Competency vs. Character? It Must Be Both!

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Competence without character is perversion and our greatest threat.
—Dr. James Toner[1]

ENVISION AN ARMY where Soldiers never sit through classes and stacks of PowerPoint slides on ethics and leadership. Imagine an Army without classes focused solely on the seven Army Values. Picture an Army in which character development is intentionally part of literally everything we do. Does it sound far-fetched or unreasonable? It shouldn't.

As our Army looks to the future, we need to examine how we educate and develop Soldiers and leaders to have the character and competence that compose the non-negotiable contract between our Nation and its military professionals. Our proposal is to get rid of almost all stand-alone ethical or character development training and education across the Army. No more sexual harassment classes. No more "law of land warfare" classes. No more legal briefs on conflict of interest and taking bribes. Instead, our proposal is to embed ethical and character education into *everything we do,* into all training venues, all educational experiences, everything. This significant cultural change will not only be more productive and efficient, it will ultimately be more effective, more pedagogically sound, and require fewer resources.

We understand that we are asking for an enormous and revolutionary change by calling for this now. Our Army's leaders will have to fundamentally change their mind-set and approach to training, education, and development for character development in our Soldiers. Such complete cultural change in how the Army trains, educates, and develops Soldiers will not be fun or easy. This type of change in an organization as large, diverse, and effective as the Army will have to come from the top-down *and* the bottom-up.

Where Are We Now?

Why this proposal? Why now? Our Army will continue to operate in some of the most morally ambiguous and complex environments in history—with no end in sight. Our Chief of Staff, General George Casey, appropriately calls this an era of persistent conflict. Casey and other senior

leaders recognize that this era will have an effect on the moral and ethical development and climate of our Army.

Our Army is without question the most competent and experienced, best trained and equipped, Army in the world. Our training models, systems, and centers are easily the best, most advanced, and most effective in the world, and our technological superiority is equally impressive. Our Army is an Army where "training is king." And rightly so. However, as we look to the future and take a critical look at ourselves (as professionals must do), we find a competence-character mismatch.

Interestingly, this same topic was addressed 12 years ago by now retired Colonel Darryl Goldman in "The Wrong Road to Character Development," *Military Review*, January-February 1998. In the article, Goldman also focused on the need for a cultural change due to the compartmentalized nature of our "character" training. He correctly notes that in the Army we "fail to provide young adults with the training and education required for appropriate cognitive development and change"—which means the current methods are not achieving the results we want.[2]

Evidence of the Problem

A recent review of the Army's Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) curriculum revealed that more than 90 percent of the curriculum focuses on developing competency while less than 10 percent concerns character education. Additionally, only about 5 percent of Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) instruction in both the Officer and Non-Commissioned Officer Education System focuses on ethics and leadership. Is this 5 percent character to 95 percent competence ratio what the Army wants to espouse?

And what about character-focused training and education in our units? The competency vs. character mismatch exists in our units (in terms of time dedicated to each), and experiences compound it. For example, look at any unit's training schedule and compare the time spent on competency with the time spent on character. How often has a squad had to redo a squad tactical exercise lane because it didn't go as planned? Contrast that with how often an instructor had to redo a class on the Army Values. Clearly, we have a mismatch. In addition, the Army has recently started eliminating chaplain slots from schoolhouses through a plan to shift these ethics classes to distance learning. For many years, these classes were the responsibility of the chaplains. These are all examples of a systemic failure to understand and implement a holistic ethical leadership education and development strategy for our Army.

The Army has unwittingly adopted an ineffective corporate model for character *training*. However, people learn best from experience. Training to teach a skill involves attempting to cram a large amount of experience into a short time frame. This is usually in the form of a lecture or class. This approach is effective only if the intent is to arm the learner with a skill. This is a great method if the outcome is to *teach* a Soldier how to load and clear a weapon or change the tire on a truck. However, this is not the way to *develop* someone, especially in the moral or ethical arena. You cannot teach someone in a class via PowerPoint how to recognize a moral dilemma, weigh the potential effects of a decision, and behave in the morally correct way. The only way you can do this is by developing— changing—a person.[3]

Like most topics we teach in the Army, we currently teach ethics and values in a compartmentalized manner. This is evident as you examine unit training schedules. We refer to classes that fall under the umbrella of moral and ethical education (respect, ethics in warfare, sexual harassment, violence at home and in the work place, etc.) as "mandatory training" or "chain teaching." To execute this training, the Army typically issues commanders or instructors "canned" PowerPoint slide decks and orders them to train all members of their unit on that particular topic by a given date. These classes are an hour-long session on the unit-training schedule. During that hour the commander, or another leader in the unit, delivers the training. Once the training is complete, the "block is checked," and the unit moves on to the next task.

