

# The Critical Component to Maneuver Warfare

Justice as maintained in spiritual fitness

by CAPT Dwight Horn, USN, CHC

**E**thical decisions in war can be made in gray areas whereas accountability for them is always black and white. This is the challenge for maneuver warfare.<sup>1</sup> The battle lines are not drawn; the targeting of the enemy can be frenetic; and the objective is always to disrupt the mental and physical stability of the enemy through unconventional attacks. That necessitates firing upon opposing forces in situations where rules of engagement often fail to specify the just act, and where seconds are paramount to achieving mission success. This sort of asymmetrical engagement can quickly fail. What begins with moral ambiguity can devolve to moral indifference, and then any righteous objective is lost. Victory gets subsumed by moral defeat.

To maintain virtue in war, justice must be sustained.<sup>2</sup> It is only through that process that the good is preserved, allowing humans to flourish in their created purpose. It enables those whose rights are violated to be restored to goodness, and it stops violators of righteousness to ideally bring them back into a proper relationship with their own true virtue and integrity. For as much as humanity is endowed with equal rights to life, liberty, and happiness, that must be protected for all.

Yet, here is where the challenge starts for war and for those who fight in it. Without clearly identifying the just cause for war, but instead, connecting combatants to that effort only through policy, doctrine, and mission assignments, the overall effort corrupts. Or-

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ders will most certainly be executed to fight and kill, but often at a grave cost to the souls of those involved and to the detriment of the mission.

The Vietnam War should be a clear lesson. Numerous books and articles show the atrocities committed throughout that conflict. One investigation on a stealth unit called Tiger Force that carried out the asymmetric warfare, like that which can be expected in a fight with North Korea or China, shows how easily immorality can arise and corrupt both the mission and unit engaged.

In this case, it started when the soldiers of this unit, not guided by justice, went beyond the front lines to find and kill the enemy. What they found, however, in the execution of the mission was that they could not easily discriminate between opposition forces and civilians (villagers or farmers). They physically looked alike, dressed alike, and it appeared too that non-combatants were at the least sympathetic to the enemy and at most complicit. Once that determination was made, the mantra became "kill anything that moves," as one book on Vietnam that uncovers corruption in this war is entitled.<sup>3</sup>

For Tiger Force, this meant "[w]e would go into villages and just shoot everybody. We didn't need an excuse. If they were there, they were dead."<sup>4</sup> Rules of engagement were set aside as was any just cause for war or justice altogether:

Remember, out in the jungle, there were no police officers. No judges. No law and order ... Whenever somebody felt like doing something, they did it. There was no one to stop them. So we watched and didn't say anything. We turned the other way. Looking back, it's terrible. We should have said something. But at the time, everybody's mindset was, 'It's OK.'<sup>5</sup>

Moral ambiguity brought moral recalibration, which in turn brought moral turpitude. While that strategy might seem to work in war for those inclined (i.e., the ones who seek petty justifications for malfeasance like murder, rape, theft, or desecration of the dead), the vanity of that mindset will one day reveal itself.<sup>6</sup> Veterans will come home, doing their best to forget unlawful deeds, but the memories will endlessly bobble to the surface, plaguing the conscience with incessant guilt as was reported on Tiger Force: "What's clear

is that nearly four decades later ... Tiger Force soldiers are deeply troubled by the brutal killing of villagers.”<sup>7</sup> That is the power of morality to cripple the soul and the dire need to ensure that a just cause defines the activity of maneuver warfare.

Equipping combatants to protect spirituality involves an examination of why and how the mission is executed and how that aligns to the moral conscience. Yet, here is where another central issue is encountered. The purpose for war at the highest levels can quickly become focused strictly on policy interests, even as strategic military doctrine states: “War is socially sanctioned violence to achieve a political purpose.”<sup>8</sup>

Numerous philosophical theorists have contributed to this amoral grounding for conflict.<sup>9</sup> If this is accurate in itself, though, which we know intuitively that it is not, Adolph Hitler, Hideki Tojo, Sadaam Hussein, Osama Bin Laden, and others like them did nothing “wrong” when they attacked other countries, enacting their own political or theocratic ends. They were using lethal power to conquer opposing wills as on the surface national and military strategic doctrine appear to outline: War is a state of hostilities that exists between or among nations, characterized by the use of military force. The essence of war is a violent clash between two hostile, independent, and irreconcilable wills, each trying to impose itself on the other. Thus, the object of war is to impose our will on our enemy. The means to that end is the organized application or threat of violence by military force.<sup>10</sup>

It seems, however, that Americans, especially those in the DOD who are defenders of moral values, do not fundamentally support this approach to war. Though unquestionably guided by policy, it is certain that war must be established and continuously grounded in a just cause; it must have a moral foundation. To execute policy that requires lethality, there must be a just purpose or else it is murder, the unwarranted taking of life.

