

Public Service in the Social Media Age: How Ethics and Perception Must Guide our Service Members

Watching in stunned horror, I sat with my eyes firmly affixed to the glowing screen of my monitor. Visions of flash-grenades illuminated the dark scenes of the Ferguson streets, temporarily removing the silhouettes of the scene in a burst of brilliant light. On my personal computer I streamed live footage of the Ferguson riots while closely watching a map tracking both the events and rumored targets of the riotous destruction. Reaching for my phone, I called my father, mustering the nerve to speak to him in a tone which came across as both angry and petrified. “Dad, I think you guys should try and find another place to stay tonight... I don’t know, maybe at Grandma’s? A hotel? Anywhere. I’m watching this thing and it’s five blocks from the house... Just be careful tonight.” Ending the conversation, I continued watching the coverage of the area events. Protestors both peaceful and violent filled the streets for quite some time, spreading a message of overall discontent with the police system. Live streams, social media posts, and news casts all told a different story to their viewers, but none had a positive spin. There simply was no positive to these events. At best: one tragic death of an American citizen. At worst: an inexcusable murder from a uniformed public servant. Our country was virtually between a rock and a hard place, with little information to go on and even less reason for hope. In these unclear times of great frustration it seemed to this onlooker that the only discernable truth was that there is something wrong with the system, and that the American public is hell-bent on seeing it change.

Imagine what it is like to see buildings you have frequented burning in the dark night sky as hundreds of angry protestors take years’ worth of hatred and angst out on an area and community that you love. A service academy student from the area, I joined the thousands of

American citizens watching (from my school far from Missouri) in disbelief as the shooting of a young man spurred an unprecedented response from factions both local and foreign, tormented and tormenting. National powers such as the CIA and FBI joined local units of police and national guardsmen tasked with bringing relative peace and stability to a situation far out of their reach, as civil right groups, empowered by the forces of “Anonymous” and other vigilante forces, spread a message of anger and discontent to a public infuriated by partial information and questionable police judgment. Anyone who watched saw that it was a warzone. Men and women were fired upon seemingly every night, gas was released, and Humvees patrolled civilian streets looking for American citizens taking “justice” into their own hands. Those with violent fury unleashed it onto a town that never prepared for it. Like most, I felt helpless as the destruction was unleashed. I could do little from my room in the barracks far away but watch and hope that the violence would spare my family and the rest of the area that we knew as home. Fortunately my immediate family and friends were spared. No ill came to our homes, vehicles, places of work or worship, or property after the initial waves of destruction; but while we stood relatively unscathed, our neighborhood laid in heartbroken pieces.

We waited, as anxiously as everyone else in the country, for the results of the Grand Jury, trying our best in the interim to sift through the hatred of the discussion afterwards and focus instead on being good ambassadors of the community in our respective lives. I watched intently the media coverage, marrying it with the first-hand knowledge acquired from my contacts in the area and the unfiltered discussion of the events on social media. From my academic ivory tower I witnessed the real world’s pain before my eyes. I did my best to put my own prejudices aside to see the situations as others might see it, but the shock and anger made it hard to remain impartial. My idealized point of view from an academic environment made it hard for me to understand the

riots. Why would someone react in such a way? How could anyone think that such destruction was right? I unknowingly, or perhaps even subconsciously, took the side of my fellow public-servants without hesitation. I would find out later that this was a huge mistake.

I stood in my room, packing my bags for a return to the area when my roommate turned on the statement of prosecuting attorney McCulloch. Like most of America, I watched, shocked and perplexed, as the physical evidence that was revealed and explained painted a very different picture of what occurred in sharp contrast to the information passed on as “fact” just weeks earlier. For months we had heard that Mike Brown had his hands up in the international signal of surrender, but that was not the case. We were told that he was shot running from Officer Wilson, only to find that the autopsy revealed that to be impossible. Finally, we had, for months, been relying on accounts of witnesses spinning situational horror stories that were amplified by an opportunistic media. Mr. McCulloch revealed that many of these accounts were either taken back or changed after being faced with evidence, while others openly discredited their own story and admitted that the testimony they presented was nothing more than information that came to them on the street. It was an overwhelming case. An “open and shut” easy-call “no indictment” that the country had waited over one hundred days for. McCulloch gravely, yet confidently delivered the unpopular news before a media circus and crowds of anxious citizens. National and international coverage attended the event, eager to see what the masses would do in response to the expected announcement of no indictment. I remember seeing a split screen on the newscast. On one side: the President, the Honorable Barrack Obama urging the nation and the people of Ferguson to strive for peace, while the other side showed live footage of protestors flipping a police car on the streets of Ferguson. Despite the pleas of even the Brown family mayhem reigned supreme on that night; consuming all hope for peace, much in the same way that arson

consumed local buildings and businesses. Just like the early nights of the first round of protest, devastation filled the Ferguson streets. Angry groups of protestors set fire to police cars, looted local stores, perpetuated violence, and even opened fire on an officer. The flames of angry protest burned until the next morning, when daybreak saw a marked decrease in action and the area got a respite from the destruction of the night before.

