Feather Merchant

forum

BRIGADIER GENERAL JAMES E. SHELTON

The other day I used the term "feather merchant." When a lieutenant asked what it meant, I didn't have a good answer for him. After thinking about it, I decided to try to define it.

A feather merchant is a person who wants you to believe that he really cares when he really doesn't. He declares himself a "people" guy because that's the "in" thing to say. Yet he gives only a dollar, or maybe five, to a fund drive, while his soldiers sign up for a 20-dollar a month payroll deduction.

A feather merchant looks outward, not inward; he worries only about the image, not about what's really going on. When he has a visitor and that visitor is clearly influential or senior to him, he starts his donkey drills and eyewash, because he doesn't adhere to any professional standards daily — he only cares when someone is looking.

The feather merchant never hears the beat of the drum. He just watches other people, particularly those he thinks might get ahead, and he falls in step with them. He's always listening and watching. His thinking ability is short-circuited, because he's always in the receiving mode, antennae constantly moving, trying to determine from the signals he receives where he should go next.

The feather merchant likes big plans, the thicker and more detailed the better. And woe be to a subordinate who gets caught, usually by someone else, like the IG, for not complying with the plan: The feather merchant probably hasn't even read it, but he's willing to crucify the little guy who's not complying, even if his own inadequate guidance is to blame for that little guy's failure to comply.

The feather merchant likes to look at his own signature, but he doesn't like to sign it often, because when he signs a paper that's supposed to mean he has read it and accepts responsibility for it.

The feather merchant checks his record brief twice a week for errors and calls MILPERCEN monthly to see if his most recent letter of commendation has arrived. He believes in awards — so much so that he has his subordinates continually writing him up for one. And he feels the same way about theirs: if one of them wants one, he can write his own recommendations.

The feather merchant won't sign a lost or damaged property statement, because someone has to pay for government property that is lost or damaged. Of course, he's not signed for any property. He lets someone else, usually at a lower rank, sign for it instead.

The feather merchant likes the word "patriot." After all, isn't he one? He has taken an oath to defend his country, to accept hardship and privation for its good. What are all those *civilians* doing for their country? Here he is — a patriot — and they're taxing *his* base pay, too!

Everybody who works for a feather merchant knows where all the trouble is — at higher headquarters. At least, that's what the feather merchant says. (Of course, we can't say it in writing, but if it weren't for "them" maybe we could get our jobs done.) The damn higher headquarters is full of idiots! Because a feather merchant is usually frustrated in this regard, if he happens to be a colonel he likes to browbeat the lieutenant colonels and majors at that higher headquarters.

He also keeps his eye on the adjacent units to see if they're getting more than his unit is. Statistically, he can always prove they are, and that's why his staff gives him daily statistical updates for his massive ring binder. Besides, his boss may ask him a question.

Isn't it good we don't have any feather merchants serving as officers in our Army? I'm glad we live by the code of Duty, Honor, Country. I guess the Russians have all the feather merchants.

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