

The Ethics Professor and the Company Man

Students in the USM College of Business are required to take an ethics course – PHI 300 – which focuses on business ethics. The course is often taught by George Carter, Chairman of the Department of Economics, Finance, and International Business and Professor of Economics. References show that Carter’s Ph.D. from Texas A&M University is in Economics, and a further search reveals that his baccalaureate degree from USM is in Mathematics, while his master’s degree, also from USM, is in Economics. Perhaps Carter completed some ethics coursework as an undergraduate or as a Naval officer, but no formal ethics coursework is present in his SEDONA file. The reader should be aware that there are various scholarly journal outlets for ethics manuscripts, and there is, of course, the option to write and publish books on the subject.

Along those lines, a search of Academic Search Premier, Business Source Complete, and EconLit reveals zero refereed publications for “George Carter” from the University of Southern Mississippi in the area of “ethics” or “business ethics”. Carter’s SEDONA file shows no evidence of published refereed work in the area of ethics. It appears that any academic work Carter may have done on the subject of ethics has yet to pass the litmus test of the double blind review process. However, a Google search over the terms “George Carter”, “Mississippi”, and “ethics” reveals some very interesting entries. We’ll discuss a few of these hits, saving the most interesting entry for last.

One Google hit returns an article from Episcopal Life online newsletter from April 2004.¹ The article contains an interview with Carter, whom the article identifies as an “ethicist and professor of economics.” An excerpt follows.

“Fifty years ago, the church, along with Boy Scouts, Girls Scouts and the ‘Leave-It-to-Beaver’ family structure provided uniform behavioral standards and expectations, Carter said. People carried those standards into the workplace. Carter said he believes ethical decisions today are more often linked to self-interest – seeking reward and avoiding punishment – than to internal standards of doing what is right ‘no matter what,’ a pattern that reflects the highest level of moral development.”

Aside from conflicts with Episcopalian Doctrine – of which I believe there are many – Carter’s statements are anti-intellectual in their very nature. Carter seems to believe that individuals need someone to tell them what is right and what is wrong, and that holding to the “least common denominator” method of leadership is appropriate. Apparently Carter believes that adhering to a set of written rules is a higher form of ethics than one based on internal reflection, intellectual thought, and intelligent discourse. The same article goes on to say that

¹ Karen D. Bota, “Taking care of business: Episcopal Church making a difference in the marketplace,” Episcopal Life, Closer Look section, April 1, 2004. Available online at http://www.episcopal-life.org/26769_37936_ENG_HTM.htm

“‘In business, we need to set up an ethical system with these external structures and reinforcement for the majority of employees, rewards for not doing certain things and punishments for doing them,’ said Carter.”

Here is a view into the man’s mind. Carter advocates setting up a punishment and reward system as a panacea for the business world’s ethical problems. However, Carter’s system would apply only to “the majority of employees,” a statement that leads us to believe that Carter is willing to either allow some individuals (but not others) to operate under their own ethical standards or to allow some individuals to be exempt from his punishment and reward system. In a USM Public Relations press release from May 13, 2004, Carter reinforces his statements in the Episcopal Life article.²

“As far as the workplace is concerned, Carter said, ‘Research has shown that the ethics that people practice come first from superiors, only a distant second from peers, and an even more distant third from one's internal ethical identity. It is important to establish the ethical foundation on which employees are expected to act in the workplace. A written document, beginning with core values, is the foundation on which ethics and honor systems are founded.’”

This second quote underscores the fact that Carter advocates a top-down ethics approach rather than a bottom-up approach to governance. Carter’s sentiments advocate a circumstance in which an administration (representative of the Power Class) dictates to its subordinates the ethics of the organization. This stance is in stark contrast to principles advocated by organizations such as the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), and the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), all of which advocate – and in fact demand – bottom-up processes. Under the top-down approach, the CoB Dean’s Office and Department Chairs should develop a code of ethics and then apply the code to the CoB Faculty. Apparently Carter relishes the thought that the CoB Faculty would fall into lock-step with the mandated code of ethics, after a period of adjustment to the punishments and rewards system of course. Again, this is in stark contrast to a bottom-up approach in which CoB Faculty would develop a common code of ethics that are acceptable to its members. Carter’s statements seem to imply that CoB Faculty and other “employees” are not to be trusted with such important tasks.

