

**Ethical Decision-Making is Critical in Combat**

by

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Ethical decision-making is critical in combat and requires leadership, values, and moral principles. Having served as a 1SG in combat it was easy to see how Soldiers can fall outside the lines. The lack of being able to identify the enemy adds to frustration and anxiety. The use of suicide bombs, improvised explosive devices, fear of the unknown, and guerilla tactics wear on a Soldier's moral beliefs and attitudes. Exposure to wounded comrades, women and children, civilian casualties, and heinous acts by cowardly insurgents inflame Soldier's passions. The perception of a lack of national support further erodes the will of the Soldier turning patriotic duty for the country, into a fight for self-preservation. When one loses faith with the ideology for which this country stands it destroys the moral fabric to make the right choices and muddies the water. Being a Soldier is honorable and the hardest occupation in the World requiring the highest of professional conduct. Soldiers endure the unimaginable, sacrifice more than most can fathom, and pay the ultimate price with their life. Countless men and women face the uncertainty with nothing more than the mere words of Duty, Honor, and Country in mind. So why is it that some Soldiers are capable of upholding the highest of standards of ethical conduct and others are not? This question has begun to eat away at the moral fabric of our profession.

To look at the issue clearly one must understand the definition of ethic and ethical first. Webster's defines, "Ethic: 1. as a principle of right or good conduct or a body of such principles. 2. a system of moral principles or values. The definition of Ethical is being in accordance with the accepted principles that govern the conduct of a group, esp. of a profession."

Ethics and ethical conduct are the moral fiber that holds the Army together as a profession. Our way of life requires a common good, strength in the face of tyranny, and personal moral courage to see righteousness prevail. Soldiers cannot learn to depend on each other without a common bond and principles.

The Army is a values-based organization, which requires a strong foundation--for Soldiers carry the Nations Colors freely. The Army has moral principles and values for Soldiers. The bedrock foundation is a mere seven words. The Army values of Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Services, Honor, Integrity, and Personal Courage are living and breathing entities, not mere ink on paper as some would believe. These hallow words are built on the sacrifices of those before us and of those to follow. These values require leaders to mentor, enforce, and express at every level, to affect our Soldiers.

Leadership is the key to mold and define these necessary values. The established values are the framework, which individuals define themselves and identify with others in our profession. They permeate in our character and being from deep within. Parents, grandparents, and relatives, nurtured our ethical reasoning. Leaders play a major role in building upon our beliefs, cultural acceptance, attitudes, and values. Leaders are essential to establish our perception of good over evil and compassion over fury. This continuous cycle requires committed leaders to reinforce, establish, and define a Soldier's ethical view from perception to reality.

Some may argue there is a fine gray line, and it is hard for some to distinguish between ethical right from wrong, when under fire. Leaders have an ethical obligation to Soldiers and to each other. Life and death decisions take place in a matter of seconds. The Soldier must have a deeply ingrained value base to weather the storm. Some would argue that "no harm no foul" puts no one in jeopardy and is okay. This is the start of rationalization between the bonds with your comrade over the moral right. However, if you let it slide you are on a path of no return.

Just look in the headlines of the Army Times, local paper, or view CNN. The incident at Abu Ghraib was a complete breakdown of leadership, values, and moral principles. Where were

the leaders? Where were the values? Where were the compassion, respect, and honor? This is exactly why in the fog of war there must be checks and balances. The lack of leader checks and balances allows chaos to begin. These Soldiers knew their moral obligation to stop or deny an illegal order. Every Soldier knows this basic tenant. If there's one thing Soldiers know is when they definitely do not have to "do it". So the argument that higher wanted the action done is a scapegoat. This was nothing more than a mob with its own agenda, no matter how hard you look. The mantle of law does not stay behind when deployed in another country.

Too often, when something or someone goes astray, there is an attempt to rationalize away an unethical behavior instead of confrontation and intervention. This sets the wrong precedent and sends us down the slippery slope of no return. When making tough decisions, always keep in mind actions speak louder than words. No one is perfect or infallible, but there is a distinction between the moral right and blatant disregard. War builds a unique unspoken bond amongst Soldiers. One should never confuse this with the moral right.

Leaders must provide clear guidance, communicate effective moral standards in words and deeds, and lead from the front. There is no ethical dilemma if you do what you know is right. Make no mistake about it, there is a clear difference between right and wrong; Soldiers know it.

The true leaders, of our young men and women who serve, make the difference. A leader is the quiet giant, loud demanding sergeant and the solemn leader who steps forward through the dark and projects the light. When faced with life or death situations there can be no doubt. Actions speak louder than words. There is no rewind, no do over, or second-guessing. Split second decisions require deep moral ethics ingrained in the mind, body, and soul. Never forget, or allow your soldiers to forget, there is an obligation to your Country, your Men, and your God.

Leaders make ethical decisions every moment of the day. The difference between great leaders and the common person is what you do.