

Running Head: Ethical Problems Facing the Army Today

Ethic Paper

Ethical Problems Facing the Army Today

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Abstract

The theme of my essay is set in the opening paragraph, suggesting that the question of ethics has and always will be a dilemma facing everyone donning the Army's uniform. We often talk of ethics as if we are accepted, for ethics is a cornerstone of military values. Yet we see ethical *faux pas* in nearly every aspect of military decision-making and execution, regardless of timeframe, vicinity or war.

In my essay, I provide monumental ethical decisions throughout our country's history, illustrating that ethics is "easier said than done." Finally, I point out what I believe is the greatest ethical problem facing the Army today: ethical sensitivity. By not wanting to appear unethical, we have become our own worst enemy.

Ethics, in my opinion, is a cornerstone of Army values, equivalent to “Duty, Honor, Country,” so it seems incredible that this foundation of our military heritage stirs such controversy today. Two hundred and thirty-one years have evolved since the “shot heard ‘round the world” echoed through the hills at Lexington, plenty of time to do away with ethical issues facing our Soldiers on and off the battlefield. Yet we see ethical *faux pas* in nearly every aspect of military decision-making and execution, regardless of timeframe, environment or war.

Certain ethical standards have applied to Soldiers since the United States Army’s initiation in 1775. Indeed, military training and discipline instills (or at least suggests) integrity, but throughout history, we see an abundant of ethics violations. On the surface, this does not make sense, but it does when one puts it in perspective.

Everyone has a sense of right and wrong, of good and bad, and everyone has vices and virtues. Every single day ethics are tested and every single day Soldiers fail to do the right thing. Why is this? Is it intentional? Is our training and discipline superficial? Can we eliminate ethics violations? In fact, there are no simple answers.

Even our greatest military commanders struggled with questions of ethics. One of the shining examples of ethical behavior during the Revolutionary War was Benedict Arnold, a heroic figure revered by his men but overlooked by his superiors. He was destined for greatness, as George Washington considered him exemplary and would personally see to it that he would be recognized in due time. However, Washington’s timeline was not fast enough, so Arnold turned traitor, forfeiting everything he worked for and disgracing his family name forever. Reviled today, few realize what a remarkable general and heroic individual he was. Many believe he was a coward.

Let us stray from individual ethics as we advance to the Civil War. By the time war erupted in 1861, the issue of slavery had Americans divided and an entire region of the United States fought to succeed. Both sides believed they were right, so much so that they fought the bloodiest war in our country's history. Today, of course, we know that enslaving another human being is wrong and that period in America will always be an abomination, but at the time, it was not so clear.

Certainly, the greatest ethical question that faced the United States during wartime was the use of the atomic bomb on Japan. Military historians generally agree that dropping this horrific weapon saved more than a million American lives. Was it ethical to kill civilians? Did the end justify the means? Were Americans, as Japanese leaders and historians allege, racists, cruel and inhuman, barbarians with no ethical standards whatsoever?

Charles Graner and Lynndie England: two young Soldiers forever linked to the Abu Ghraib prison scandal. Rightly or wrongly, their actions called into question Army ethics across the board. This isolated incident tarnished the image of Soldiers in uniform and in the wake of their unwise actions of prisoner abuse is an international issue. It generated a firestorm of abuse allegations, specifically targeting those at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Terrorist capture, torture and brutally murder our Soldiers with displeasing frequency, but that is evidently all right. We have come to expect that of them. We hold them to no ethical or moral standard. Yet, in our honorary pledge to be ethical, we provide relatively comfortable living quarters to captured terrorists, prepare special cuisine while the Soldiers who guard them eat MREs, and we furnish the Koran and permit prayer anytime they demand it.

To prove that we are ethical, we entertain international inspectors who are not embarrassed to report any fact or rumor that would discredit us on the world stage. The House

and Senate debate “torturing” prisoners as a means of obtaining vital information to preserve American lives (we do not torture prisoners; we interrogate them). Worst of all, when anyone levels false accusations against our troops, no one is there to defend us.

This leads me to what I feel is the greatest ethical problem facing the Army today: ethical sensitivity. During his first inaugural address, President Franklin D. Roosevelt stated in part, “...let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself...” This historical statement centered on one word and the impact that word had on a nation terrified of the future. I feel the word “ethics” has a similar effect. In our plight to be ethical, to be above our enemies, to be morally superior to other nations and cultures, we are on a path to destruction from within.

Benedict Arnold made a bad choice and had no one to blame but himself for being a traitor. Slavery was wrong and nothing can right that period of American history, but it is in the past and we learned by it. History proves that Japanese atrocities far outweighed those committed by Americans, and the architects of Pearl Harbor and the Bataan Death March have no justification to level one iota of blame on America. The isolated incident at Abu Ghraib pales in comparison to what they do to the military and civilian men and women they capture. Terrorists attacked our country and killed our people, and any means we use outside of torture to prevent recurrence is thereby justified.

There is no attempt in this paper to justify bad behavior by pointing out worse behavior, but let me explain what I believe. America is an ethical country, and, for the most part, its citizens are ethical people. We do not have to prove anything to the international community, who generally do not care for us anyway. It seems that whenever the news media claims we committed an ethical violation, the first thing we do is overcompensate to prove they are wrong,

which, conversely, projects the impression that we are covering something up. It is time we stop this nonsense!

There will always be problems with ethics in the Army, in the military, in politics, in society, in the world. What we tend to overlook are the individuals who practice ethics in their daily lives. We focus instead on those who violate ethical standards, as if this is the norm. All I can do as an individual—all any of us can do as individuals—is to lead by example, learn by unethical behavior of others, and pass our standards on to our soldiers!

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