…90 percent of the [ROTC] curriculum focuses on developing competency while less than 10 percent concerns character education.

This method is not an effective way to develop an individual or imprint a value regarding the culture of an organization.[4] In fact, it can actually have the opposite effect. This method of transferring knowledge on these important subjects is not unique to company-sized units. It is how moral and ethical training takes place throughout the Army at all levels. Sadly, it does not work and may even be counterproductive:

> This propensity to create new, isolated initiatives to address varied human relations misconduct has been the fundamental failure in the way the U.S. military has addressed character development since the Eisenhower administration. We continually assume that secluded enterprises addressing ethics, morals, or values are consequential just because they give the impression that 'we are doing something.' In fact, this fallacious faith in new, detached projects is evidence that they do more harm than good by diverting the attention of those in leadership who have the authority to cause real change.[5]

In October 2008, the Army held a Sexual Assault Prevention and Risk Reduction Training Summit. At the summit (whose guest speakers included the Secretary of the Army and the Army Chief of Staff), the Army announced its new "I A.M. Strong" campaign to help prevent sexual assaults in the Army. Why would the Army need to address issues of respect for service members in 2008? One of our seven Army Values is "respect." We are confident that most people in the Army have the seven Army Values memorized. However, memorizing them is not enough. For the Army Values to be meaningful, we must internalize them, embody them, and live them. We can and should be better than this.

A powerful example of the "bumper sticker" mentality of our Army Values occurred in 2005 during the court martial of a Soldier charged with forcing an Iraqi off a bridge over the Tigris River. During the sentencing phase at the Soldier's court martial, Lieutenant Colonel Nate Sassaman, his battalion commander, testified that every member in his battalion carried a card "based on Army Values" and "knew Army Values—inside and out—and in fact, strictly followed them."[6] But carrying a card printed with the Army Values, or being able to recite them, is a far cry from understanding what

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the words mean, believing in them, internalizing them, and ultimately embodying the values into one's thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and behaviors.

Recently, during interviews conducted with 12 former brigade commanders who had commanded troops in Iraq or Afghanistan, we found there were frustration and discontent with how the Army currently conducts training and education in the area of moral and ethical development. The following themes emerged from those interviews:

● The Army does not do a good job of developing Soldiers morally and ethically.

● Character competency is as important as tactical competency for the future of our Army.

● If I had to do it all again, I would spend more time developing my Soldiers' competency in character.

● Classroom training in ethics is not effective.

Five of the brigade commanders had to relieve or reprimand a platoon leader or platoon sergeant for either detainee abuse or violating rules of engagement or escalation of force rules. A battalion commander in Iraq, who was involved in an Article 15-6 investigation on the circumstances leading up to an instance of kidnapping and gruesome death, stated that it would take a "special commander" to have prevented this unfortunate incident (because of the derogatory climate that existed in the unit following the highly publicized rape and murder of a young Iraqi girl). When asked if the Army has such "special commanders," he responded, "yes, but only very few."[7] How do we grow and develop these special Soldiers and leaders to operate in a complex and morally ambiguous environment that will most likely continue for several years to come?

Training–Education–Development

The primary problem is that the Army does not have a model for character and leader development. We have a piecemeal, catch-as-catch-can training checklist that attempts to *teach* Soldiers character and ethics. We expect leaders to give subordinates

"on-the-job-training" in character without an explicit model or strategy and without equipping the leaders with the knowledge and tools to do the job. Our Army must do better than this.

Character must be developed, not taught. Training results in a skill, education results in more or new knowledge, and development results in a changed person. Therefore our Army needs to develop character, and to undergo development, people must undergo a transformation that fundamentally alters how they think, feel, and behave. In short, there must be permanent change. For example, we can train (transferring skills and abilities) a leader on mentoring techniques. We can educate (transferring knowledge) a leader on the human development process behind those same mentoring techniques. Finally, we can develop (lasting changes in one's identity, perspectives, and meaning-making system) leaders by creating an identity in which they see themselves as a mentor and leader developer.[8]

Soldiers reveal their character through their behavior—in the context of their daily lives and while displaying their competency. A good test of Soldiers' character is how they behave when something has gone wrong. Character does not reveal itself in a vacuum. The construct of "character" is visible in what we do all the time (although we often do not think in these terms). As such, our Army needs to morally *develop* ethical leaders for complex contingencies.

