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**Ethical Issues in Operations:**  
**The Importance of Military Ethics in the**  
**Conduct of Military Operations Other**  
**Than War**

By/par Colonel William H. McFarland, Jr.  
United States Army

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# **Ethical Issues in Operations: The Importance of Military Ethics in the Conduct of Military Operations Other Than War**

## **Introduction**

Adherence to an acceptable military ethic based on internationally recognized moral tenets is essential in the conduct of all military operations, and especially in the conduct of Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW). James H. Toner, a former U.S. Army officer, a visiting professor of International Relations at the U.S. Air War College, and an associate professor of Political Science at Norwich University in Vermont, says “ethics is about trying to separate right from wrong, honor from shame, virtue from vice. It is the studied search for wisdom and an inquiry into what we ought to do. It also entails the obligation of acting wisely and resolutely upon the judgements we make. Ethics derives from custom, from rules, from goals, and from circumstances. A mature, settled sense of ethics understands and incorporates all sources in wise decision-making.”<sup>1</sup>

The presence of military ethics in the conduct of MOOTW is as important as ever because today’s militaries face the increasing probability of direct military-to-civilian contact: contact with those who are in need (humanitarian missions) and with those who need to be kept from combating others (peace operations: peacemaking/peacekeeping). The ethical conduct of MOOTW engenders national and worldwide support, sets the stage for a positive environment in which the operation has a chance of success, and

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<sup>1</sup> Toner, James H., True Faith and Allegiance – the Burden of Military Ethics, The University of Kentucky Press, 1995, p. 21.

enhances the status of nations evolved in the operations. A military unit that does not embrace a strong, moral ethic is likely to make the wrong decision when faced with a dilemma. This wrong decision could jeopardize the mission, the military unit's credibility, and the status in the international community of the nation deploying the unit.

In this paper I briefly will describe the concept of MOOTW, then cover some of the major ethical issues that may face military forces involved in the conduct of MOOTW, specifically in humanitarian and peace operations.

### **The Concept of Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW)**

Now incorporated into the term "Smaller-Scale Contingencies" in U.S. military terminology, MOOTW refers to the full range of military operations short of major theater war. These operations include rendering humanitarian assistance, conducting peace operations, enforcing embargoes and no-fly zones, evacuating U.S. (and other nations') citizens from threatened regions, reinforcing key allies, and conducting limited strikes and intervention.<sup>2</sup>

### **Major ethical issues that face military forces involved in the conduct of Operations Other Than War**

Two areas that are ripe for posing ethical dilemmas are humanitarian and peace operations. Three of the four humanitarian missions identified in the preceding paragraph (Somalia, Rwanda, and Bosnia) turned sour when, despite the best stated intentions of the nations responding to the plight of those in need, acts of murder and

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<sup>2</sup> A National Security Strategy for a New Century, The White House, October 1998, pp. 20-21.

genocide were conducted in plain view of military forces sent in to ease the suffering. The ethical dilemma in these circumstances is captured in the question: “how can force be used in a way that avoids the disasters that have afflicted recent UN operations in places such as Somalia, where in 1993 the deaths of eighteen US Rangers effectively aborted the (humanitarian) operation, or in Rwanda, where in 1994 the international community’s indecisiveness allowed hundreds of thousands of Rwandans to be slaughtered in a “machete genocide”, or in Bosnia in 1992-1995, where genocide took place before the eyes of passive UN Peacekeepers?”<sup>3</sup>

Troops deployed to these hotspots were impacted by several circumstances that complicated their missions. These troops possessed and conveyed moral values upon which international human rights standards rest – those of the political culture of Western nations. This culture was not, and is not today, accepted universally throughout the world community. Additionally, insufficient domestic support for the humanitarian missions existed in those nations that supplied that bulk of the military forces necessary to carry out the costly humanitarian mission. A perception of inadequate burden-sharing by the participating nations complicated the operations. And, finally in the political arena, the big issue of national interests muddied the water: were participating nations working truly for altruistic reasons, or were there hidden agendas?<sup>4</sup>

Operationally, the military forces were deployed with no clear set of political or military objectives. This led to unclear objectives or ones that were wide open to

