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Running Head: The Socio-Political Evolution of Ethics and How it Pertains to the Military
Ethical Decision Making Process

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How it Pertains to the Military Ethical Decision Making Process

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Temujin, known to most as Genghis Kahn, has been established as one of the most bloodthirsty tyrants of the 13th Century. He was known to destroy entire villages and cities, slaughter every man, woman, child and animal inhabiting them, and then sow the soil with salt so as to prevent the fields from producing for many years. His actions in that era were, in fact, quite common. Warfare had its own standard set of rules. If you conquered a people and they refused to submit to your rule, or if they betrayed a treaty, the standard response was total destruction. It is interesting that Kahn was deemed such a horrific tyrant, however, modern history views Alexander the Great of Macedonia as a great ruler, military strategist and diplomat. There are many in the old Persian Empire that would beg to differ. History tells us that Alexander the great was actually a megalomaniac that thought he was an invincible god, and he employed the same tactics as Genghis Khan did, only he did it 1500 years earlier.

Little has changed in the 2300 years since Alexander the Great rampaged across Persia, Asia and India. Arguably, it does seem that Western culture has taken strides to ease the atrocities of war, though at a slow rate. As recently as the 1600s early settlers and indigenous people in North America committed such atrocities upon each other that they are still commented upon today. The English, French and American Indians fought, tortured and slaughtered each other for the better part of 200 years, from the Jamestown Massacre of 1622 to the Wounded Knee Massacre of 1890. Our own modern history reflects other atrocities that at the time were considered well within the realm of social acceptance. One recent event during the Viet Nam War was the 1968 My Lai village massacre. More than 500 civilians were killed by the 11th Infantry Brigade of the American Division. One lieutenant that was involved in the incident viewed it as the right thing for the type of war being fought. Punishment for the leadership

involved was light to nonexistent; in fact only one lieutenant was convicted and he only spent three days in prison. In every incident involving the military and massacres of civilians there was an ethical decision made.

Ethics are defined as a set of principles of right conduct. They are also defined as the rules or standards governing the conduct of a person or the members of a profession (Ethics, 2006). The Army prides itself on being a value-based organization, and Soldiers and NCO's alike are constantly reminded that they should make decisions based on their character and the seven core Army values. It is the social evolution of our character that is now defining modern ethics. The Army's leadership manual, FM 22-100, defines character as a person's moral and ethical qualities that motivate a person to do what is appropriate no matter what the circumstances or consequences. The key word is *appropriate*. That which was appropriate at Wounded Knee or the village of My Lai no longer applies today. Society has seen a dramatic shift towards battlefield civility, especially within the last twenty-five years.

The question then remains, what element within the modern sociological structure is affecting the change in ethics? One means of addressing this question is to understand that character is based upon two aspects of the human psyche: beliefs and values. Character, therefore, is what drives ethical reasoning, which in turn leads to ethical orders. The beliefs of the individual are derived from upbringing, culture, religious backgrounds and traditions. They are the convictions that people hold true. Values then, are the "deep-seated personal beliefs that shape a person's behavior" (Department of the Army, 1999, p. 2-23).

The reader can now observe that Soldiers throughout history were of completely different character. Their values and beliefs were completely different. Since we know what forms

character, we can now understand how the socio-political environment can shape an individual's values and beliefs. The real question remains, are ethical values evolving or devolving? Mr. Robert Bunker, (1997) in his paper "Epochal Change: War Over Social and Political Organization" observes that societies began to form definitive ideas as to what the rules of conduct on battlefield should be during the feudal era of Western Europe. Existing elites established rules of civility and chivalry on the battlefield. However, they lost their battlefield dominance to those that challenged the old order. Outsiders that "had no stake in the maintaining the existing social and political order," and would directly gain from its overthrow, began to fight with unrestrained thinking. The outsiders were unrestrained in their beliefs and values; therefore they were able to operate free from the fear of being "unsoldierly". They developed radically new forms of warfare and were able to overcome the old order. Their beliefs and values became the new social norm (p. 2). The old order, if unable to adapt to the new warfare was assimilated into the new order.