Additionally, Carter’s quotes illustrate a common problem among CoB administrators, and indeed USM administrators in general. The common problem is that these individuals follow the precept that “As long as it’s not clearly against the rules, it’s not unethical.” Of course, all should be aware of the differences between “illegal” and “unethical,” but no set of rules is free of vagueness and loopholes, two openings that the “rule follower” culture seems to exploit incessantly. One only has to look as far as the CoB Management Team’s perversion of the 2006 merit raise process to see what “principled administrators” who “follow rules” can do to a strategically crafted framework.

² “College of Business and Economic Development Adopts Core Values,” USM PR Press Release, released May 13, 2004. Available online at <http://www.usm.edu/pr/prnews/may04/cbedvalues.htm>.

What these quotes also identify is Carter's demonstrated belief that the organization is superior and more important than the individual. The organization's ethics trump those of the individual. The organization's objectives trump those of the individual. The organization's methods are superior to those of the individual. It seems that Carter has an extremely limited understanding of incentives, given evidence that precious little of his career has been spent building consensus. Carter is a military man, a native of Hattiesburg, and an apparent disciple of former USM president William D. McCain, known as "the General." McCain's presidency was marked by strict military-style administration, and Carter attended USM during this period. Later, Carter would serve as a commissioned officer in the Naval Reserve.

It is this military indoctrination that exacerbates Carter's apparent inherent leadership and ethics views. As McCain expected to hear only "Yes, Sir" from subordinates, so Carter expects that orders flow downhill and that faculty members (or employees, or subordinates) should simply do their jobs and not question the decisions made "above [their] pay grade," a saying Carter has repeated many times in nearly thirty years at USM. A disagreement might be registered in private, but to argue with a "superior" or to attempt to change the system is inappropriate and has no place at USM. George Carter is, at his core, a Company Man, working within the system at USM but careful never to swim too far against the stream of "how things are."

So now it's time to turn to the final citation from our Google search. The well-known (at least at USM) article, which appeared in The Chronicle of Higher Education on March 19, 2004, discusses Carter's role in the Glamser/Stringer affair.³

"Mr. Glamser, a 61-year-old motorcycle enthusiast known for his affable classroom manner, says he immediately called his friend George H. Carter, a professor of economics who teaches courses in ethics. Mr. Carter advised him that in cases in which a person's credentials are questioned, the correct course of action is to forward the evidence to that person's immediate supervisor. In this case, Ms. Dvorak's immediate supervisor was the president of the university, Shelby Thames."

When Glamser contacted his "friend" George Carter for ethics advice, Carter advised him to "forward the evidence to...Shelby Thames." Perhaps Glamser should have solicited a second opinion. Perhaps Glamser should have investigated his friend's views on ethics before following the counsel provided by Carter. Glamser, and indeed a large portion of the USM Community, believed Dvorak's actions to be unethical. However, Carter's statements in other venues clearly indicate that the ethics of the individual are subordinate to the ethics of the organization as handed down by the leadership of the organization. Given what we've seen, Carter must have believed Thames to be the ultimate ethical authority at USM. Being the good Company Man, Carter did not advise Glamser to take action outside the "Chain of Command" by going public with the allegations or even immediately conducting an independent AAUP investigation, because

³ Thomas Bartlett, "Move to Fire 2 Professors Roils Campus in Mississippi," The Chronicle of Higher Education, March 19, 2004. Available online at <http://chronicle.com/free/v50/i28/28a00101.htm>.

such a move might embarrass the organization and its leadership. Glamser consulted Carter the Ethics Professor and was met instead by Carter the Company Man. Glamser was questioning a superior, and the type of action Carter prescribed would almost certainly help maintain the order of things at USM.

Perhaps Glamser didn't know that Carter has no formal ethics training, that Carter has relatively no standing with the academic ethics community, that Carter is a military man, or that Carter would seemingly act more like a representative of the university than a friend to Glamser, and, if not, then Glamser is certainly not at fault. For those who would argue against our suppositions, we pose a question: When Thames failed in his ethical responsibilities as president of USM, why did Carter not speak out in his role as ethicist in residence? The answer lies in the fact that the Ethics Professor is first and foremost the Company Man.