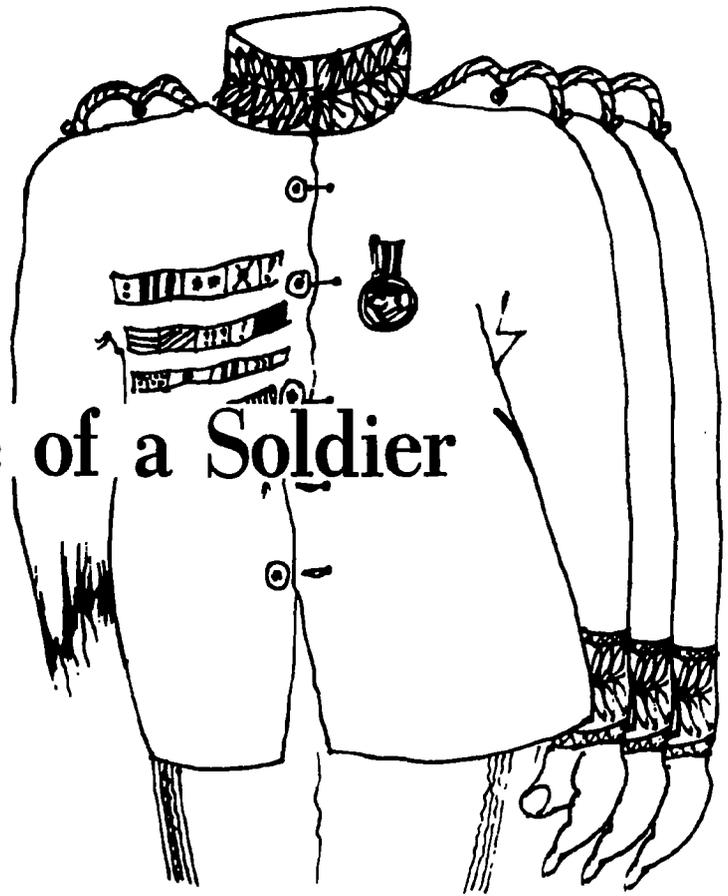


# The Conscience of a Soldier

Josiah Bunting



In his *Enemies of Promise* Cyril Connolly said of Proust: "His hatred and contempt for the life of action suited the war-weary and disillusioned generation he wrote for, his own snobbery offered him both a philosophy and a remunerative career, he believed also in art for art's sake." Had I Proust's genius, this judgment would fit what I have become in the past two or three years very well, and certainly, like Proust's, mine is a war-weary and disillusioned generation.

Until rather recently I was Major Josiah Bunting, United States Army. I ran very hard on the bureaucratic and careerist treadmill that the officer corps of the Army has very largely become. After five or six years I found that I had come to despise it and what it was doing to me and what it had helped to do to this country, and jumped off. Perhaps I did not make a good landing. In any case, my claim to speak on the exercise of individual conscience within powerful institutions may not be particularly strong, for I have come to disbelieve my own fitness for fighting the good fight within the system. I have no taste for what is called "infighting," for staying on board St. Thomas More's battered ship of state. I have no desire for promotion or place in a system which at the present time sets, it seems to me, a premium on the less admirable human qualities, nor

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do I probably have any real ability for performing useful service in it. Thus conscience doth make cowards of some of us. I am not comfortable striving with political men.

The Army is the only institutional power with which I have worked for any length of time, so my observations are rooted in that experience and in my reading and conversations about others' experiences with that institutional power. I have also some reflections on these observations and some ideas about how to improve the Army bureaucracy which wields the power. I cannot be sanguine about these ideas being taken seriously by the authorities, or for that matter about any proposals for radical reform of the Army being taken seriously by them. However, the Army officer corps desperately needs improvement. Its problems are manifold. In many respects they are problems common to all bureaucracies, and this is the first thing that most military officers will tell you—which is depressing enough.

In the first place, most military officers are not bold or imaginative thinkers or moralists, as you and I flatter ourselves we are. Neither for the most part are they skeptical. Nor have they any sense of irony or of the absurd. These wants are likely to persist. Now one may say that this has always been the case in the profession of arms both in this country and in the British Army, which is something of our Army's lineal ancestor, and one is generally right in saying it. However, it is certainly cold comfort for the years ahead, especially when one considers that the senior military acted to get us deeply involved in the Vietnam war and were foolish and persistent in saying that, had they been given their

head in 1965, they could have finished off our troubles in Vietnam in a hurry and could have retained the confidence and admiration of the American public in doing it.