War, therefore, should only be undertaken to protect or reestablish moral goodness:

It is the final act to restore every aspect of goodness through the rightful execution of lethal power and for the ultimate realization of humanity existing in its proper interrelationships. That, and that alone, is the reason to kill.<sup>11</sup>

This, then, is what needs to drive strategic, operational, and tactical activity at its core.

The Korean War is an example where engaging in conflict for political purposes leads to confusion and disaster for those who fight. The start of the war delivered the just cause: stop communism.<sup>12</sup> That message was already steeped in American culture as the Cold War raged on. The intense fear that communism would overtake the world, known as the “Red Scare,” generated hysteria throughout America.<sup>13</sup> All manner of propaganda spoke to this. There was no need, therefore, to convince the democracy to rise and go to war after North Korea, a puppet communist regime of Russia, invaded South Korea. The righteous will to battle that malign force, which denied basic freedoms and rights, seemed fully justified. Even Superman, a paragon for justice, joined the Army to get in the action (November 1959 comic series, issue #133). It was a noble cause and as President Harry S. Truman said:

‘If we let Korea down, ... the Soviet[s] will keep right on going and swallow up one [place] after another.’ The fight on the Korean peninsula [is] a symbol of the global struggle between east and west, good and evil.<sup>14</sup>

About a year into the fight, though, when many thousands of military members had died and the engagement appeared more difficult than as first imagined, Truman in concert with the United Nations changed direction and offered a political directive for the conflict: focus on reestablishing the old 38th parallel that divided the North and South prior to the invasion. That became the “cause” for the fight: political conciliation, not justice.

What a disaster it was. The military morale declined. Combatants could not understand why they were fighting for a wholly nonsensical geographic line instead of giving their lives to uphold

goodness against the reprehensible threat of communism.<sup>15</sup>

The senior military officer, leading the fight in Korea, GEN Douglas MacArthur, USA, was equally frustrated and dispirited. He wanted to squash communism throughout Asia; winning this war and not allowing the battle to end in a stalemate of wills. He argued this position to President Truman, but in the end, MacArthur was fired. It was not his last word on the matter, though. He was invited to give an address to Congress on his views. This is a portion of what he stated:

The Communist threat is a global one. Its successful advance in one sector threatens the destruction of every other sector. You cannot appease or otherwise surrender to communism in Asia without simultaneously undermining our efforts to halt its advance in Europe. ... [It] has become aggressively imperialistic, with a lust for expansions and increased power normal to this type of imperialism.<sup>16</sup>

MacArthur wanted to find justice. Destroying Communism and what it represented was that righteous cause. To redirect the cause for war and make it a political agenda was foolhardy in his view. It would corrupt all for which warriors fought. It would defeat their purpose and leave them feeling defeated. It would also betray their impassioned will to defend those in need; in this case, those in South Korea who were dependent upon America. MacArthur spoke to this as well in his address to Congress. He said,

Of the nations of the world, Korea alone, up to now, is the sole one which has risked it all against communism. The magnificence of the courage and fortitude of the Korean people defies description. They have chosen to risk death rather than slavery. Their last words to me were ‘Don’t scuttle the Pacific.’<sup>17</sup>

Unquestionably, MacArthur, in not being able to fight to expel all threats of communism and ensure himself the freedom of the South Koreans, must have thought that he had “scuttled the Pacific,” abandoning the just cause.

When there is a fight for justice, combatants will rise. They will de-



fend moral goodness. It is instinctual to them. But when that cause for war becomes a political agenda, an imaginary line, or if it is lost altogether, confusion can instantly arise. Warriors can begin to wonder why they are dying in battles when no one seems to care, when there is no moral cause. This, then, can make them lose sight of justice itself, thus undermining goodness through vengeance, indifference or a callous disregard for humanity. It can even cause them to feel self-justified in defiling corpses, torturing prisoners, or shooting any caught in the conflict.<sup>18</sup> In this state too, anger, disillusionment or apathy can drive emotional states, corrupting hope for rationality. These kinds of things have happened in every war but particularly in those where a just cause was not identified and maintained as the sole reason for the mission.