How do people develop character? The research in this area is a mixed bag. A powerful pedagogical method, espoused by Dr. Lee Knefelkemp from Columbia University, is to get people out of their comfort zone—make them feel uncomfortable by facilitating discussions on subjects they don't want to talk about. This process causes cognitive dissonance in individuals' minds, which challenges their beliefs and leads to change.

The Army needs to take a holistic view of character development. A common model used for development is:
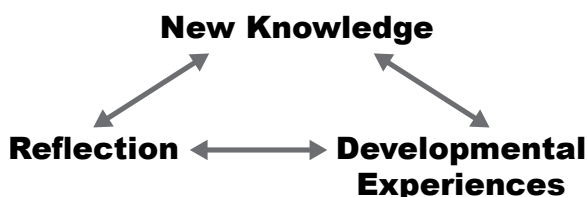
New Knowledge

Reflection ⟷ **Developmental Experiences**

> *A good test of Soldiers' character is how they behave when something has gone wrong. Character does not reveal itself in a vacuum.*

Our goal needs to be to intentionally create opportunities and set the conditions for Soldiers to understand and internalize James Rest's four stages of moral development:[9]

- Moral recognition
- Moral judgment.
- Moral intention.
- Moral action.

We need to develop Soldiers who are more intellectually and morally complex and have the moral courage to act on their beliefs and values. This is much easier said than done. Successful programs "begin with a model that includes cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimension … and a program as diverse as values clarification, moral dilemma discussion, role-playing, and conflict resolution." Additionally, there is evidence "that moral development can continue into adulthood, and that particularly dramatic changes can occur in young adulthood in the context of professional school education … [M]oral and ethical development occurs in a variety of settings, both formal and informal."[10]

Our Army needs to create these formal and informal settings and practice (role-play, rehearse) moral intention and moral action. The biggest gap in the Rest model is the step between moral intentions and moral actions. Often, our Soldiers know the right thing to do, but (often due to misplaced loyalty) lack the moral courage to actually do it. There are many examples from our current conflicts (the Bagram Air Base beatings, Abu Ghraib, Operation Iron Triangle); Soldiers knew the right thing to do but failed to do it. Toner notes that this fundamental problem has a solution: "A major problem with ethics education is that it cannot be crammed into neat compartments and nice-sounding, desired learning outcomes. . . There is no 'magic bullet'—no always-certain ethical compass. We must teach moral reasoning, not just 'core values' or 'ethical checklists.'"[11]

Albert Bandura has described the choice to do nothing (or look the other way) "as moral disengagement":

Simply stated, moral disengagement is what happens to human beings when they're stretched beyond their emotional and psychological capacity. Their bodies, psyches, minds, and souls disengage from events around them and they become detached, in an almost dissociative state. Unchecked, a person will 'reconstrue,' or use strained logic to justify their amoral behaviors.[12]

This era of persistent conflict has stretched, and will continue to stretch, Soldiers beyond their emotional and psychological capacity:

> To develop good character, students need many and varied opportunities to apply values such as responsibility and fairness in everyday interactions and discussion . . . [T]hrough repeated moral experiences students . . . develop and practice the moral skills and behavioral habits that make up the action side of character . . . in a learning and moral community in which all share responsibility for character education and attempt to adhere to the same core values.[13]

How do we create developmental experiences and introduce new knowledge to develop Soldiers morally and ethically? It is not that hard, but it takes time, thought, and mentorship. A start is to provide Soldiers real-world simulated experiences, similar to a tactical exercise lane, and add realistic contexts and situations to confront. Develop real-world problems they must tackle and struggle with. Create opportunities for Soldiers and leaders to practice ethical decision-making and analyze vignettes from a variety of ethical lenses (outcome-focused, rules/process-focused, values-focused). While we expose them to complex, multi-task, tactical operations, we must embed morally intense variables into the equation. We should attempt to get Soldiers out of their comfort zones, create anxiety, and require them to make difficult decisions that do not necessarily have a right answer, but that do have consequences.

