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TO KILL OR NOT TO KILL

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Never in American history have the dry pages of military doctrine been popular enough to be professionally published and sold in bookstores across the country. In that respect, the *Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, the guiding document for all operations in Iraq, is truly remarkable. It was printed by the military in late 2006 and is now a high-ranking seller on Amazon.com. In her review for *The New York Times*, Samantha Powers called it, "the book to begin with in looking for a revised 21st-century strategy in our war on terror." It is easily the most widely read and discussed doctrinal publication the United States military has ever produced. U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel John Nagl, one of its authors was invited as a guest on *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart where he said, "If I could sum up the book in just a few words, it would be: Be polite. Be professional. Be prepared to kill." In that single phrase he captured the principal discrepancy between how American conflicts have developed since WWII and what our soldiers have become. In Iraq, I witnessed this discrepancy; I felt it. I knew from the moment I picked it up what the *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* was missing.

On April 11, 2004 I did something that I'd never before done. I shot a man…at least, I shot at him. (Amidst the chaos of the moment, it was difficult to say whether or not he was hit.) It was Iraq. I was a Marine and we were under heavy attack. It seemed like the thing to do. And though I'd been in the infantry for over a decade I would not exactly describe the moment as perfunctory—automatic perhaps, but not quite perfunctory. Exactly what does it take to level the sights of a weapon and fire it at another human being? Under the circumstances, one wouldn't think much. And honestly, for me it didn't. But it would be precarious to assume that *it didn't take much* necessarily because of circumstances alone. For some people, circumstances weigh very little in the decision to shoot or not to shoot. In Iraq, a non-conventional operation referred to as a counterinsurgency, military doctrine not only demands of its soldiers a willingness to kill, but a willingness not to kill as well. But the evolution of its training has produced a much different kind of force, a different kind of warrior.

There was a well-known study—well-known within the military anyway—done directly after WWII by retired Colonel S.L.A. Marshall. In his book, *Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command in Future War*, he reveals his surprising discovery that, even in the thickest of fire fights, the vast majority of soldiers did not fire their weapons. (Based on interviews with the soldiers themselves, Marshall estimates that within the average unit under fire, only fifteen percent of men actually pulled their

triggers. Even within the most disciplined units, he found that average rose to not more than twenty-five percent.) What Marshall finds from his many interviews with soldiers is that it was not fear that prevented these men from engaging their enemies, but humanity; all of them reported a keen reluctance to kill.

One can just imagine the military's dismay to hear this news. Beneath all the rigid tomes on military tactics lies the fundamental principle of conventional battle: Those who fire the most bullets *win*. In the military, this principle is referred to as: *Fire Superiority*. Really, it's more mathematical equation than adage. It's not a statement of potential; it's not about which side has more guns. Fire Superiority is a condition amidst the battle, a moment, when one unit is discharging a heavier volume of fire than the other, keeping more of the latter's heads down, thereby allowing the former to maneuver. That's the key right there—maneuver. That's how an infantry unit gains forward momentum and how they seize the initiative; that's how they win the battle. And that is precisely why Marshall's findings were so disconcerting.

By Vietnam, the problem was all but solved; the number of soldiers willing to fire their weapons in combat reached over ninety percent. The military began to understand the necessity for desensitization in training.[*] That is, they realized that the societal morality that comes typically packaged in a recruit's consciousness must be, to a certain extent, disconnected, at least so long as he remains in a profession that demands killing. Examples of numbing a soldier to violence, like the vicious cadences sung in formation, the firing at "man-sized targets," and stabbing of uniformed dummies, abound and are fairly well-exposed today. But the killing culture goes far beyond any training that is involuntarily put upon individual soldiers; the effort is mutual. The military, no doubt, provides an environment in which violence can be looked upon with nonchalance. But that can only take a man so far. A soldier must engage this environment willingly. He must embrace it for it to have any meaningful effect. To be truly desensitized, he must desensitize himself.

