

Running heading: ABU GHRAIB AND ETHICS

Abu Ghraib and Ethics

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Class 57

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5 January 2007

UNCLASSIFIED

Abstract

Ethics are the very foundation of who we are as a person. There are different forms of ethics within our society, such as, business ethics, moral ethics, and social ethics. Before a Soldier comes into the Army, most of his or her beliefs and values (ethics) are formed in his early childhood. With sound judgement and solid leadership, leaders are able to tweak and continue to develop a young Soldiers mental psyche. The events that took place at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq are incomprehensible in nature and a huge embarrassment for the United States and the U.S.Army. The United States is looked upon by all nations to set the tone of events and be the standard-bearers for all to emulate.

After reading the “Final Report of the Independent Panel to review DoD Detention Operations” and numerous other reports about the Abu Ghraib prison episode, it sickens me as a senior non-commissioned officer that such things happened in Iraq under our watch. Pouring over these findings has raised serious issues in my mind that we have a very serious breach of ethical values. By not only the Soldiers, senior non-commissioned officers, and senior leaders who let these atrocities happen under their command but also by the senior leaders of our Army who failed to hold the senior leadership responsible for their numerous failures.

The Abu Ghraib prison scandal is by far the most disgraceful lack of military leadership I have seen in my twenty-one of active service. The senior leaders of that unit not only failed their Soldiers but the citizens of the United States, who hold our military to a higher standard of conduct. Failing to set a positive leadership style is the grass-roots problem of this entire incident(s). No matter how dangerous or boring the mission may have been, it is the duty of leaders at all levels to do what is ethical and morally right. Reading the reports about these young Soldiers who stood trial over the horrible things that took place there and the punishments that were handed down saddens me as a leader in the Army.

I fully concur with the punishments handed down through the court system on those punished, but I feel that some leaders did not stand up for the things they did. I feel some of those leaders chose to save their own hide over that of their Soldiers. I am sure that every person involved in this ordeal faced decisions where ethics played a huge part. Each one of us in the military centres our ethics, beliefs, and judgements around a little phrase we call “Army Values.” At least that is what is supposed to happen, but something went dreadfully wrong at Abu Ghraib. No one is perfect in this world, and I am no different but by living our Army values on a daily

basis surely help a Soldier's decision-making process when faced with an ethical dilemma. The vast majority who were raised by their parents or family member has to ask only one question when faced with a decision that may be questionable; "would they (parents or family members) approve of my decision." If the answer is "no" and you have that certain twang in your belly, you know you're wrong, dead wrong! Each one of us has asked that very question or very similar to it.

Young Soldiers make mistakes senior leaders know this. The motto of "coach, teach and mentor" is as common among leaders as the Army values are. When a young Soldier makes a mistake it is up to us as leaders to determine if punishment is warranted or just sitting the Soldier down and actively listening to him or her in why they made their mistake, and then offering your experience on how to learn from their mistake. This is leadership in its truest form.

An investigation headed up Major General Antonio Taguba into the Abu Ghraib abuse allegations found serious breaches of conduct by officers and enlisted Soldiers alike. When a senior leader(s) demonstrates questionable ethical values it affects every Soldier under his or her command. This was clearly demonstrated (questionable values) in the Abu Ghraib prison under the command of Brigadier General Janis Karpinski, an Army reserve who was in charge of all the military prisons in Iraq. Officers at every level starting with the company commander Captain Reese, Lieutenant Colonel Steven Jordan, and Colonel Thomas Pappas all failed to set the condition for Soldiers to conduct their job properly by grossly neglecting to provide the proper training and supervision. These revolting acts of neglect in leadership are unacceptable. Throughout this entire ordeal not one senior non-commissioned officer (NCO) was charged in the reports, nor were they named in news articles or investigated for wrongdoing, I find this hard

to believe. Senior NCOs live, work, and operate on a daily basis around their Soldiers and conduct their own battlefield circulation within their unit. I cannot and will not accept the fact that senior NCOs were oblivious to the fact of what was happening with their Soldiers.

The United States opted out of the Geneva Convention in Afghanistan stating, "al Qaeda and the Taliban were unlawful combatants and therefore did not qualify for prisoner of war status". When the US went to war with Iraq, the Geneva Convention applied to prisoners of war. I believe this is where the downfall started by saying we are going to play by the rules in Iraq but not in Afghanistan and Guantanamo. If we had made one set rule for our interrogation methods, in my opinion many of the things that took place could have been avoided. Now, with that said, it does not give anyone free-rein to act above the law and commit human atrocities.

So, where did things go wrong? Is the blame to be laid on the Soldiers that actually committed the acts, the company, battalion and brigade leadership for not implementing standards or setting the proper environment, or does it lie with the senior leadership of the Army. I say a little bit of all three, here is why I say that. Soldiers that deploy in harms way do not go thinking that they are going to be committing heinous crimes or anything of like that. Soldiers at all levels deploy to do a job that their country has asked them to do, no matter what the job capacity or length of time, Soldiers just get the job done, period.

So, again where did things go wrong? I believe some things were over-looked, things like Soldiers working in Guantanamo and Iraq, more so the Soldiers working with prisoners and conducting interrogations. Being in a combat myself things can get pretty hectic especially when the op-tempo is high, getting attacked on a regular basis, seeing or knowing a buddy got killed or

injured, or things back home are not going just right. Until a person has been put in those situations, it is very hard to understand or even comprehend.

This is where some of us use the acronym “KISS” keep it simple stupid. Doing this helps Soldiers make a decision when they may be faced with an ethical dilemma. Reading the Final Report of the Independent Panel to review DoD Detention Operations and reading about the numerous policy letters that went out regarding the treatment of prisoners and then having them retracted weeks later and others put in their place, set every Soldier up for failure from the top down to the lowest private. So, what tools could leaders have used to reduce any confusion by the Soldier?

Given the fact that US forces, of which a lot of those forces coming from the reserve component has never attempted to carry out a mission like the one at Abu Ghraib. Leaders at the senior levels failed to provide the adequate training opportunity necessary; instead, forces were put into place. Therefore, did any of those senior leaders realize what they were doing by sending in units that were not trained for that job? If they did what ethical decision making process was use to come to their ultimate answer, and how do they justify it?

Here’s the bottom line; mistakes were made at all levels and although I would have wished some senior leader had stood up and said’ “yes, this happened on my watch,” would have been admirable on their part, but it did not happen that way. Maybe by doing so they could have lifted the blunt of punishment many of these young Soldiers received. So how do we fix it so that nothing of this magnitude every happens again? It starts with teaching, counseling, leading by example, proper training, with leaders at all levels having the intestinal fortitude to stand up to his or her boss and identifying problems that can be catastrophic in nature and not worrying

about ones self but that of Soldiers. It ends with the responsibility resting on the shoulders of every Soldier regardless of rank, religion, color, sex, or origin to do the right thing. Remember this, it is not what it says on your tombstone of how you will be remembered, it the impression that you made upon your friends, family, Soldiers and your God that lives on after your gone.

Did I do the right thing?