Quality coaching and mentorship (guided reflection) must be ongoing throughout the process. A leader, coach, or mentor should help students find meaning in their experiences and examine their perceptions and decisions. Leaders and coaches should also pass along their experiences without passing judgment. We have intentionally chosen the word *coach*, not *teacher* or *counselor* because it is important how we deliver the message. In order for someone to change, he must develop, and this takes realism, experience, and repetition. The bottom line is that training is ineffective when trying to develop people. "It isn't until the 'leader-in-training' is required to live through a problem and has to figure it out first hand that it soaks in."[14]

This idea is not new. Integrating training, education, and development in one holistic model of competence development is beginning to infiltrate into the Army culture. Our Army is slowly moving toward an adaptive leader training and development model. Because of the ever-increasing complexity of the modern battlefield, Soldiers and leaders must make split-second, hyper-important decisions that have second- and third-order and sometimes strategic effects. Not *trained* in particular skills, but *developed* to have certain characteristics and traits—Soldiers and leaders will have to be nimble physically, mentally, socially, and emotionally—and have strength of both character and competence. All Soldiers have to have the ability to think critically and act resolutely.

As mentioned above, an important aspect of the developmental model is reflection. Reflection is a concept that many people in the Army either don't like or don't know about, but it is vital to character development. Reflection involves a person (or group) thinking about, writing about, and discussing in detail an experience, idea, value, or new knowledge. Moreover, for reflection to be developmental, someone (a squad leader, a platoon sergeant or leader, coach, mentor) must push the envelope and facilitate a reflective experience that takes the individual out of his or her comfort zone.

…to be developmental, [one] …must push the envelope and facilitate a reflective experience that takes the individual out of his or her comfort zone.

What It Looks Like In Action

Let's look at two key components of character—respect and integrity. Topics such as respect and integrity should not be compartmentalized in Soldiers' and leaders' brains. Respect and integrity are not vague, theoretical terms that we should think about and talk about occasionally. They must be who we are. Soldiers cannot understand and display respect and integrity in terms of being "on duty" or "off duty." The recent sex scandal involving drill sergeants and recruits is an example of this "on duty" vs. "off duty" mentality.

For example, a platoon leader can discuss the importance of accurate property accountability and readiness reporting while conducting a motor pool inspection. A battalion commander can initiate a ten-minute discussion about respect at the end of a training meeting. A company commander can discuss conflicting loyalties with fellow commanders or Soldiers while eating in the dining facility. During a selected "down" time in a mission rehearsal exercise, a platoon sergeant can insert a five-minute discussion on the importance of accuracy in reporting. Opportunities such as these are numerous, and it is worth remembering that, from a developmental perspective, "omission of discourse is not value-neutral education. There is no such thing. Omission is a powerful, even if unintended, signal that these issues are unimportant."[15] Consequently, when our Army, in any venue, fails to address moral and ethical implications, a clear message has been sent to the audience: "Right now, this is not that important."

A start in implementing this change can occur in our schoolhouses if instructors simply ask themselves, "What are some of the ethical challenges that occur in my subject (maintenance management, tactics, first aid, communications, intelligence, firing safety, supply management, convoy operations, etc.)?" The instructor can then infuse the challenges into the curriculum or through pedagogical techniques. For example, a class on how to conduct preventive mainte-nance checks and services on a vehicle can include a discussion on the importance of accurate materiel readiness reporting. She might say, "Your fellow Soldiers may be put at risk if you report a vehicle fully mission capable, when it really isn't." The long-term solution will have experts in the field of character development assisting TRADOC and our schoolhouses with integrating character and competency lessons in curricula.

The individuals who can best change this culture in our Army are those selected to lead Soldiers at the company, battalion, and brigade level—commanders and command sergeants major. These key leaders have the most direct influence on Soldiers and subordinate leaders and should lead the way in changing culture (and climate) in our Army. They also set the culture and climate in their units so that Soldiers are, and *feel they are*, a part of the team. Key leaders in an organization have the most success in changing its culture.[16]

Therefore, commanders and command sergeants major at all levels should challenge each other and challenge their Soldiers to help change our culture. This is not resource-intensive. We can and should make subjects such as honesty and integrity a common part of the conversation in motor pools, forward operating bases, training areas, orderly rooms, and athletic fields. We should talk

Soldiers from the Public Affairs Office listen to an NCO at Joint Security Station Zafaraniya, eastern Baghdad, Iraq, 18 April 2009.

U.S. Army, SSG James Selesnick

openly and comfortably about what these words mean. We should have open, honest dialogues on the topic of respect (*What does it look like? What does it not look like?*). These discussions do not have to be formal classes on a training schedule. Developing people to be more morally and intellectually complex (as opposed to training or even educating them about the subjects) requires taking them out of their comfort zones and talking with them, not to them.

