What Is Right?

by Gen Wallace M. Greene, Jr., USMC(Ret)

There is the Golden Rule and a table of moral concepts God gave to Moses.

There is guidance from Machiavelli, English common law, the Constitution, and the Uniform Code of Military Justice.

There is a wealth of military tradition and custom.

But nowhere do we have an all-inclusive code to tell us what to do.

Tapestry depicts biblical story of Uriah's death by the Ammonites, contrived by King David who coveted Uriah's wife, Bathsheba.
II Samuel 11

This article is a brief examination of the question of professional military ethics—a problem which we all share today—and I intend to deal with it as a practitioner and not as a theorist.

If we were to start by going to the dictionary for a definition of ethics we would find it stated as "the science of morals." Turning to morals we would discover that it is "the practice of ethics!" This is typical of the confusion surrounding the whole question of ethics and morals.

For our purpose, let us define ethics as professional military character and conduct from the point of view of what is right or wrong. But here again we immediately run into trouble with the application of this definition. Let me illustrate with a homely story from my own life.

When I was 12, my grandmother presented me with a family heirloom. "You are now old enough to have this," she said as she opened the little box and revealed a gold medallion with a fine gold chain. She lifted it out and hung it about my neck. "See what it says." I raised the gold piece and read the inscription, "Do right and fear no man!"

Later, I showed the gift to my father and read the inscription to him. He readily recognized the antique family piece and turned a quizzical smile on me as he said, "Do right and fear no man!? My son, what is 'right'?" What *is* "right"? I was nonplussed. My father had launched me on a puzzling search which was to extend over the years.

On the following Sunday evening, during a meeting at our church, I showed the pastor the medal, which still hung about my neck. After he had read the inscription I asked him the question, "What is 'right'?" He was certainly disconcerted and immediately launched into a long defensive discourse on the meaning and guidance offered by the Ten Commandments and one's Christian conscience. As I listened, I realized that my standing in Sunday School was rapidly slipping away as the

result of this troublesome question! Besides, at that time, I didn't understand some of the Ten Commandments very well and as for my conscience it was often an uncertain trumpet! So I remained silent. When I returned home I took off the golden trinket and carefully returned it to its box. It is still there—but to this day its question is ever-present in my mind.

Throughout my Marine Corps career, when faced with a problem requiring my decision, I often asked myself the same old question, "What is 'right'?" Today, your own successful decisions to similar problems rest on the answer to this same question.

Several years ago I attended a symposium on military ethics that convened at the Naval War College. In attendance were the students and faculty from all classes of the college together with a number of outside military and civilian leaders. It soon became evident that what the students were seeking was an all-inclusive code of conduct built on a set of standards that would quickly and comfortably tell them what to do. But as Gen Robert N. Ginsburgh, USAF, had previously pointed out in an *Air University Review* article, it soon became quite clear to all hands that, "There is no clear-cut solution as to what is morally right, militarily sound, and socially consistent in handling the daily problems of life." In spite of the efforts of individual working committees to find rational answers to this painful question amid much debate, they were unable to do so. Following a disappointing plenary session, the seminar finally broke up with many of the participants dissatisfied and unhappy that they had been unable to find an ethical yardstick to solve the problems of military leadership.

But what can we use then as a guide in determining what is right or wrong? It is a natural human yearning to have some code of conduct that will tell us what to do and not to do under any and all circumstances.

The Ten Commandments are a code of ethical conduct—a table of moral precepts revealed by God to Moses on two tablets of stone 3,000 years ago. These principles had the "broadest implications for human responsibilities toward God, other people, and things." In the intervening years, society's changing values have not been able to destroy the significance of the Commandments, but they have certainly weakened their interpretation, limited their coverage, and confused their application to the problems of today.

The Golden Rule as annunciated by Jesus Christ and Confucius is another general maxim which due to human frailties often doesn't work very well in the solutions of problems arising in this doubting and cynical world. At the opposite end of the biblical spectrum, the Old Testament adage of "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" is not always applicable either in making the right decision.

One of the world's most controversial geniuses, Niccolo Machiavelli, answered the question 400 years ago in another fashion by saying, "It is advisable at times to praise, speak, see, and do things contrary to your way of thinking—by practicing craft and deceit to get the better of those whose actions are dictated by loyalty and good faith."

As guides, we also have English common law, our own written law, such as the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, the enactments of Congress and the legislations of the States, military law (*Title X,* the prisoner's *Code of Conduct,* and the *Uniform Code of Military Justice*), as well as a wealth of military tradition and custom.