One of my bleakest prognoses must be that, since both the morale and the reputation of the Army have sunk, the Army's attractiveness to bright young men choosing careers for themselves must diminish also. For not all military men have lacked acuity and imagination. Many of them have had these things and a great deal of what is called character as well. Nor can we be sure that there is not now some cadet corporal George C. Marshall drilling Rats at VMI or some Matthew Ridgway preparing his room for inspection at West Point. But the prognosis is surely bleak enough.

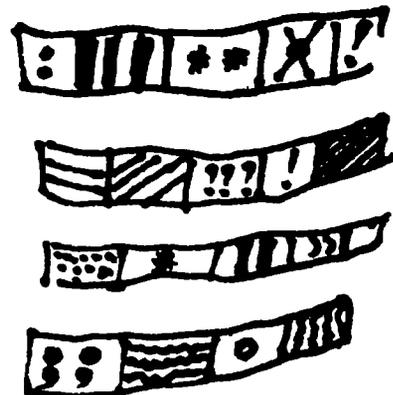
Other problems germane to my subject face the military institution (and I am not even going to address the more blatantly public of them—the problems of race and drugs and ill-discipline). In Vietnam, for example, the Army was charged with prosecuting a war for which it had not been trained to fight, in support of an ally it did not trust and for which its attitude has generally been one of great cynicism, for a cause it did not understand and in many instances ignored when it did understand it, and without the firm support of a civilian public whose interests it was supposed to be representing. Even more terrible, more reprehensible and more germane to our subject is the fact that the senior officers of the Army—those who advised the young Prince in the White House in the early sixties and his unhappy successor—consistently gave them bad advice, and often gave them bad advice not because it was their best judgment (even though it was usually bad) but out of some grotesquely misplaced sense of loyalty to things other than the very best interests of their country.

I am not referring now to what the unconventional and gifted British General Orde Wingate called “the tyranny of the dull mind,” which one so often encounters in the military. I am talking of a much more dangerous and misbegotten tyranny: that of the gifted mind which has jumped the track, which cannot admit its early mistakes and misjudgments and which, in attempting to make good on them, erects on their unstable foundations a self-serving skeleton of excuses and explanations that, it seems to them, will make good those earlier misjudgments; a tyranny of the gifted mind which has taken counsel of its ambitions to the extent that it will not risk public judgments which might thwart those ambitions, even though those judgments may be correct. B. H. Liddell Hart summed up the latter phenomenon very nicely:

A different habit, with worse effect, was the way that ambitious officers, when they came in sight of promotion to the generals' list, would

decide that they would bottle up their thoughts and ideas, as a safety precaution, until they reached the top and could put these ideas into practice. Unfortunately, the usual result, after years of such self-repression for the sake of their ambition, was that when the bottle was eventually uncorked the contents had evaporated.

There is also the tyranny of the institutional rather than the national or even moral loyalty, a particularly frightening monster often difficult to recognize. An example: In 1917 the British General Haig wanted to launch an offensive in Flanders. Lloyd George and the Cabinet at home were skeptical of its possible success, so they went in a delegation to talk to Haig and see something of the conditions of the war. When Haig heard they were coming, he did everything in his power to withhold the true and depressing evidence from their scrutiny. He went so far as to connive in having one of his staff's officers order that all healthy German prisoners be removed from their cages (which were close to Haig's headquarters) and be replaced by sickly ones. “You see,” the delegation was told, “we have been most successful in what we do here. Look at those prisoners, how ragged and sick they are. The morale of our enemy has crumbled, and we are sure to win a great victory.” Haig, of course, did not win a great victory. Instead his campaign resulted in 400,000 Allied casualties.



These different tyrannies, these separate driving or attracting forces which make men in positions of power do what they do, are most difficult to identify and isolate. Probably most men in power believe they are acting according to conscience. Military bureaucrats, or any bureaucrats, would be pressed themselves to explain why they said and did things that we, in our lofty and privileged station as historians, now identify as reprehensible. What, for example, motivates a man who by all odds is among the three or four brightest, and is in fact among the three or four most senior, generals in the Army at this time to say things like the following?