Commanders and other leaders should have young Soldiers lead discussions in these areas. A platoon leader can ask a specialist to give an example of a conflict between loyalty and integrity. Two platoon sergeants can discuss what respect does *not* look like in front of their platoons. A group of Soldiers can role-play examples of honesty. Peer interaction on these difficult and uncomfortable topics is one of the most effective developmental techniques. We are limited in this area only by our imaginations, and we do not need to set aside a one-hour block of instruction to initiate such discussions.

Ensuring Soldiers in a unit genuinely have character (and are competent) is a leadership and command responsibility at its most basic level. Like most "issues" in the Army, this is simply a leadership issue. Historically, "commanders are responsible for everything a unit does and/or fails to do." This is a simple, yet powerful concept. Interestingly, in terms of accepting responsibility for the "character" climate and behavior in a unit, we can learn something from our Navy comrades-in-arms. If our Army adopted the Navy's concept that "if the ship runs aground, it is the captain's responsibility," it would create a different paradigm in commanders' minds. Commanders will realize that if they fail to properly and fully develop character in their Soldiers, they are setting the conditions for failure.

Changing a Culture

The shift we are advocating would be a revolutionary change in the Army's culture, not an incremental or methodical one. To be effective, leaders at the highest levels of the organization would have to require it. These leaders need to create, drive, and propel this change to ensure it affects every facet of the Army's leader development and education systems.[17] The current status quo separates competency and character-based development. The new paradigm will always develop competence and character simultaneously—and thus increases the time spent in character development.

After the cultural shift, competence and character will be a part of everything we do. As a guide to propel this change, we propose to use John Kotter's eight steps in changing an organization's culture:

1. Establish a sense of urgency (from the top-down *and* the bottom-up).

2. Create a guiding coalition (to take the ball and run with it).

3. Develop a vision and strategy to integrate character and competence.

4. Communicate the change vision using senior leaders.

5. Empower broad-based action by removing barriers to change.

6. Generate short-term wins by integrating character education into our curriculums.

7. Consolidate gains and produce more change (by integrating character education into our training venues).

8. Anchor new approaches in the culture by challenging others in the organization to talk about the change.[18]

There will be a steep learning curve for instructors and leaders on how to create and facilitate these uncomfortable conversations. However, a good part of the strategy to implement this change is to "just do it." We need to set the conditions and create opportunities for Soldiers to think about the way they understand difficult issues such as killing, murder, torture, rape, and how to relate to detainees and foreigners. Soldiers need to test and challenge their thoughts, beliefs, and values. This simple first step will actually be a huge step toward addressing the cultural change we propose.

If the Army decides to make this cultural change, it will actually save time and money. The net saving

occurs because Soldiers will no longer have to sit in classrooms and theaters for ethics-related training. Our Army will have transformed into a profession where character and competence training, education, and development occur simultaneously—with the outcome being Soldiers who understand and have internalized what it means to be an American Soldier. Ultimately, our Army and our Nation will benefit from such a change. It is the right thing to do, and now is the time to do it. **MR**

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U.S. Soldiers and Afghan border policemen walk along a mountain trail during a patrol in the Paktiya province of Afghanistan, 13 October 2009.

Moral Disengagements
When Will Good Soldiers do Bad Things?

Christopher M. Barnes, Ph.D., and Keith Leavitt, Ph.D.

There is no moral precept that does not have something inconvenient about it.

—Denis Diderot

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PHOTO: U.S. Soldiers search an Iraqi house, 21 September 2006, in Tal Afar. (Photo courtesy of Scott Andrew Ewing)

THROUGH INTUITION, VARIOUS EXPERIENCES, reactions to the experiences of others, and exposure to standards held by others, people develop a set of moral standards that they apply to their own actions. For Soldiers, the Army plays an important role in the development of these standards. Leaders, trainers, and educators aid Soldiers in inculcating institutional values. Moreover, the Army provides Soldiers explicit codes, such as the Geneva Convention, the Law of Land Warfare (Field Manual 27-10), and the U.S. Soldiers Creed.

Through these and non-Army sources, most Soldiers develop a cogent ethical framework that they use to inform and guide their behavior. Personal values serve a powerful self-regulatory function. Following this framework gives us a sense of satisfaction and self-worth, and violating our standards makes us feel guilty. Even in situations where doing the wrong thing brings benefit and doing the right thing places one at risk, many Soldiers use their ethical frameworks to select ethical behaviors. However, sometimes individuals with even the most codified and stringent moral standards can selectively disengage their ethical frameworks.