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<sup>3</sup> Campbell, Kenneth J., Dr., “The Role of Force In Humanitarian Intervention”, *Airman-Scholar: A Journal of Contemporary Military Thought*, US Air Force Academy, Spring 1997, Vol. III, No. 2.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 2 and 3 of 12.

interpretation. This allowed “mission creep” to occur and caused the slide from humanitarian/peace operations to those associated with warfighting.<sup>5</sup>

The issues complicating these deployments highlight the question of the appropriateness of sending military forces to conduct humanitarian missions. Dr. James Johnson, University Director of International Programs, Professor in the Department of Religion, and an Associate in the Graduate Department of Political Science at Rutgers University believes that the use of force in these types of mission is justified “to defend the innocent, retake what was wrongly taken, and to punish evil”. He adds that what makes the case of intervention by force for humanitarian purposes so hard is that such moral justifications may be greatly compelling, and yet we still, in a given case, should not intervene by military force. There may not be the necessary authority to do so; there may be no reasonable hope of success; military intervention may cause more harm than good; other means of dealing with the crisis at hand may be more effective; and some forms of military intervention may hinder the cause of peace rather than serving it.”<sup>6</sup>

Peace Operations introduce compelling challenges to military forces. The “gray area” of conflict that exists between traditional peacekeeping and peace enforcement is difficult to identify and may very well contribute to ethical dilemmas. “A new concept of ‘induced consent’ focuses on that segment of the ‘gray area’ that deals with failed or failing states involved in intrastate conflict.”<sup>7</sup> Dr. David Jablonski and James S. McCollum, both retired US Army colonels and professors at the US Army War

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 3 of 12.

<sup>6</sup> Johnson, James T., Prof., The Just war Idea and the Ethics of Intervention, The Joseph A. Reich, Sr., Distinguished Lecture on War, Morality, and the Military Profession, US Air Force Academy, 17 November 1993, p. 16.

<sup>7</sup> Jablonski, David, Dr., and McCollum, James S., COL, “Peace Implementation and the Concept of Induced Consent in Peace Operations”, Parameters, Spring 1999, (pp. 54-70), Copy of Article - p. 1 of 17.

College, state that “the idea of inducing consent for a settlement among factions in such conflicts appears to border on the oxymoronic. At the very least, the concept would require an extremely delicate balance between coercion and rewards to be successful”.<sup>8</sup> An interesting aspect of the ethical challenge posed by induced consent is that in UN-sanctioned peace operations, the belligerents or parties in conflict must agree to intervention. This means that they agree to being induced to consent to a cessation of tensions/hostilities and move toward reconciliation.

In 1995 this concept was employed in Bosnia. “Great power pressure caused the belligerents in the Former Yugoslavia to consent to the Dayton Peace Agreements. The induced nature of this consent at the strategic and operational levels caused the UN to authorize a large, heavily armed Implementation Force (IFOR) under Chapter VII to ‘take all necessary measures’ to ensure compliance with the agreement down to the tactical level.”<sup>9</sup>

Although coercion or induced consent may seem high-handed, it may be the only method that brings the belligerents together. Kofi Annan, the UN’s Under Secretary General for Peacekeeping Operations, remarked that “the purpose of an inducement operation is to build, not to destroy, even while intimidating into acquiescence those who would prevent reconciliation”.<sup>10</sup> In certain cases, the end does justify the means.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 1 of 17.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 6 of 17.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 7 of 17.



## **Conclusion**

Strong military ethics serve as a beacon to forces that are oftentimes deployed to execute MOOTW. More time than not, the political leadership of the nations sending the forces into harm's way do so without setting clear guidance, objectives, or providing any hint of the operation's desired endstate. Militaries sent into environments such as this may waver from doing the right things or slip away from the things they ought to do. Only those militaries that embrace high moral standards and live a military ethos based on those standards will succeed. Militaries involved in MOOTW must demonstrate a clear understanding of what is right and what is wrong, what is honorable and what is shameful, what is virtuous and what is fraught with vice. Militaries must ethically conduct MOOTW and seize the moral and ethical high-ground to achieve success with their mission, whether the mission is to ease human suffering or ensure the groundwork is laid for peace.

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