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## Why I no longer support Capt. Honors

By **Christopher A. Preble**, Special to CNN c/div>

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### STORY HIGHLIGHTS

Christopher Preble: Many back Capt. Owen Honors, saying he's been unfairly attacked

Preble: First reaction is one of sympathy since Honors tried to connect personally to shipmates

But those who felt videos caused a hostile environment cannot just leave ship, he says

Officers have been let go over less, he writes, and Navy's reputation at stake

**Editor's note:** Christopher A. Preble is director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute. He earned his commission in the Navy in May 1989 and served more than three years, including two deployments, on board the guided missile cruiser USS Ticonderoga.

**(CNN)** -- The proliferation of Facebook pages in support of Capt. Owen Honors -- one boasting more than 20,000 "likes" and others with thousands of members and comments -- shouldn't surprise anyone.

The harsh criticism directed at the Navy captain for a series of inappropriate videos he recorded as the then-executive officer of the USS Enterprise in 2006 and 2007 has elicited a rally-round-the-underdog effect from people who perceive an honorable man, and a respected institution, under assault from an effete elite, the vast majority of whom have never served.

The top three television networks included stories of the scandal, as did print newsrooms from London to Argentina. Commentary in the blogosphere is heated and highly polarized.

My first reaction was sympathy for Honors. Yes, the videos, which include bad language, sexual innuendo, bathroom humor and a host of other juvenile gag lines, were in poor taste. Yes, they were disrespectful toward whole classes of people, including SWOs (Surface Warfare Officers), of which I was one.

Yes, I thought to myself, Honors had failed to live up to the highest standards expected of military officers. But he wanted to establish a personal connection with his crew, something that is difficult to do on an aircraft carrier that is home to more people than the town where he grew up. He was trying to entertain. Military service is a special lifestyle with particular demands. What happens "in theater" ought to stay "in theater." Can't we just cut the guy some slack?

Actually, no. My initial reaction was to defend the captain, but conversations with a few former officers reminded me of an essential truth about leadership. Everyone who wears the uniform, but especially those entrusted to lead, has a special responsibility to uphold the very highest standards at all times.

This is precisely because a single officer's actions will be seized upon by the service's harshest critics as a sign of an institution run amok. The antics of a group of Navy and Marine Corps aviators at the infamous Tailhook convention in 1991 affected naval officers all through the service. I know. I was deployed half a world away at the time, and yet my promotion to lieutenant junior grade was held up until I could prove that I was not involved in the events in Las Vegas.

If Honors' punishment seems severe -- he was relieved of command of the Enterprise and his career is effectively over -- consider that officers can be processed out of the military for "conduct unbecoming" even when they commit offenses off base and in civilian clothes. Officers have been removed from the service, often with deep reductions in rank that result in severe cuts in their retirement income, for offenses ranging from driving under the influence of alcohol to solicitation of prostitution.

By contrast, Honors was acting in an official capacity, using government equipment and the time of his staff. And always in the role of executive officer.

It is hard for those who have never served to understand that last point. An executive officer is more than a second in command, more than a senior vice president at the right hand of the commander. In many respects, an executive officer is a father figure for the troopers, oftentimes men and women just out of high school and away from mom and dad for the first time.

I confess: I laughed at the Honors video. I don't even really mind the SWO jokes. Foul language, including the F-bomb, is a seemingly

permanent feature of my lexicon. As a society, we can be too quick to judge humor, even humor in poor taste. When it comes to off-color jokes, I'm generally inclined to let them pass. As Honors says at one point in the video, some of you are likely to be offended. Deal with it.

But it doesn't work that way at sea. In the comfort of my home, I can change the channel if I see something I don't like. Likewise with music on the radio, or the umpteenth cloying news report lamenting someone's misfortune. Although a sailor could choose not to watch the executive officer's videos on a closed-circuit television, he or she can't escape the ship -- a truly unique, and often quite isolated, environment that depends upon every man and woman doing his or her job.

There are those who will say that the Honors incident is a sign of a badly dysfunctional institution, the Navy, that has always set itself apart, even from the other services. I don't believe that is the case. A review of the incident will ask, fairly, where was everyone else in the chain of command?

It is also appropriate to ask why this is coming to light now. The videos were recorded several years ago, the Navy investigated in some capacity, and ultimately appears to have let the matter slide. Is the Navy only now responding in a different way because it has attracted widespread media attention? If so, that doesn't speak well of the service's motivations to police itself.

All that said, when a single person's actions create a hostile working environment for the entire crew, other officers and senior enlisted personnel -- including subordinates -- should step forward. Likewise, it will be worthwhile if the focus on Honors reminds all military leaders, officers and enlisted, of their duty. But if it becomes a servicewide witch hunt on the order of the Tailhook investigation, the Navy -- and the country -- will suffer.

Either way, one man, Capt. Owen P. Honors, deserves the blame.

*The opinions in this commentary are solely those of Christopher A. Preble.*

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