Moral disengagement involves avoiding applying an ethical framework to a situation by using four distinct rationalizing techniques. By removing the standards of ethical behavior that they normally hold themselves to, Soldiers can engage in unethical and inhumane acts they would otherwise describe as inexcusable. How does this process work? And, more practically, how do we recognize and attenuate it in Soldiers under our command and ourselves?

...officials may euphemize the behaviors by calling them "advanced interrogation techniques" or "threat neutralization."

As noted by Bandura and colleagues in 1996, ethical frameworks can be disengaged by—

● Reconstruing the conduct.
● Obscuring personal responsibility.
● Misrepresenting or disregarding the harmful consequences of one's actions.
● Vilifying the recipients of maltreatment by blaming and devaluing them.[1]

We draw from recent research to describe this process, analyze a recently sensationalized (and controversial) example, and provide suggestions for preventing moral disengagement.

How Does Moral Disengagement Work?

Disengagement occurs through different psychological processes of restructuring the situation.

Reconstruing conduct through framing. One road to moral disengagement is to flip the framing of the issue. Rather than focusing on how a behavior is unethical, Soldiers reframe the behavior as in service of a higher ethical purpose. Former Lieutenant Colonel Allen West retired from the Army after a scandal in which he allegedly violated ethical codes of conduct by discharging a firearm next to the head of an Iraqi detainee. West had received information that someone in the area planned to make an attempt on his life and believed that the detainee had relevant information. Rather than focusing on how discharging the firearm threatened the reputation of U.S. forces in a situation where cooperation was essential, West focused on how obtaining information would help prevent an attack against his life. West emphasized that an attack on him could also place those around him in danger, so obtaining information from the detainee would protect his men as well. A respected Army officer and a recipient of the Bronze Star for previous meritorious actions, West was able to violate ethical standards that he would otherwise value (such as the Geneva Convention). West was so successful in his moral disengagement

that, as of this writing, he still adamantly defends his action even though it clearly violated explicit ethical codes of conduct and no evidence has ever emerged that his actions protected Soldiers' lives.

Reconstruing conduct through the use of euphemistic language. Certain words–such as *torture* or *execution*—automatically raise red flags that prompt the use of ethical frameworks and standards. However, other words may not have the same effect even if they mean the same thing. Some behaviors clearly violate the rules

Steven D. Green, shown shooting off a lock at an abandoned house in December 2005.

of engagement, but officials may euphemize the behaviors by calling them "advanced interrogation techniques" or "threat neutralization." Many people refer to a captured person as a prisoner, but others often use the word "detainee." Soldiers can avoid ethical processing that would otherwise occur by using sanitized language.

Reconstruing conduct through advantageous comparison. We often determine how *moral* a behavior is by comparing it to another behavior. Soldiers make advantageous comparisons by comparing their behavior to even worse behaviors. The worse the comparison behavior is, the less harmful the behavior in question appears to be. In the television show *The Sopranos*, protagonist Tony Soprano claimed that his actions as a leader of organized crime were "not as bad as [those of] rapists and serial killers." Soldiers may do the same thing. Compared to Saddam Hussein's prolonged chemical attacks on the Kurds, any harm American Soldiers visit on Iraqis some see as trifling.

Obscuring responsibility via displacement. To the degree that Soldiers believe that others determine their actions, they do not feel responsible for the ethical outcomes. An especially famous example of this is the Nuremburg defense. When prosecuted for war crimes, many former Nazi Soldiers argued that they were "just following orders." Soldiers sometimes believe that social pressure or command pressure is too difficult to contend with and believe that they are not responsible for the outcomes.

Obscuring responsibility via diffusion. Diffusion of responsibility is a similar phenomenon. If multiple people share the responsibility for an act, no one individual feels responsible for it. One way for this to occur is for an unethical task to be broken up into steps that are relatively harmless and each of those steps assigned to a different person. A good example of this is a firing squad. Many people feel bad about executing someone (even when it is legal to do so), so having a group of people all fire simultaneously diffuses the responsibility. No single person knows the lethality of his own shot (or whether their weapon contained a live round), and therefore no one feels he is responsible for the death by firing squad.