When I enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1989, I was plunged into a truly brutal dialogue. Drill Instructors conveyed the gory destruction of human bodies with genuine zest; their language was permeating…overwhelming, frankly. But I must quickly admit that while I found the instruction initially shocking, I did not find it altogether repelling, in fact quite resonant. It struck a chord deep within me, a part of me that seemed to already understand this obvious truth: To master one's reluctance to take life, one must stop revering life so much, particularly that of an enemy.

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* Interestingly, by Vietnam, the face of battle changes significantly away from the conventional forms of WWII and Korea, thereby reducing the importance of the concept "Fire Superiority" in the overall war. However, Fire Superiority remains, even today, a significant element of maneuver warfare and in firefights within nonconventional operations; therefore, desensitization remains a staple of military training.

What I found early on in my service was that this unseemly dimension of war, so often unpalatable to civilians, was almost universally taken for granted within the Marine Corps by everyone from private to general. And of course the explanation was simple: It had to be. Defending well—our essential calling—meant fighting well; this, in turn, meant killing well, which ultimately meant nurturing our more primal selves. It made perfect sense, especially when one took into account Marshall's revelations from WWII.

In *Packing Inferno: The Unmaking of a Marine*, I wrote about the flare, the downright enthusiasm, with which we trained ourselves to gouge eyeballs from our enemies' sockets and crush—literally obliterate—their skulls with the heels of our boots as they lay quivering on the ground. The higher a Marine could swing his leg up into the air and the deeper his heel sunk into the dirt, the more congratulations he received, and, in turn, the more virile he most certainly began to feel. In response to this passage, I received an email from a former Marine who I'd recently become friends with. He served as a rifle company commander, like me, back in the nineteen-fifties and was displeased by my characterization of Marine Corps training.

He wrote, "Even as a former infantry officer who has been shot at and has fired back, I found this image of a lust to gouge out eyeballs, and to thrust bayonets into real bodies, very off-putting. It sounded *un-Marine* to me. Though there had been some bayonet fighting in Korea, our training in that area was perfunctory. And though we came out of our training determined to be very good Marines, I don't think we were ever encouraged to think of ourselves as, or be, bloodthirsty. In my day, we prided ourselves, I thought, on cool professionalism that didn't depend on hating an enemy." This former Marine's name was Daniel Ellsberg.

It is, of course, possible that he has simply forgotten what things were really like back in his own day—it was, after all, a long time ago—or that he has clung to a nobler myth in defense of his generation of Marines. It is also possible that he's just plain wrong. But I don't think he is. Ellsberg's description to me of the general attitude toward war when he was a Marine matches very closely with the findings of S.L.A. Marshall, and it was exactly this attitude that made American combat units *inefficient*, and, therefore, exactly the attitude that the military sought to, and successfully did, drive out. By the time I arrived to recruit training "cool professionalism" was no longer the eminent characteristic desired in a young Marine. I'd say it was closer to cold-heartedness.

The point is not that all men going through recruit training become merciless killers; in fact, many make concerted efforts not to be. Each individual arrives with his own capacity to resist the

reconfiguring of his consciousness, but the margins for behavior are narrow within the profession of arms. A soldier is either striving to make himself a better killer or he is resisting. Because the military is not a stagnant outfit, the soldier's mind cannot be stagnant either; it is always in flux; it is always either moving toward a fight or already in one. In such an environment, some men will turn out to be more enthusiastic killers than others. But in the days of Daniel Ellsberg those individuals might seem odd, out of place, or just plain crazy. In today's efficiency-conscious military, they are more likely to fit right in.

However, the pure efficiency model has its obvious limitations. At the furthest reaches of what one might think of as a sensitivity continuum is a total numbness to all carnage, even the deaths of one's own comrades or loved ones. For the moment, at least, our society still deems that an intolerable place. The individual who strays into such territory, no matter how efficiently he might kill on our behalf, will quickly find himself dubbed "psychotic" and confined or expelled outright. Evidence of this boundary exists fairly prominently within the military.