Having successfully returned to the area from my school less than 12 hours after the last events of that first night unfolded, I went to see, with my own eyes, what was truly happening in the Ferguson area. I drove slowly down the street of West Florissant, creeping forward in my mother's van as I somberly took the sights in. The remnants of buildings and cars sat in ashes on the cold suburban streets. A crisp Missouri breeze carried those ashes away, but left the wounds of the events open as residents were left to ponder what would happen next. Businesses shed an interesting light on the trust locals had in the peace of the protests, as some boldly left their windows uncovered while others boarded up, as if bracing for the violent force of a hurricane. Some were rewarded for their faith, weathering the night of violence to see the bright morning sun glisten off of their window's untouched glass. Others were not so lucky. Clear signs of looting and destruction were visible from the street in places. The violent wrath of the protestors had been taken out on those unlucky few while entirely passing over others. Eventually my path was discontinued by a police blockade set up to keep non-residents out of the area. Area policemen stood their posts rigidly, armed as if ready for another round of violence. Their blue and red lights illuminated the scene, which was shared by the militant presence of the Missouri National Guard. Soldiers in a familiar pattern of slate grey, foliage green, and desert sand were dispersed amongst the area, both to support the police in their quest for peace as well as to act as a deterrent for anyone with ideas of further violence. In all it was a scene from an apocalyptic

war film. Never in my short life had it occurred to me that such things could happen on American soil. Certainly these were the kinds of images that one saw on the news from different countries, but never a ten minute drive from your house! Seeing enough for one day, I eventually drove from the area to contemplate what I had seen. I didn't get far before I realized that what I had seen and what I had felt simply did not align. I, a Caucasian male, an agent of the government, and aspiring armed forces officer had driven down to Ferguson to see a display of savagery. I expected to be disgusted by the action of my fellow Americans, and to take away from my experience that wearing the uniform was imperative to avoid and save the public from situations just like this. I questioned their actions to destroy infrastructure, believing even from my isolated position that I knew what was best for them to do without even being there. What I found, instead, was that it was that kind of thinking that caused this mess. I saw both in the story unfolding around me and in the mirror that the culture and mentality of modern-day public servants was causing us to miss the point. Taken aback, I reflected on the matter throughout the evening. I thought about what I had heard, and what I had seen. I tried for a moment to step outside of the confines of my uniform and oath to gain a better understanding of both sides: the uniformed man, carrying out a mission likely unknown to the public, trying to stay alive and do his job; and the average American citizen, uninformed of the intentions of most public officials and at the mercy of their own two eyes to inform them. It suddenly become clear. Our hubris and uniformed status had made us question our public, when in reality it is we who need to be constantly prepared to be questioned and/or questioned regarding our actions by our public. A reaction like this clearly could not be merely from this one event. This was the product of a long period of frustration, perpetuated by a racially charged atmosphere and a developed mistrust in

empowered officials. Surely this is an indication of how good of a service we are providing to the American people.

It is not a new phenomenon, nor is it all that isolated of an incident in this world that the people feel somewhat oppressed by the forces that regulate and govern them. Even in my limited experience in the seafaring industry, I have heard constant complaints from seamen that the Coast Guard that is meant to help them often ends up doing just the opposite. “Are you even on my side?” asked an exasperated Captain of mine in discussing how he felt about our men and women in coast guard blue. Years of disorganization, miscommunication, and lack of public outreach have fostered an operational culture in which the very sailors whom the Coast Guard protects feel (at least) that the agency does little but inconvenience them for the own ends, when in reality their success is one of the primary goals of the institution! What part of this is unavoidable? Certainly some of this stems from a natural disconnect between those in regulating authority and those regulated. But what of this can we, as those in uniform, change? What are our baseline commitments as those who serve a nation? And how do we earn back the trust of the public whom we exist to serve?

After seeing the events of Ferguson unfold before my eyes, and putting it in context with some other major instances of citizens not trusting public officials, I am convinced that every public servant has the ethical obligation to the country to not just act above reproach at all times, but visibly so. Reflection on the topic can bring you to no other realization. So what if Darren Wilson was right? That does not take away the questionable nature of the actions, and it sure does not do anything to make our public feel safer! Any ethical leadership must revolve around treating the lead (or the governed, read as protected) as means, and not ends. As such, the current state of affairs sees those in power acting in such a way as the very citizens from whom they

draw power believe that their best interests are not being served! This literally uses our citizens as the means of power, for our own (perceived) ends! “Ends” focused governance must see public trust as the prize. We owe it to the people to let them know that powers are working for their good. It no longer is (although the argument can be made that it never was) good enough to simply provide a service to the people. We must work increasingly harder to show the public what we are doing on their behalf! In a world where any man or woman with a smartphone can snap one or two unflattering images of someone in uniform, we must work hard enough to show the public that our failures as an institution are the exception, and not the rule. Right now many social media sites see false or even quasi-incriminating evidence going undisputed, and this has bred a generation of American citizens who believe nothing but the worst of the men and women charged with their wellbeing. The military services, institutions, and public servants must take it upon themselves to cultivate public trust. Surely, if even the NFL with their seeming endless bouts of bad publicity can hold public affection using deliberate and strategic public relations, then public servants who serve and protect a nation (a decidedly nobler cause) can do the same.