To prepare warriors for war, and particularly for maneuver warfare, where small fire teams by necessity are heavily armed and operating with great autonomy, training needs to focus on three elements that center on morality.

The first is the just cause for war. Success is not simply “steel on target.” Warriors must know why they are involved in killing. How does the strategic, operational, and tactical mission align with justice? How does an air strike on a hostile position, a multi-role anti-armor anti-personnel weapons system fired to disable a ship in port, or other activities, which disrupt, immobilize, and destroy the enemy serve the strategic and moral purpose of war?

We must give warriors clarity on these issues. For if the just cause for war becomes the basis of training for all combatants, their activity in war and return home can become a cause for celebration, not self-condemnation. They can avoid moral injury and find joy in having served the cause of justice nobly.

Second and flowing out of the first is that the success of maneuver warfare hinges on training that establishes moral leadership. It is not enough to lead by positional authority as a result of rank or assignment within a group. Those in charge must operate out of

a conscience that is sensitive to moral values that sustain goodness.

Leaders must be able to take the rules of engagement and know how they link to broader intuitive values of honor, integrity, and righteousness. They must have the courage and clarity of purpose to defend what they believe to be morally right, even in situations where others would not. Would leaders, for example, stand against those in their own unit who commit maleficence? Would these leaders abort a critical mission if it seems that a few innocent civilians would be targeted? Would leaders give the call for fire at a fishing vessel that is being simultaneously used as an enemy command post? These issues invite complexity of moral calculation and judgment, discerning who is the enemy, who are non-combatants, and who are hostages in a situation.

Without developing these kinds of leaders, the goodness of the unit, its mission, the chain-of-command, and, ultimately, the national cause for justice can easily be ruined. My Lai and Abu Ghraib are but two examples where it all went wrong, defiling the overall intention of warfare.

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Third, every person involved in warfare where taking a human life is a necessity must uncover their spiritual centeredness; namely, that place where one through self-awareness operates in positive relationship to others, the environment, and the ultimate truth. This comes through an epiphany, a transcendent awakening, where people in examining the meaning for life confront truth about existence and find resolve at a higher level about self-identity and the purpose for life. It is an empowering moment where people are no longer

bound or consumed by carnal pursuits and egoistic agendas. They are rather transformed and enlivened by a new-found calling to define their existence for a greater cause, aligning all things to a righteous order.

This is the fullness of spiritual fitness. It brings vitality to war. For out of this place, warriors rise to kill with confidence, assured that preventing the destruction of goodness is their purpose. For this they live and die, finding that pinnacle moment of life where they stand with electricity, excitement and confidence as a force for justice.

Getting to this point is what warriors need. Yet, it only comes when training focuses not just on synchronizing the body with the mechanics of war, but on involving the spirit as well to orchestrate the intersection of those mechanics with the moral dimension.

This is the place for military chaplains. They are the only ones in the Services who speak to the question of why, getting after the spiritual dimension. They exist to align mission essential tasks to spirituality. They are the ones who challenge the mind and conscience to consider not just the rules of war, but why there are rules for life at all. They challenge reasoning on issues that have no scientific explanation: self-evident truth that informs and orients mental judgment and acuity.

Here, we indeed talk about morality, but also metaphysical concepts such as logic, axioms, infinity, causality, existence and non-existence, and the conscience state. John Finnis, in his book, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, speaks about the fundamental nature of some of these kinds of truths in this way:

[i]n every field there is and must be, at some point or points, an end to derivation and inference. At that point or points we find ourselves in the face of the self-evident, which makes possible all subsequent inferences in that field.<sup>19</sup>

Teaching about these ideas is a critical part of the chaplain's role for warriors. It prepares combatants to build a coherent narrative about life, death, and war. It helps them to establish broader perspectives about their vocation and, ultimately, to facilitate spiritual fitness

that elevates their calling to the apex of service to country and faith.

Emasculating warriors and being a nation at war with its warriors is what happens when brave men and women are sent to defend a nation and take the lives of the enemy without knowing to the depths of their souls what it is to fight and kill for justice.<sup>20</sup> It can quickly bring self-doubt and self-incrimination. Veterans wonder why they killed without reason. Their inability to know can lead them into darkness.