Judgment of a new order of ethical reasoning and ethical orders may be the downfall of any existing order. During the American Revolutionary War, the British were aghast at some of the techniques employed by the "rebel" army. Colonial soldiers refused to stand up to the British in a traditional line formation. They would hide behind rocks and trees. The rebels held no tradition of value. They would even purposefully shoot the officers in order to create chaos in the ranks. Such breach of social etiquette and rules of warfare were unheard at that time. History shows that the British refused to change their tactics and they lost. Furthermore the character of the officers in the colonial army, using their ethical reasoning to issue ethical orders defeated an old order and created a new order. Their tactics soon became the norm. Ironically,

however, depending on what side of the fence you are standing on, guerrilla warfare is still considered against the “rules”. It is an iconoclastic ideal that justifies the “other” side’s uses of all available means to achieve their end. Modern western society will do well to remember their roots. Additionally, it would be wise to remember, that just because western ideals, morals and convictions eschew the use of innocents and civilians as soft targets doesn’t mean that radical eastern beliefs and values do the same.

The Army’s leadership manual describes the process of linking knowledge to action in the form of the Ethical Decision Making Model (Department of the Army, 1999, p. 4-8). Our ethics as a society may have “evolved” from the time of Alexander the Great, however there are still conundrums that haunt every Soldier, leader and statesman. Ethical dilemmas by their very nature create a conflict of virtues and values. The harsh reality is ethical dilemmas have by their very nature two or more possible ethical solutions. If a situation has only one ethical solution, then it isn’t a dilemma; the leader has only to have the moral conviction to do what is right (Klem, 2006, p. 8). One of the main issues of an ethical dilemma manifests itself in the form of the “right versus right” quandary. While the leadership manual states that the Ethical Decision Making Model isn’t the solution to all problems, it does offer the basis for solid use of Army values to solve most ethical dilemmas. The “right versus right” dilemma pits one value against another. And while some people of weaker character would use the classic quandary to justify poor decisions, the Army leadership philosophy argues just the opposite. The four classic “right versus right” dilemmas are: truth versus loyalty, individual versus community, short term versus long term and justice versus mercy (Klem, 2006, p. 5). The Army’s version runs to loyalty

versus honesty and duty versus respect. Soldiers in the Army are often faced with the first of the two dilemmas. Loyalty versus honesty occurs when a Soldier has faced with a dilemma dealing with peers, unit or superiors. This is also the most difficult situation for Soldiers to be in, as their actions will have social and professional consequences. A prime example is when a Soldier is asked to “cover” for another Soldier during accountability formations. If something happens to the Soldier’s buddy, then he risks putting the entire chain of command in jeopardy. In the second instance, duty versus respect, Soldiers must often choose between doing what is right and their superiors or the unit. One example might be a Soldier that feels obligated to generate or falsify documentation during a Command Inspection in order to help out a superior he likes and respects. The Army’s leadership manual mentions that ethical dilemmas aren’t issues of black and white; the world isn’t that easy. If it were, then leadership would be easy and anyone could do it. The manual further indicates that in the majority of cases the Army’s values are perfectly compatible and often compliment each other. (Department of the Army, 1999, p. 2-23)

Finally, we address the social aspect of ethics and how that affects decisions made in the military. As was noted earlier, character is based upon beliefs and values. We like to believe that the society has evolved, and that our beliefs, which are based upon our upbringing, culture, religious backgrounds and traditions have evolved too. Within the United States of America the beliefs and values instilled in one household can vary greatly from those in the home right next door. However, somewhere between all the homes in America there is an established social norm. As we can observe between the times right after September 11, 2001 and today, that defined social norm and acceptance of military action can vary greatly. Would the nation

have been as aghast at the actions of the Abu Ghraib prison on September 12th? Sadly, the Soldiers knew the standard no matter what the date. When a person enters the Army, that Soldier brings their upbringing with them. We try and indoctrinate and matriculate them into a larger family, but there will always be those earlier influences that will affect decisions. As Soldiers it is imperative that we understand the basis for the ethical reasoning we use to make ethical decisions. However, it may be of greater importance to understand the character, beliefs, and values of those that would oppose us.

The final conundrum is this; if our society has reached a point in which a new order threatens the very fabric of our social order, at what point do we abandon our convictions in order to survive? Conversely, should we stand by our convictions, ethics and values to the bitter end and in turn become assimilated into the moral fabric of a new order? We like to believe that our moral convictions hold the high ground and our ethics will prevail. Only history will be the judge.

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