

CD

**A Soldier's Ethical Responsibility to the  
Nation**

By SGM Thomas Gonzalez  
Student #263

For SGM Jackson, FA R03

15 October 2005

This country built its foundation on righting the injustices of a Britannic King George the III and has set a standard of morality that will be forever tested by the international community. During times of military conflict, the American Soldier becomes the torchbearer of the country's morality. The behavior of the Soldier reflects personality, integrity, righteousness, and the courage of the United States of America. An American Soldier's ethical behavior, right or wrong, represents this great nation's people and contributes to the international view of the United State's intentions.

Soldiers must adhere to the moral principles of the Army and the nation. When a breakdown of moral principles occurs it creates a dissonant backlash that has a harmful effect all the way from the Soldier's current command to the President and finally rests its pessimistic outcome and overtone on the people of the nation. The negative sentiments created throughout the international community can defeat United States policy and, worse yet, stimulate the cause of America's enemies. Ethical violations, such as those occurring at Abu Ghraib, fuel the enemy, do a disservice to our Army, break down morale, and create an expenditure of both human and monetary resources that could have been spent on better causes. Given the speed of modern day media and communications, a single soldier can create an international incident through their dereliction and misconduct and the entire world will know about it within hours. When Soldiers disregard Army ethics it is finite and there will be consequences. Morality is questioned, American intentions are scrutinized, and the respect held for the United States Army is whittled down. The good intentions of America's people and a nation are then diminished.

Some would argue that there are no rules in war and that we must be like the enemy if we are going to be victorious. Although some truths may come from that statement, these questions should be asked if the American Soldier and the Army were to lower their ethical standards:

What then makes American Soldiers any different from an enemy that believes decapitations, the killing of innocent civilians (men, women, and children), and denying personal rights is just? Could a Soldier then reflect on their actions and say they lived up to the virtues of the heroes of America's past? The answer is no. The American Soldier is held in reverence by the fact that there is a moral foundation and an ethical responsibility that American Soldiers take personal pride in. Soldiers have laws that create boundaries and provide for the rights of others and it is essential that they believe and uphold those laws. Adhering to the standards and ethics of the Army maintains an honor and integrity of service to the country's defense that only a true soldier can understand.

Where do violations of ethics begin? Violations begin with the individual. Americans learn and grow in a society where the difference between right and wrong is very apparent. Immoral and unethical acts are subject to judicial impositions which are acted upon appropriately. The Army then builds upon this foundation by providing every soldier with a set of standards and values that they must adhere to. Each and every soldier knows those values and is obliged to live by them. Each and every soldier also has the inherent right to disregard illegal orders that violate these values. American Soldiers exist by a creed that states, "I serve the people of the United States of America and live the Army Values." When violations of ethics occur it is a personal choice, a personal choice that an individual conscientiously makes in disregard to the ethics instituted by the Army. The excuse of ignorance is not a reasonable defense because the Army trains soldiers from day one of service on ethics, the Army Values, and the repercussions of violating these moral principles and continues that education throughout a soldier's career.

Another factor in failed ethical responsibility is leadership failures. Leaders are not only the keystone of Army morality, but they are the guardians of the ethics that the Army holds in such high regard. Leaders must continuously display the highest standards and uphold the Army Values unequivocally. Setting the example not only displays what is appropriate and what is not appropriate but it also provides the foundation on which young soldiers build their personal ethics. Soldiers that see their leaders living the Army Values and the morality we derive from living by those values will follow the example and live by those principles too. Leadership is a key factor in developing ethical responsibility in the United States Army.

Understanding these failures and reemphasizing the importance of the individual and the leader to ethical responsibility and the effects their actions have to the country will assist in stopping future violations of the Army Values. The moral principles or ethics that we adhere to is the fiber that keeps the United States Army strong, respected, and admired around the world. As an American soldier, living the Army ethics is an obligation and a responsibility that the people of the United States entrust us with to defend our nation.

Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), the third President of the United States of America (1801-1809), stated, "Our greatest happiness does not depend on the condition of life in which chance has placed us, but is always the result of a good conscience, good health, occupation, and freedom in all just pursuits." This quote drives the message home that soldiers are not only responsible to the nation but also to themselves and their families. Living and working by a just means makes it easier to feel good about your accomplishments everyday. Pride comes naturally and self respect is evident in the actions that are displayed by morally conscientious soldiers.

The American Soldier has always had an enduring reputation of respect and is held in high esteem as a role model of society. Much of the United States population looks upon the

defense of the nation as a place of honor and morality. Even individuals adamantly opposed to military actions understand the virtues of military service and its importance to the state.

William James, a pacifist during the early 1900's, stated in his essay, *The Moral Equivalent of War*, "Martial virtues must be the enduring cement; intrepidity, contempt of softness, surrender of private interest, obedience to command, must still remain the rock upon which states are built -- unless, indeed, we which for dangerous reactions against commonwealths, fit only for contempt, and liable to invite attack whenever a centre of crystallization for military-minded enterprise gets formed anywhere in their neighborhood." These virtues or moral principles remain the rock that the United States of America was built upon and is the strength that allows the America Soldier to receive respect from his or her allies and adversaries in the global arena. As diplomats of the United States cause and the democratic beliefs her policies bring to the world, it is incumbent upon every soldier to live by the ethics they swore to uphold.

## Works Cited

William, James. The Moral Equivalent of War. 1906. The Electronic text Center. Emory University. 15 October 2005 <http://www.des.emory.edu/mfp/moral.html>