. . . I think that on balance the Army has accomplished what it was sent [to Vietnam] to do. It was sent out there to create those conditions within which the political, economic and social future of the country could be established. And we have certainly created those conditions.

What motivated such Westmoreland pronouncements, uttered with regularity for four years, that the American military was being most successful in the achievement of its mission, that given a few more men and a few more munitions and a little more time we would surely turn the corner and win the peace? Was it stupidity? Misplaced loyalty? Ambition? Fear?

I will give my own responses to these truly difficult questions by developing the four points I made earlier. I first said that the Army was not properly trained to fight the kind of war which it should have fought in Vietnam—if it should have fought at all. The Army of 1965 (it was in that year that battalion-size infantry units, Army and Marine, were first committed to the war) was “configured” for conventional war, making pertinent the comment some historian made about the second battle of El Alamein fought in October, 1942: that it was the best executed battle of World War I. Armies do not rapidly adjust to the changing political and military contexts in which they are called upon to fight any more than military genius commonly manifests itself in any but the most settled periods of technology and strategic and tactical thought. And in 1965 the American Army was trained, doctrinally and practically, to fight what is called “conventional war.” By that time it had fully digested the tactical lessons of the Korean War and of World War II, in neither of which had it purchased any significant experience of counterinsurgency fighting, a kind of fighting which must exalt the political end over the immediate military goal.

It is true, of course, that the dogma of massive retaliation had been succeeded by a new doctrine called “flexible response,” according to which we recognized that, although nation-states might be predatory, they are not suicidal. We saw it was unlikely that we would have to fight an all-out nuclear war, but we might have to prosecute some lesser form of warfare, some limited campaign for a limited and isolated objective. Among the limited campaigns envisaged were campaigns around the glacis of the Communist bloc. Western Europe was a possible arena, though it is difficult to see how any war involving American forces there could be limited for long. There was also the possibility that we would have to fight in what we called, with superb arrogance, “underdeveloped nations,” countries in which we inferred the Communists would foment revolution. Among these, where in fact the Communists had already been at work for a long time, was Vietnam.

Also about this time, under the anxious supervision of an Administration which may yet be regarded as among the most posturing and belligerent in recent history, preparations for waging counterinsurgency war were acquiring a great vogue. In April, 1961, Mr. McNamara called for a 150 per cent increase in antiguerrilla forces, and in May President Kennedy told Congress that the military must partially reorient itself to counter-revolutionary fighting. But the vogue, such as it was, became public rather than institutional. The Green Berets came to enjoy a modest public fame. They fitted in nicely with the Kennedy Administration's conceit of itself: they were palpable and indeed glamorous evidence that the refined machismo that characterized the Administration had now taken root in the land forces of our Defense Establishment.

But no one who was anyone in the Army paid the Special Forces any particular attention. The Army's counterinsurgency capability was sham, a capability restricted to a very few of its oddball officers and senior enlisted men. Very few officers who had serious notions of becoming generals served in the Special Forces. And 150 per cent of 15,000 would not make a fighting force sufficient to deal with the kind of counterinsurgency the Army would shortly be committed to fight. Indeed, in an appointment that reveals nakedly how much special trust and confidence the Administration and its senior military advisor really reposed in its counterinsurgency capability—which demonstrates with what exquisite misunderstanding it judged the real nature of the struggle in Vietnam—it appointed Lt. Gen. Paul Harkins, a soldier utterly without counterinsurgency experience in any war, as first commander of the New Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, ignoring the claims of the few gifted officers with any experience at all in such fighting. This was at the end of 1961.

I dwell on this only to establish that the Army that would fight in Vietnam would fight a conventional war, a war of hardware and inappropriate tactics, a war, in short, utterly at odds with the politico-military reality of the situation. And military bureaucrats had a stake in fighting it that way.

Down the sluice we went, propelled by the most optimistic assessments of our progress possible. Dissenters or those stricken by conscience in the field were ruthlessly cut off or ignored or—to use one of the great buzz-words of the age—“co-opted.” A few more men, a few more bombs, a few more months, then the corner would be turned and we would emerge blinking and vindicated at the end of the tunnel.

We should not, as the best of our military brains told us at the time, have become involved at all, or our involvement should have been a severely limited one. These brains (and it should be noted that they were all retired) included Generals Mac-

Arthur, Ridgway and Gavin. But we did get involved, and finding that we were disbarred by the very nature of the Army's training and organization for prosecuting a strategy that might, just conceivably, have been successful, we endorsed the ancient shibboleth, dear to generations of soldiers, that "more means better." The only problem was that the enemy was not susceptible to any of the "more," nor was our ally able to profit from the expenditure made on his behalf.