Distortion. Disregarding or distorting the consequences of an action can result in moral disen-

gagement. People remember the benefits of their actions, but often forget the harmful outcomes. They find ways to avoid seeing the harm of their actions. They may try to discredit any source of information that suggests their action was or might be harmful. By not acknowledging the harmful outcomes of an action, they avoid the normal process of ethical evaluation.

Derogation. How a Soldier views the recipients of his actions is important in the process of moral disengagement. Dehumanization involves ignoring any human qualities of a person or group of persons and treating him or them as an object. Because the potential recipient of a Soldier's actions is no longer a human but merely an object, ethical considerations are not relevant. Blaming the recipient is a similar process. By blaming the receiver, people can view themselves as victims driven to their behavior by his provocations. The people running Abu Grahib prison at the time of the prisoner abuses may have believed that all of the prisoners were terrorists who had done terrible things and deserved retribution from the guards.

What Happens When People Morally Disengage?

Moral disengagement is a process that can occur in almost anyone and has important consequences. In studies of elementary and middle school students, Albert Bandura and colleagues found that moral disengagement led to verbal and physical aggression, stealing, cheating, lying, destructiveness, less help to others, and less personal guilt. In a study of college students, moral disengagement led to unethical business decisions.[2] In two studies examining adults, the morally disengaged tended to seek harsher sentences for criminals and had fewer negative reactions to reports of American Soldiers beating Iraqi detainees.[3]

Moral Disengagement at the Canal

In March 2007, three sergeants attached to Alpha Company, 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry Regiment, captured four Iraqi nationals after a firefight and discovered a small cache of weapons. Citing frustration with policies and procedures that frequently led to detainees being turned loose, the sergeants and nine other Soldiers from their unit drove to an isolated spot along a canal, shot the four detainees

> ***...moral disengagement that allowed them to summarily execute four prisoners in their charge.***

in the back of the head, promptly disposed of the bodies in the canal, and swore their subordinates to secrecy.

Interrogation tapes of the three sergeants hint at the processes of moral disengagement that allowed them to summarily execute four prisoners in their charge. A statement from Sergeant Michael Leahy shows the use of *a diffusion tactic*: "Like, my arm went up to the right, and I fired again. I'm pretty sure I didn't hit anybody, but I'm not gonna say that because I don't know for sure. I wasn't even looking when I shot the second time. My arm just went to the right." Although Leahy later admitted to shooting the man, he was careful to point out that his shot might not have been the fatal one. In a letter from prison, his co-conspirator, First Sergeant John Hatley (who was in charge that day) defended his actions through *displacement*, blaming those in charge of setting policy regarding the evidence required to hold detainees: "The guidelines established for detaining and prosecuting the enemy has [*sic*] extensive flaws. Furthermore, the enemy is well aware of these flaws and consistently exploits these to facilitate their release." Of course, individuals who are on trial or in prison are motivated to restructure guidelines for their own benefit, but more telling (and a more dangerous practice) has been the general public's seeming desire to disengage their own standards on behalf of those acting as their agents.

The media has recently provided us with an analogous incident in the form of a videotape of Sri Lankan soldiers capturing and executing members of the Tamil Tigers. Although Sri Lankan officials currently deny the authenticity of the videotape and the veracity of the claims, one can imagine that the justifications of the individual soldiers is quite similar to that of the sergeants at the canal. More meaningful, however, is the difference in the American and Sri Lankan public's

response to the two incidents. An Internet search of reactions to the Sri Lankan incident reveals language such as "atrocities," "war crimes," and "murder," but commentary on the American Soldiers' canal killings produces examples of—

● *Victim derogation* (e.g., "they're all second from the bottom on the evolutionary totem pole"; "you're all feeling sorry for the same uncivilized creatures that would make you a victim in a heartbeat").

● *Distortion by ignoring harm* (e.g., "they did the job they were sent to do. A little late, but . . . better late than never").

● *Reconstruing conduct by advantageous comparison* (e.g., "It's War . . . They cut our heads off and drag us through the streets").

● *Obscuring responsibility via displacement* (e.g., "you can thank Bush for this").[4]

The stark contrast in the way we apply our moral standards to others compared to ourselves is obvious. In other words, we (as a Nation) often engage in moral disengagement in an attempt to excuse the behavior of those acting on our behalf.

Strategies for Keeping Morally Engaged

There are ways in which we can monitor the kinds of self-deception involved in restructuring for moral disengagement.

