Scott Christensen

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NSA Group Project: Code of Conduct Evaluation

To give a brief overview of this assignment, my group and I are presenting our analysis of the NSA’s overall compliance to ethical principles. We will be examining the NSA’s Code of Ethics and then be critiquing various scenarios the organization has dealt with morally challenging decisions. In such situations, it is our belief that in order to fully understand the NSA’s motives and methods, one must first understand the guidelines of conduct upon which the NSA is based. Throughout the course of this paper, we will analyze then critique the Code of Ethics of the NSA.

When researching the NSA’s Code of Ethics, the most readily available resource came in the form of a PDF document with the title “A CODE OF ETHICS AND PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT FOR NSA INTELLIGENCE PROFESSIONALS” and written as a persuasive essay. The proposal essay begins with an abstract describing the birth of the NSA in 1952 under the legislation of President Truman and its subsequent involvement in national security. Specifically, it’s importance after the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001. Since that time, and now more than ever, the NSA has been the target of much public criticism as it has strove to carry out its mission. It is with that pressure or both duty and backlash in mind, the proposal says, it is proposed that a new Code of Ethics should be written.

Such a Code, the proposal argues, will “strengthen team cohesion and help employees resolve dilemmas about mission”. It argues that articulating a Code of expected and aspirational behaviors will “improve workforce resilience and thus protect against possible future releases of classified information”.

After this abstract, a subsequent introduction reiterates the mission and purpose of the NSA before continuing various sections concerning values of government organizations. The proposal explains that the NSA shares many positive values with agencies such as the military and U.S. intelligence, but there are values that are should be specifically implemented and defined for the NSA’s line of work. The key attributes of the proposal identifies are integrity, competence and patriotic service. Each of these attributes is then broken down into its relevance within the field of the NSA and how it is expected to be manifested in a professional environment.

After delving further into these necessary attributes, the proposal closes with briefly summarizing the sections in a professional sectioned list. Its section headings contain:

I. Vision & Purpose

II. Persons to whom the Code applies

III. Values that support the Code

IV. Aspirational and mandatory behaviors

As we examine the Code of Ethics in further detail, we find there are both strengths and weaknesses of this proposal. What the proposal excels in is its explanation as to why a Code of Ethics is needed at all and it’s choice of necessary virtues. The proposal speaks of various ethical principles that each NSA employee should not only abide by, but what principles they should internalize, like integrity, competence, and patriotic service. These three principles are far more than simply checklist criteria, but when truly exemplified define the moral character of an individual. Identifying the need for NSA employees to be a certain way is very indicative of virtue ethics and describing how they can become people exhibiting these characteristics is perhaps one of the great strengths of the NSA’s Code of Ethics.

Also, the proposal paper for the NSA’s Code of Ethics is very current and up to date. The proposal was published February 17th 2015, a document written quite recently when compared to other government documents. It also contains very current security and ethical issues, such as the 9/11 incident and others that happened thereafter.

However, there are some faults with the NSA’s Code of Ethics. This proposal we have been quoting is the most readily available source of information on the NSA’s Code of Ethics and is posted on the NSA’s official website, but it is unknown or not readily known if it is actually what the NSA’s official Code of Ethics actually is! The website has no indication that the proposal paper was actually accepted, there is only a link to it on the page. Though we have searched the entire webpage and done various external searches for the official Code, all sources eventually return to this document. If it is not, there are different sections on the webpage that define the NSA’s official conduct and professionalism, such as its “Mission & Strategy” and “What We Do” sections, but this document is the most thorough and complete. This is the biggest fault we have concerning the NSA’s Code of Ethics, is this the most current version of it or not? If it

To conclude, the NSA’s Code of Ethics, though imperfect, do contain valuable principles that are found admirable and worthwhile for members of the National Security Agency to live by. It’s comforting to know that such a Code exists for those seeking to defend the peace and wellbeing of US citizens.