So to sum up that point: The Army was not trained to fight the kind of war the situation demanded—if any war in Indochina demanded the involvement of American ground forces.



Nor, to address briefly my second point, did the Army trust its ally in the field, if trust in the military sphere means "have respect for the thinking and fighting abilities of one's comrades-in-arms." We tried instead to make over the South Vietnamese Army in our image, warts and all. I remember reading in a CRIA publication about the American who took a suit to be copied by a Chinese tailor, and when he finally picked up the suit found that the tailor had reproduced his old suit exactly, including the tears and patches. Our own tactical deficiencies were magnified in the South Vietnamese Army. They too began multibattalion search-and-destroy operations (the name of which was officially changed when I was serving in the Delta in 1968), scouring the jungles and rice paddies like some monstrous noisy predator. The results are well known to us all: the free-fire zones, the wholesale killing of noncombatants (which the military continues to extenuate on the grounds that these deaths were unintentional—as indeed most of them were—a corollary that follows logically from the assumption that in order to save cities you have to destroy them), the ghastly "wasting" of the countryside and its resources, the employment of body counts as principal criteria by which to assess military failure or success, finally the moral emasculation of the South Vietnamese Army, whose individual feats of heroism I now see are rewarded with financial bounties instead of decorations.

Thirdly, it is certainly unfair to fault the Army for not knowing or understanding the cause for which

it fought. Nowadays my friends in the Army and Government affect to be amused when I tell them that in 1966 the Government was telling its citizens that we were "fighting to bring freedom to Vietnam"—a direct quotation, incidentally, from the letters of condolence sent parents of American soldiers killed in Vietnam. Surely I never believed such swill, my friends say. But this is hardly the point. No American Government has any business telling its citizens it is carrying on a war for reasons it knows itself are false reasons. Later this particular "cause" was somewhat transmuted: we were fighting in Vietnam to guarantee the Republic's right to self-determination. And is it not admirable what they have determined for themselves? There is another line which appeared with lamentable consistency after 1965: we were fighting a war for the American reputation. Should we waltz on our commitment, our reputation as a guarantor of small nations to whom we have treaty or other commitments would suffer irreparable harm. The Communists would be quick to seize upon such a thing as evidence that we would not "stand up" to them. This, of course, is nonsense. It makes the typically arrogant assumption that our prospective Communist adversaries are simpleminded, have not read history and are, in fact, bent on taking over their neighbors one by one.

Returning to the Army and its confusion about what it was supposed to be doing in Vietnam: For the overwhelming majority of soldiers and officers who served in the war there was of course no confusion. Erich Maria Remarque summed up a soldier's feelings on campaign in his exhausted private's description of life on the Western Front. "He knew only that he was there," Remarque said. And that he wanted to survive into the peace that must come one day. For the young professional officer in Vietnam this meant doing what he was told to do as well as he could without much regard for how his contribution would weigh against an ultimate resolution of the fighting. After all, he served there for only a year, then he came home.

One night in Vietnam I asked another officer whether he thought the American officer had changed much in the last thirty years—was he different from his father who served in the Second World War?

"Yes," he said, "if you asked a captain who came home in 1945 what he had done in the war, he might have answered that he had been with Patton's Seventh Army in Sicily, that later he had trained further in England, and that he had landed at Normandy and had helped to liberate such and such a city. If you asked a captain who returned from Vietnam in 1970 what he had done there, he would, likely as not, have replied that he had been an operations officer for five months and a company commander for seven months." He saw it as necessary that he do certain things, "get" certain tickets

punched, make himself competitive for promotion later. The focus had changed radically in twenty-five years. This can be explained by the fact that probably the captain of World War II was not a regular and by the fact that he was not serving a one-year tour, but was a member of an Army whose final success would mean only the end of his combat service. His contribution could be seen to mean something in the achievement of that success. In Vietnam this was reversed.

The fourth point I made is that the public did not support the American soldier in Vietnam with any enthusiasm and therefore that he served with a strange fatalism or preoccupied himself with pleasing his superiors or grew contemptuous of the public. This is perfectly explicable. In two ways it has had serious, prospectively catastrophic, effects on the Army. First, it has led to the current plans for a Volunteer Army. Second, as I have said, it has tended to make much of the officer corps sullen, resentful, suspicious of the public and above all of the news media through which they experience the public attitudes.