Public servants in any capacity make a living off of national well-being. To do so without displaying to the people our efforts is asking a culture built around instant access and visibility to believe in an invisible system. This holds especially true of those servants in uniform: *any* uniform. As symbols and ambassadors of our institution to the public, we wear uniforms for a number of reasons. Those in service carry the distinction and tradition of their individual institution as well as the known role of fighting for their country with them in uniform. Our uniforms distinguish the parts from the whole, as we act as individual cogs in a much larger machine. Our civilian counterparts in firemen, policemen, or even hotel door men wear uniforms as well, and also for the primary purpose of distinguishing them as they act in their contributory

roles in society! The uniform does not define us as people, but it does at least strongly suggest the job or duty we perform while inside of our delineating clothes. Young children learn at an early age what a soldier looks like, or what a policeman looks like. In uniform there is no question what your chosen profession is. You are easily distinguishable, and with that distinction comes the additional burden of constantly proving your worth to a watchful public. Yes, you must do your job, but you must also act proper in the eyes of your people. Why? Because there are thousands of others who wear that same uniform, or brandish the same badge, or even perform that same function! To make one foul move in a uniform is to color the perception of anyone involved on the topic of your profession. One ill-mannered sailor in a pub will damage that establishment's view on any white-clad sailor to walk in their doors. Hence, we are able to see what happened in the case of the Ferguson shooting. Sloppy police action and a tradition of over-used non-discriminate force has doomed any police violence to perceived murder because those acting inside of that uniform have given, at times, no thought to the others who share it.

It was the day before Thanksgiving, and I looked upon the streets of Ferguson as a snowy peace spread throughout the town. I walked, looking into the weary eyes of the policemen and guardsmen as I passed them on my way. They were tired. The weary guardsmen were standing twelve hour rotations, as I learned from one of them. I'm sure the police were close to the same. These men, standing peacefully but vigilantly at their posts, whether they knew it or not, had been in conflict long before the fateful shots rang out on these streets. Even I, wearing a hooded sweatshirt displaying my academy, had been fighting unknowingly ever since I had arrived at the institution a few summers ago. We all are, and what the events in Ferguson showed us is that we are losing. It was not merely Darren Wilson's actions that made him this subject of such hatred,

this pariah. It was his association with a failed system combined with the tragedy of the situation that doomed him, and the city where it took place.

If you want to look for someone to blame this on, look no further than me, or your local police officer, or any commissioned officer in any armed force. All of us; this belongs on every uniformed or distinguishable public servant in the country. For it was not so much Darren Wilson's actions, but rather our own that brought this upon him and upon the city of Ferguson. Every police officer that ever non-discriminately fired a weapon, every marine on shore-leave that got too drunk to be anything but a menace, any academy kid who goes out on the town and curses up a storm, and every service member that neglects to display for the public each day that their betterment is our mission contributed to this lack of faith. We stopped giving (or at least showing) our public reasons to trust us, and justifiably they stopped trusting. The onus is on us to fix this now. We must refocus our forces, and rededicate ourselves to a brand of service that allows our citizens to know that we act with them in mind. Only when it has become clear to our public that this is the case, will they be able to take the good news with the bad. Only then will they be able to see the necessity of an officer discharging his weapon on a man trying to pry it from his fingers, where they now see a man unfairly deemed to have shot a youth to advance his racial preference. Ethically justifiable decisions must reign. From Admirals to Seamen, we must fight just wars and display eternal public dedication to win our most important battle: the battle for our nation's trust.

I sit now in my room, back in the barracks of my beloved academy. In both time removed from and distance I'm far away from Ferguson and her weary residents, but my burden is no lighter than those still on the frontline of this national discussion there. Hanging up in the corner is my uniform, pressed and cleaned for the start of a new week. The insignia shines, and the tag

reads my name; but the reality of the fact is that can I no longer read it as my own. I look into that standard issued rectangle of plastic and gloss and see thousands of men and women looking back at me. I step into that garment and see before me a public, waiting, hoping, to see me do something admirable. It is a burden that I, we, must carry the rest of our days, never failing to remember what our existence must mean to those we serve. We exist in a realm of duty, sworn to protect a constitution and a way of life. Whether elected or appointed, we have been equipped with the necessary means to serve our public as best we can, with our only true goal being their eternal and visible betterment.