In training, for example, the most common case made for doing one's job well is to save the lives of one's fellow soldiers. That the mission takes priority over life is always taken for granted among combatants, but it is acceptable and, in fact, encouraged to make an effort to accomplish the mission efficiently enough to save as many lives in the unit as possible while doing so. It is important to point out, I think, that "saving lives" in the military, particularly at the ground level, is not done merely in the spirit of preserving firepower, but out of a genuine desire not to see friends die. As often as Marines chant "Kill" in training, they don't really mean everybody. This is a point so apparent that it tends to divert attention from the military's rather paradoxical task—to train its soldiers to want to kill, to want it badly enough to do it reflexively in combat, but not to want it *too* badly.

At home there is a similarly ambiguous view of the deaths in war. Despite the very obvious perils of battle, American society, while fond of victory, is generally reluctant to confront the bloodshed that goes with it. For example, our soldiers killed in action may be displayed in photographs wearing their dress-uniforms, but they may not be shown mangled, bloody, or in flag-draped coffins. Ironically, the enemy's casualties, often far greater in number than our own, are shrouded even more carefully from the public eye. They are practically non-existent in the American consciousness, either as reliable statistics or as maimed bodies. They disappear from the world with hardly a trace other than within our own soldiers' gallant stories in which they were killed. Such stories of battle, where lives are

concurrently taken and saved, offer the most visible boundary between the lives a soldier may revere and those which he is forced to dismiss.

On the battlefield, the deaths of a soldier's comrades are always dealt with in the most solemn manner. It is acceptable (though not necessarily required) to lament the loss of life, feel grief, and even, to a limited extent, deplore the cruel nature of war. Conversely, the enemy's death is meant to be regarded with indifference and sometimes even amusement, which was precisely the aim of the desensitization in training. Civilians, however, living in the theater of war, occupy a strange space in a soldier's mind. As non-combatants they must be protected and, therefore, their lives partially heeded; but, when they are killed, either inadvertently or by way of some calculated risk, their lives are swiftly sloughed off as "collateral damage" and forgotten. Such an ambiguous posture is often unavoidable on the battlefield where "objectives" always supersede life. This was the gray area that I became intimately familiar with in Iraq.

In 2005, after twelve years of active service in the Marine Corps and with growing reservations about the war, I relinquished command of my rifle company and resigned my commission. It struck me that, in our headlong pursuit to deliver freedom and democracy and to expel an oppressive regime and combat terrorism, we had inadvertently lost sight of the very people we'd been deployed to help. Because the conflict was unconventional and because our adversaries wore no uniforms and were indistinguishable from the local populace, in our struggle to survive, we began to view all people as a threat and therefore with suspicion. The distinction between the lives we could revere and those we were compelled to dismiss suddenly became blurred. This was problematic amidst an operation, in which gaining popular support, as a method to undermine insurgents, was the paramount task put forth by the Counterinsurgency Manual.

A few years after I returned from the Middle East, I met an independent journalist named Daniel W. Smith, who had just returned from his tenth visit to Iraq since the occupation began in 2003. To a small audience, he described his movements through the provinces, through the war, and among its many opposing factions, utterly alone and unarmed. He admitted his Arabic was minimal. His skin was very white. His head was clean shaven giving him an almost military appearance. We were astonished by the courage it must have taken to live as he did, so vulnerably. "How did you do it?" we asked. And Daniel said, "When I walk around, I don't wear sunglasses or a hat. I try to keep my face very open. I keep my expression very open. Really, that is my only defense."

His account drew attention to the stark contrast between his affect in Iraq and that of a typical American soldier donned in heavy protective gear, helmet, and dark ballistic sunglasses or goggles and bearing an automatic weapon. Daniel observed that the only occasion in which he ever noticed Iraqi people genuinely frightened of him was when he was traveling with a U.S. military detachment. To accomplish the type of work he was trying to accomplish and make the types of human connections he wanted to make, he knew that that presence was not helpful. And having noticed this contrast, it would be impossible for me to avoid spotting one of the most fundamental paradoxes we faced in Iraq. To achieve our military objectives there, to *win hearts and minds,* for instance, or to befriend and ingratiate ourselves among the locals, or be empathic, our forbidding comportment would also not be helpful—more than that, it would be distinctly counterproductive. Not only did our closed manner exclude the humanity of the Iraqis, but it excluded our own humanity, as well. For a combat unit, particularly one under perpetual threat of attack, that is precisely the point. Daniel's way would have been simply too risky.