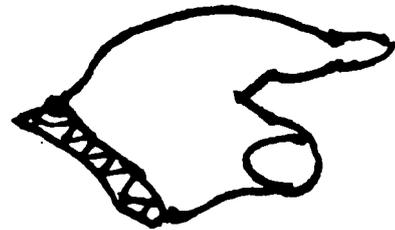
I come at last to the central issue of the subject as it applies to the American Army. What does the professional officer do when his conscience troubles him, or even when his intellect alone troubles him, or when the two of them together tell him the institution of which he is a part is making very serious mistakes? Can he stand up within the institution, make his criticisms forthrightly, dare to hope that they will be scrutinized dispassionately and acted upon in a way which may vindicate his judgments? Can he do this without serious risk to the successful development of his career?

Generally the answer to both these questions is No. Even more depressing is the fact that the problem rarely surfaces. The attitudes of most officers to their work is functional, operational: They do not consider the long-range perspectives, but instead are problem-solvers, men of action who, after all, have taken an oath to obey the orders of their commander-in-chief. There is tremendous institutional pressure against the very gestation of individual problems of conscience, even more institutional pressure against their being articulated within the military bureaucracy. Among the greatest of these, one which makes the profession of arms unique, is that the dedicated professional soldier—soldier in the sense of field leader and fighter—has no opposition to join. Without becoming a mercenary or an outlaw he cannot carry on the craft for which he has trained himself and to which he has made a most solemn commitment.

Further, if he is a good officer he will be healthily ambitious for promotion—ambitious in the sense that he will recognize his talents and skills merit deployment across a progressively larger span of control.

Those who will judge on whether or not he is qualified for promotion will be his own immediate superiors, who, in turn, will be judged by their own immediate superiors. Above all, he must please them, he must be successful as *they* set the criteria for success by their orders. If these orders are stupid or immoral (and in battle the boundary between stupidity and immorality is itself most difficult to set), he, the subordinate, will take very large professional risks in refusing to carry them out. And even if he takes the risks and is vindicated, his reputation is likely to be tainted (in the eyes of his fellow officers) with a faintly distasteful cast, let us say, like that of the ship's captain whose vessel was run into by another vessel and who was himself exonerated of any personal guilt in the collision.

There is this to consider also, that only rarely in war are serious moral dilemmas posed, unambiguous, naked and unmistakable to the military professional. The greatest moral question of the Vietnam war—indeed of any war—is whether the benefits that will accrue from its successful prosecution will make good the expenditure of blood with which those benefits were purchased. It is a moral question few soldiers ever ask themselves and that fewer can answer when a war is in progress. Everything in the professional soldier's training runs counter to his even posing the question. The young and middle-grade military professional is a mason, a kind of indentured apprentice; he is no architect. And by the time he has climbed to the top of the greasy pole he has usually become an advocate of the military solution anyway.



Let me sum up what I have said so far. The military professional in American society is, *au fond*, a bureaucrat, usually an ambitious bureaucrat. His weakness and the weakness of the military bureaucracy have been underscored and magnified by the present war. His early training and his progress through the bureaucracy, if it has been normal and steady, have tended to erode his moral sensitivity to the judgments about the use of force and run counter to his willingness to cut against the grain of prevailing military opinion, the opinion which for him is embodied in the orders of his superiors. He has become an expert, and like most experts he tends to want to apply his peculiar expertise to almost any problem that may confront him. Lord Salisbury's famous judgment on experts is worth stating here:

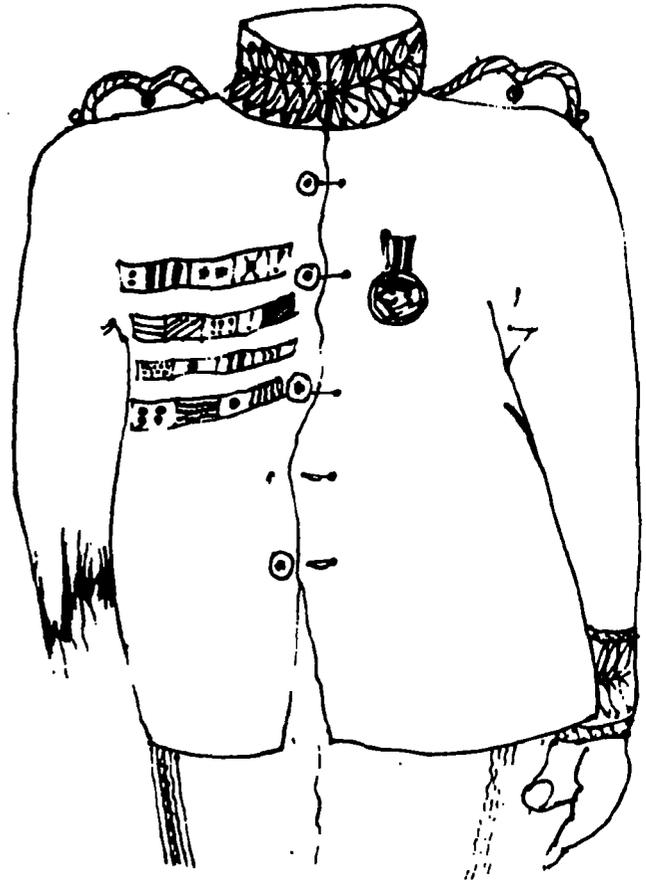
No lesson seems to be so deeply inculcated by the experience of life as that you should never trust experts. If you believe doctors, nothing is wholesome; if you believe the theologians, nothing is innocent; if you believe the soldiers, nothing is safe. They all require to have their strong wine diluted by a very large admixture of insipid common sense . . . soldiers are dangerous advisors as to a military policy.

Our senior soldiers were certainly dangerous advisors as to our military policy in Vietnam. But I criticize with some diffidence. I went to Vietnam convinced that what we were doing there was necessary; in fact I asked twice to be removed from Oxford to serve there. Like most soldiers, I was ardent for some desperate glory.

Fundamentally I think the problem I have been circling about and around is one of identification. Lord Salisbury's statement sums it up well enough. We identify with our profession or our state or our particular bureaucracy. What's good for General Motors—it is a very short step to saying—is good for the national interest, and since I am successful in General Motors, my expertise is useful to the national interest. But my loyalty remains to General Motors, not necessarily to the national interest. In the military the problem is magnified because of the institution's mission. Institutional loyalty displaces national loyalty, and not always in ways the soldier can recognize.

How then is the Army's institutional momentum, the leaden bureaucratic power that is both inertia and momentum at once, to be controlled or arrested? How can individual conscience register on the momentum of the Army's institutional power, either to impede it or press it along or, when necessary, check it? It seems clear that individual conscience must somehow, in the Shakespearean usage, be "stayed for," somehow be indemnified against reprisal, that those who would act on matters of conscience be reassured that their actions do not involve their destruction in the bureaucracy. Either this, or the institution's corporate sanctity must be violated and its professionals made to include men who are either not military professionals or men for whom the promotional attractions of a military career are not overriding. Concrete suggestions are usually more difficult to make than general proposals, but the following may be worth consideration.

1. Since the Officer Efficiency Report is the major means by which boards of senior officers decide who is to be promoted in the system, let both the officer's superior *and* his principal subordinates write efficiency reports on him, and let relatively junior officers sit on the promotion boards themselves. An officer whose ambition to succeed in the system makes him chary of following the demands of con-



science would surely be more willing to speak out if he knew his commander did not have make-or-break power over his professional prospects.

2. Appoint general officers from the civilian professions for, let us say, four or five-year terms, such appointments to be made by the President on the advice of Congressional committees who would nominate equal numbers of men from both major parties (or whose known political affiliations were with neither party). Large numbers of general officer billets can be filled by intelligent amateurs from the other professions. Of this there is no question.

3. Appoint what the German Army now calls ombudsmen, civilians answerable to the legislative branch, to serve in the more senior military commands, men through whom conscience-motivated complaints might filter for legislative scrutiny. I would think the best ombudsmen would be men with as little exposure to bureaucracies as possible.

I happen to believe that to the poet's question, "Is the eternal truth man's fighting soul?" the answer is Yes, that military bureaucrats are fascinated by power, fame, station and place to the extent that their consciences, individually, rarely can inoculate them against such claims. Therefore we must inoculate the system itself by encouraging men to follow the dictates of conscience and to ignore the worldly rewards of bureaucratic success.