

Justice Not Served in Army Case

I have deep admiration for the military, its sacrifices and dedication. The root of its strength, however, is the services' ideals, which provide the bedrock of what is often truly great about this institution. That is why I am dismayed when they betray their own code.

This incident involves the case of Colonel James H. Johnson III. Colonel Johnson was of military royalty -- his father had commanded the 82nd Airborne Division -- and seemed well on his way to a top slot himself. His last assignment was as commanding officer of the 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team.

Then Col. Johnson ran afoul of any principle of military or even civilian law. Starting in 2005 he began a long affair with the daughter of his cultural adviser. That is enough to warrant his dismissal, but it gets a lot better. Johnson married the young woman. Without divorcing his wife, either. Making him a bigamist. After that, he made use of official credit cards and vehicles during repeated trips to visit his paramour, journeying from his base in Italy to their rendezvous in the Netherlands. Taxpayers were paying for his tryst, in other words.

Like any new member, he also wanted to help out her family. Under his signature, contracts for thousands of dollars went to her father, for goods and services that "were neither produced nor received," according to the court martial panel. He also provided the family a U.S. Army cellphone, on which they ran up \$80,000 in charges. You know kids and phones.

By the time a court martial of five colonels had convened, Johnson had already pleaded guilty to fifteen counts of conduct unbecoming an officer, fraud, and bigamy. He was duly convicted.

At this point Colonel Johnson's military career was over and his wife was divorcing him. But now it was time to pay the paper. This is called justice.

In an episode of class warfare worthy of Gilbert and Sullivan, the panel rendered a \$300,000 fine and five years confinement -- but only if he refused to pay the fine. No jail time, in other words. While officially reprimanded, he was not given a discharge -- dishonorable or otherwise -- and can now retire as a full colonel with 26 years of service and a \$72,000 a year pension. Greg Rinckey, a former Army judge advocate general lawyer, remarked to Stars and Stripes

, "I was expecting his dismissal ... the reprimand is meaningless. And he still gets his retirement? I'm shocked."

But troops know that geese and ganders deserve the same treatment. The Stars and Stripes website had over one hundred comments on the story, almost all negative. On the Facebook page of the independent Army Times

, outrage was expressed. One commenter declared, "This is as bad as it gets ... The lower enlisted go to jail for stealing a soda, and an officer gets to retire and live his life after being found guilty of bigamy. I had a soldier in Iraq found guilty of bigamy; he is still in jail." Another simply noted, "Officers taking care of their own."

The military is in a precarious time; their wars over or winding down, they are entering a garrison environment. There will be major cutbacks, and with no clear warfighting mission, a lack of focus and reduced morale. Yet, despite any changes -- in peace as well as war -- I have always believed that two things made the officer corps so admirable, the core of their effectiveness even before ability in battle. One was the principle that you take care of your men first, before anything else. And second was that in matters like this, all who wear the American uniform are equal. This is no time to start dismissing core principles.