump, Hegseth, Isom, the anonymous FOIA/IG bureaucrats. That anger isn't unreasonable. But it also risks missing the more important point.

I can hardly blame the mid-level officer who deflects criticism of their command, when the example being set at the highest echelons of both military and civilian leadership is: never accept culpability, never accept responsibility, never accept blame. I can hardly blame the senior enlisted advisor for defending the institution over engaging with its critics, when that's the exact posture modeled by the Secretary of War and the Commander-in-Chief in real time, on camera, in front of the families of the people affected.

This is how institutional culture actually propagates. Not through a memo. Not through a training slide. Through demonstrated behavior at the top, which everyone below watches closely and, consciously or not, absorbs as "this is what's rewarded here." When the people at the very top of the pyramid treat every criticism as an attack to be repelled rather than information to be used, that becomes the operating norm for everyone beneath them.



NOT AN ADMINISTRATION-SPECIFIC PROBLEM

It would be convenient — and lazy — to treat Example 1 as evidence that this is a partisan problem, unique to one administration. It isn't, and the historical record backs that up.

In a previous piece, "*When Saving Face Becomes the Mission*," we examined the Red Hill fuel leak in Hawaii — the same contamination referenced in Example 2 above. Senior Navy leadership's initial posture in that crisis wasn't transparency. It was minimization and reputation management, even as the people being poisoned were the very servicemembers, family members, and Hawaiian civilians the Navy was ostensibly there to serve and protect. The instinct to protect the institution's image took precedence over protecting the people inside it — under a different administration, with different names attached, but the exact same underlying pattern.

Put the two examples side by side — Red Hill and the Lincoln — and the mechanism is identical: legitimate concerns raised by servicemembers and families, met not with investigation and correction, but with denial, minimization, and in the Lincoln's case, something closer to open gaslighting — reframing documented hardship as media distortion, and reframing the people raising the alarm as either mistaken or disloyal.

This is the entire point of including both examples. The psychological mechanism from Section II — identity fused with institution — doesn't check party registration before it activates. The training gap from Section III — nobody teaching senior leaders to recognize their own cognitive dissonance — doesn't discriminate based on who's Commander-in-Chief. And the result — deflection over accountability — shows up whether the fuel is leaking under a Democratic administration or the ship is undersupplied under a Republican one.

This is a culture problem, and our military leadership culture is proving it outlasts administrations.

EPILOGUE: WHO, IF ANYONE, BREAKS THE CYCLE?

None of this is really a story about a handful of individuals having a bad week. Trump, Hegseth, Isom, the FOIA bureaucracy, and the senior Navy officials who managed Red Hill are not the disease — they're symptoms of a system that never built the tools its leaders would need to do anything different.

We have built an officer and senior leader corps that is extraordinarily well trained in tactics, strategy, and command, and almost entirely untrained in recognizing its own defensiveness, its own rationalizations, its own cognitive dissonance. We have modeled, at the very top of the institution, that admitting fault is optional and that image management is an acceptable substitute for accountability. And then we act surprised when that exact behavior shows up at every level below it.

If we actually want the improvement that every leader claims to want, the fix isn't complicated to describe, even if it's hard to execute: build the recognition of cognitive bias and logical fallacy into Professional Military Education the same way we build in tactics and doctrine. Reward leaders — visibly, consistently — for saying "you're right, we got this wrong," instead of rewarding the ones who defend the institution's image most skillfully. And hold the very top of the chain, civilian and military alike, to the same standard we claim to hold everyone else to.

Until that happens, we'll keep getting leaders who would rather be righter than better — and an institution that keeps promising to improve while never quite getting around to admitting what's wrong.



Footnotes

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- 22. Sweazey, op. cit., note 20.
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Lt Col (Ret) Ryan Sweazey is the President and Founder of the Walk the Talk Foundation. All articles are posted on [LinkedIn](#) and online at walkthetalkfoundation.org. The Star Chamber podcast is available on [Apple](#), [Spotify](#), and [YouTube](#).

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