Monitoring cynicism. One antecedent of moral disengagement is highly evident in the canal killings—cynicism. Detert, Trevino, and Sweitzer found that individuals high in the trait of cynicism (i.e., a low opinion of human nature, with the opinion remaining stable across time) are more likely to be morally disengaged; further, cynical individuals are subsequently more likely to make unethical decisions. However, cynicism may also increase over time. Leaders, especially those in-theater, should monitor the morale of their troops. (Morale is a weather vane for the inclination for moral disengagement.) Although frustrations, fatigue, and emotional exhaustion are consequences of long and repeated deployments, consistent and growing cynicism is a sign that a Soldier might need additional guidance or oversight in ethically challenging situations.

Increasing accountability. Another way to reduce moral disengagement is to increase

accountability, either formally (within systems) or informally (through reminders from leaders and other unit members). Just as diffusing responsibility can lead to moral disengagement, tying individuals directly to their own actions reduces the likelihood of unethical behavior. This is the reason why many retailers keep mirrors near expensive items; most people are unable to steal while literally looking themselves in the eye.

Creating an internal locus of control. Detert, Trevino, and Sweitzer found that an external locus of control (a pervasive belief that the events in one's life are due to random processes, rather than their own actions) predicts increased moral disengagement. In other words, if individuals do not believe that they control meaningful outcomes in the world, they are less likely to hold their behavior to their own moral standards. Paradoxically, many of the features of our operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, including long periods of silence punctuated by surprise attacks, changing objectives, and repeated deployments, might lead Soldiers to adopt a less internal (and more chance-based) locus of control.

Focus on benefits and harms of actions at hand. As noted above, one way to morally disengage is to reframe the action as serving a higher principle, such as when West reframed detainee mistreatment, ostensibly to protect his troops. In discussions and decision making processes, combatants stay morally engaged if they take a full view of the decisions being made. Forcing themselves to see the harm in their actions, however ugly and painful that may be, will leave them less likely to morally disengage. Moreover, we shouldn't compare the harms of a course of action to prototypical extreme harms, such as Nazi internment camps. We should evaluate the harms of an action in comparison to its benefits and the harms and benefits of alternative courses of action. This does not mean that Soldiers should never do harmful things, but they should screen such behaviors through their moral frameworks rather than morally disengaging.

The power of language. The language that combatants use can influence their actions. Army leaders may do well to consider using language that is less euphemistic. By avoiding the use of euphemistic language that obscures the nature of certain actions, Soldiers will find it more difficult to morally disengage. Similarly, Soldiers should avoid using language that dehumanizes people on the other side of the conflict. By accepting that the populations involved in our current conflicts are people with complex motivations (and not simply evil monsters who deserve retribution), we will be less likely to morally disengage.

Conclusion

Clearly, there will be times when our Soldiers must engage in behavior intended to harm the enemy. That is the nature of war. However, Soldiers should not indiscriminately engage in such harm. They should first run contemplated behavior through moral frameworks in the hope of preventing more incidents like the killings at the canal in Baghdad. Indeed, important portions of Army training attempt to build moral frameworks for that very purpose.

The recent research summarized above highlights when our Soldiers will be most likely to morally disengage and cause incidents that are harmful not only to the victims but also to the very missions our Soldiers are working so hard to accomplish. The strategies we recommend are:
- Monitor cynicism.
- Increase accountability.
- Increase internal locus of control.
- Focus on both the harms and the benefits of a given course of action.
- Avoid dehumanizing those who oppose us in conflict.
- Use transparent and non-euphemistic language. *MR*

The language that combatants use can influence their actions. Army leaders may do well to consider using language that is less euphemistic.

NOTES

1. A. Bandura, C. Barbaranelli, G.V. Caprara, and C. Pastorelli, "Mechanisms of moral disengagement in the exercise of moral agency," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 71* (1996): 364-74.

2. J.R. Detert, L.K. Trevino, and V.L. Sweitzer, "Moral disengagement in ethical decision making: A study of antecedents and outcomes," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 93 (2008): (2), 374-91.

3. K. Aquino, A. Reed, II, S. Thau, and D. Freeman, "A grotesque and dark beauty: How the self-importance of moral identity and the mechanisms of moral disengagement influence cognitive and emotional reactions to war," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 43 (2007): 385-92.

4. All quotations are from the "25 most liked comments" as of 26 January 2010, regarding the "killings at the canal" story on CNN.com. Many of those quoted claim to be active duty Army or veterans of recent conflicts, although the anonymity of comments makes verification impossible.

Unidentified bodies near burning house, My Lai, Vietnam, 16 March 1968.