To prevent this and prepare for the next major conflict, we must nurture the spiritual and moral sensibilities of those who fight. We must help warriors see how national strategy becomes operationalized into tactical objectives that are “inexorably intertwined” with the reason for war: the just cause.<sup>21</sup>

In many campaigns and at a great cost, the military has been the means of protection against all enemies for the self-evident rights to life, liberty and justice. It exists solely for that purpose whether through deterrence or kinetic engagement against foreign adversaries. To continue in this calling, military members need to be equipped in body, mind, and spirit to be just warriors in a just battle for a just cause.

This is not something to be feared. Warriors questioning their purpose and reason for taking the lives of others because they were only told to do it are crippled from the start. Though they might follow orders to kill, there will always be the discordant and damning question in mind about whether they were murderers.

Contrarily, righteous warriors convinced of their righteous cause are the most powerful weapons for truth. They will not only kill the enemy but will find their purpose and calling as noble warriors who were willing to rise in the face of injustice, take on the enemy and defeat them. It will be the celebration of their lives and will define their existence beyond the day they die. That kind of warrior is what makes maneuver warfare successful above all other considerations. It is the heart and soul of victory for those blessed enough to have that calling and execute it with fidelity.

## Notes

1. Headquarters Marine Corps, *FMFM-1, Warfighting*, (Washington, DC: 1989); Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1-2, Campaigning*, (Washington, DC: 1997); Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1-3, Tactics*, (Washington, DC: 1997); and Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 6, Command and Control*, (Washington, DC: 1996).

2. For a complete development of this topic, read chapters 9-11 in the following: Dwight Horn, *Emasculating Warriors, A Nation at War with its Warriors*, (Middletown, DE: Amazon Publishing, 2018).

3. Nick Turse, *Kill Anything that Moves*, (New York, NY: Picador Books, 2013).

4. “Tiger Force,” *The Blade*, (October 2003).

5. Ibid.

6. Shira Maguen and Brett Litz, “Moral Injury in Veterans of War,” *PTSD Research Quarterly*, (Washington, DC: National Center for PTSD, 2012).

7. Ibid.

8. GEN Martin Dempsey, *Joint Publication 1, Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, (Washington, DC: March 2013).

9. Most notably, wrongful thinking about war has been perpetuated by Clausewitz: “War is a mere continuation of politics by other means - not merely a political act, but a real political instrument.” Others too have contributed to this idea that war is at its essence an amoral struggle of power: Thucydides, Niccolò Machiavelli, and Thomas Hobbes. For the quote refer to Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, (London, UK: Penguin Books, 1982).

10. *FMFM 1, Warfighting*. See also Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, (Washington, DC: 1997).

11. *Emasculating Warriors*.

12. “The real, if uneulogized, foreign policy of the Truman Administration was the containment of Communism, and there was general agreement that the United States had better begin containing. And, ... Americans, denying from moral grounds that war can ever be a part of politics, inevitably tend to think in terms of holy war—against militarism, against fascism, against bolshevism. In the postwar age, uneasy,

disliking and fearing the unholiness of Communism, they have prepared for jihad. If their leaders blow the trumpet, or if their homeland is attacked, their millions agreed to be better dead than Red.” T.R. Fehrenbach, *This Kind of War*, (Washington, DC: Brassey’s, 1963).

13. Staff, “Second Red Scare,” *Ohio History Central*, (January 2020).

14. History.com Editors, “Korean War,” *History*, (November 2009).

15. “But throughout the ebb and flow of the war, General MacArthur was concerned that the soldiers under his command, non-Americans as well as Americans, were sacrificing their lives without purpose, or for an objective not worth the sacrifice of human life. ... General MacArthur ‘saw his men dying for nothing. If their sacrifice was to have any meaning, the UN’s political purpose needed reexamination.” David Lutz, “The Exercise of Military Judgment: A Philosophical Investigation of the Virtues and Vices of General Douglas MacArthur,” (1997). Also, Bevin Alexander, *MacArthur’s War*, (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2013).

16. GEN Douglass MacArthur, “Farewell Address to Congress, April 19, 1951,” (speech, Congress of the United States, Washington, DC, April 1951).

17. Ibid.

18. Read Turse’s book to see how bad it can get: Nick Turse, *Kill Anything that Moves*, (New York, NY: Picador Books, 2013).

19. John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1980).

20. *Emasculating Warriors*.

21. “Strategy, plans, operations, and assessments are inexorably intertwined. Plans translate the strategy into operations with the expectation that successful operations achieve the desired strategic objectives.” This too must be founded in the just cause for war. VADM Kevin Scott, USN, Director, Joint Force Development, *Joint Publication 5-0, Joint Planning*, (Washington, DC: June 2017).



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