But *nowhere* do we have an all-inclusive code to tell us what to do. Gen Ginsburgh knew what he was talking about. "There is no clear-cut solution as to what is morally right, militarily sound and socially consistent in handling the daily problems of life." John Milton, the poet of *Paradise Lost*, felt this great frustration when he concluded that we must await the second coming of Christ for the answer! Another poet, Rudyard Kipling, neatly avoided the problem by calling, "Ship me somewhere east of Suez, where the best is like the worst, where there ain't no Ten Commandments, and a man can raise a thirst."

Even the word "right" is a symbol that oftentimes has a differing meaning for each of us. There are many other similar symbolic words, such as loyalty, patriotism, obedience, justice, equality, integrity, courage, honesty, competence, humility, determination, and decisiveness. And, there are symbolic phrases such as West Point's "Duty, Honor, Country" and the Marine Corps' "Semper Fidelis." What does each of these symbolic words and phrases mean to you? Compare your interpretation with that of your brother officer and you will find important and surprising differences resulting from corresponding differences in the ideals, beliefs, and standards instilled in us by our family life, our school, our church, our community, by our military specialty, and by our friends and enemies. Even these meanings often change and sometimes grow dimmer as we grow older, gain experience, and withstand the batterings of living—or turn cynical.

In teaching military ethics and leadership, one of the most successful methods has been an analysis of actual case histories—an examination of cause and effect, of ends and means—in the solution of moral problems through the decisionmak-

ing of others. Each case history is selected because of its unique ability to give guidance in a particular area of ethical problems. This method was successfully used by then-LtCol Lowell English, in the 1950s in establishing the first formal course in leadership at West Point. Later he set up a similar method of teaching ethics and leadership at the Naval Academy.

In the civilian professional world, the National Society of Professional Engineers, for example, publishes monthly ethical review reports in which this system of case history analysis is employed for the benefit of its members. This technique in a way is really another version of the military estimate of the situation with some important differences in the form of analysis. Historical examples, current personal experiences and observations, or written reports are carefully selected for guidance in particular areas. Each case history is then analyzed as to the elements of the problem, the action that was actually taken to solve it with the results therefrom, the decision you would have made, and finally, when possible, a discussion of the case with one or several of your associates to gain their ideas and to test your own.

Let me cite a few specific and actual cases—sample studies—for you to think about.

► During the briefing of a division commander at a regimental command post during combat, the colonel commanding deliberately lies to the visiting general outlining a laudatory operation by his troops that had never actually taken place. You are present at this briefing as regimental operations officer. What should you do? What is right? What did the operations officer in this case actually do? What is the consensus of your group as to what should have been done? Your conclusion will provide you with solid guidance for similar future problems in this area of ethical behavior.

► Another example: As a lieutenant colonel you have been assigned to a counterintelligence agency for duty in South Vietnam. You find that you are to hold a key position in Operation PHOENIX, planning and executing the assassination of enemy agents (Viet Cong) masquerading as respectable citizens in villages and hamlets and yet who are known or suspected by your agency of being responsible for the terroristic murders of hundreds of loyal South Vietnamese officials and their families. The action required of you is contrary to the Ten Commandments, the Golden Rule, the laws of your country, and the moral precepts in which you have been steeped. It is most repugnant to you and yet, at the same time, you realize that the job has to be done—by someone! Can "wrong" ever be "right"? What is your decision? What was actually done by the officers faced with this situation? What is the consensus of your group? Here again your conclusion provides you with effective guidance in another area of professional military ethics.

► To continue briefly, the training scandal at Parris Island in 1956 (the McKeon Affair) is a case history. Could an analysis such as I propose—taught in our Marine Corps Schools—have prevented what was in essence a recurrence in 1976 at both Parris Island and San Diego?

► The acceptance of corporate favors is another example. What does a case history analysis tell us about correct professional ethical conduct in this area of money and special privilege?

I am now 76-years-old and still looking for the answer to the question posed by the gold medallion! What *is* "right"? I have offered you a practical method for finding the best workable solution to that problem. The great difficulty will be to force yourself to follow the path established by your conclusion and its guideposts! USMC

Quote to Ponder:

The Critique

"On the day of battle, naked truths may be picked up for the asking; but by the following morning they have already begun to get back in uniform."

—Sir Ian Hamilton
Quoted by LtCol R.E. Mattingly, (*MCG*, Jul82)