2004, the year I was deployed to Iraq, was a truly violent time there. The killing on all sides was rampant. Our own casualties mounted quickly, predominantly from the ubiquitous Improvised Explosive Devices (a.k.a. roadside bombs). I remember clearly the first Marine they brought back to base with his skull broken open by shrapnel. And even more clearly than that, I remember the hatred churning in my gut for those who did it. The trouble was, of course, that we didn't actually know who did it. I think it was difficult not to make the entire Iraqi population the collective scapegoat for this one Marine's death. It would never have been expressed in exactly that way, but the attitude was most definitely present. As our frustration swelled, our operations shifted conspicuously from humanitarian (stability and nation-building) to a fierce battle of wills with the insurgents and, by definition, with the populace in which they concealed themselves. The more casualties we took, the heavier our hand became with the locals, and consequently the more recalcitrant they grew.

During the same period, about one hundred miles north of our Area of Operations, a U.S. Army commander named Lieutenant Colonel Nathan Sassaman was leading his battalion (1-8 of the 4th Infantry Division) through the same set of challenges in Samarra. He quickly gained a reputation among Americans and Iraqis alike for dealing with defiance harshly. He once said to *New York Times* journalist Dexter Filkins, "With a heavy dose of fear and violence, and a lot of money for projects, I think we can convince these people that we are here to help them." Sassaman retired in 2005 after being officially reprimanded for having covered up an incident in which Soldiers of his had forced two Iraqi men to

jump into the Tigris River. It was punishment for having broken the American curfew. One of the men was alleged to have drowned.

Sassaman wrote in his recent book *Warrior King*, “We clearly lost sight of our primary purpose—to destroy the enemy with overwhelming force at every opportunity—and somehow drifted toward a twisted policy that aims to make the fight as fair as possible.” Though his comments and the corresponding behavior of his unit were viewed, by many, as excessive relative to his contemporaries, they were not inherently different. They were, I think, just further along the same trajectory, a trajectory on which all units in Iraq are ultimately propelled. Certainly, my unit too meted its fair share of violence. Even our handles hinted at our aggressive tendencies. Sassaman was called the “Warrior King” and in my unit, we were called the “Warlords.”

The Counterinsurgency Manual does anticipate some of what I’m describing. The authors clearly understand that any military occupying a country using excessive force will soon be subverted by its people. They offer useful maxims like, “Sometimes the more force is used, the less effective it is,” and remind commanders that the nature of a counterinsurgency is quite different than that of a conventional battle. The manual advises that “judgment [on how much force to be used] involves constant assessment…and troops may have to exercise increased restraint.” Such words seem to imply deep insight into the minds of the occupied, but what I learned in Iraq was what is missing from the text—any insight at all into the minds of the occupiers. It does not account, for example, for the military’s response to S.L.A. Marshall or the intense culture shift and decades of desensitization that followed. It does not account for the hatred that soldiers will feel in the wake of their fallen comrades, or the frustration, or the fear, or the hunger to survive. It does not anticipate the incompatibility of an inured force, such as the American military has become, with principles that require at least some level of sustained empathy.

And yet, for all its shortcomings, the book itself is not the problem; it merely points to the problem: the irreconcilable nature of the modern warrior and the modern objectives he is sent to achieve. Contrary to current military doctrine, empathy and aggression do not go hand in hand. The more extreme one’s environment, the more obvious this becomes. In other words, it is not possible to reduce one’s regard for an *enemy’s* life without reducing one’s regard for *all* life. And it is not possible to genuinely strive to help a people, to reach out to them, while simultaneously preparing to kill them. One cannot achieve excellence in both war and humanity at the same time.

http://www.progressive.org/mag/boudreau0209.html