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Section: PERSPECTIVE

The ethical compass of American warriors: THE MORALIST

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As the United States military investigates the alleged massacre of Iraqi citizens in Haditha by a group of Marines, it's important to ask some basic questions about our troops: Have we trained them adequately to handle the ethical challenges of war? If not, what more can we do?

It's too early to draw conclusions about the events in Haditha, but credible witnesses contend that the death of a Marine in a roadside explosion last November sent his comrades on a shooting rampage that killed women, children and other innocent people who happened to be in nearby houses and a taxicab.

Had the Marines in question not joined the armed forces, chances are they would never have taken a human life. But these men chose to become fighters. They were trained to kill, then issued guns. With those weapons came a sacred trust.

One risk in war, of course, is that self-proclaimed defenders of freedom will turn into vicious criminals. Sudden rage and fear crack the moral compass. Guilt and shame lead to deception and lies. Because battle is full of such emotions, service members can easily lose their way.

Military leaders know this. Last week, U.S. Marine General Peter Pace, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told a group of Marines that investigations into the deaths of innocent civilians force us to "to revisit ourselves and see where we are on our moral compass."

Morally speaking, where are the young men and women sent to fight the nation's toughest battles? Where are their leaders? The answer, it seems, is that they are at risk of slipping toward brutality, and the military command in Iraq has set aside this month for a "refresher course" in battlefield ethics and "the values that separate us from our enemies." According to

Gen. William Caldwell, spokesman for the multinational force in Iraq, all 150,000 coalition troops - including 130,000 Americans - will participate.

Not a moment too soon. With no end in sight to the war in Iraq, and with no better policing strategy in place, our young troops are ordered to engage in house-to-house and street combat against dangerous insurgents.

They are not supposed to kill "non-combatants," and they are supposed to avoid the "collateral damage" of civilian loss of life, even though insurgents often blend into the civilian population. Yet Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki charges that coalition forces have little respect for life or property and are "killing on a hunch or a suspicion."

Our troops are supposed to be equipped with the right values before they get to Iraq, but the military doesn't rely on the values learned from families and clergy. Ethics is a notable part of the training of officers and enlisted men and women.

Take the Marines, for example. Education in military and philosophical ethics is included in the formal curriculum of the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis, where many Marine Corps officers spend their discipline-filled undergraduate years. Prominent civilian ethicists are invited to Annapolis to broaden and deepen the academy's offerings.

Ethics education is not just reserved for elite leadership training. From the first day of boot camp, Marine recruits are drilled in the official "core values" of honor, courage and commitment. These values are described on the Marine Corps' Web site:

Honor: "Marines are held to a high standard of the utmost ethical and moral behavior. Honesty and honor are held in great regard. Respect for others is essential. . . . Every Marine is accountable for his or her actions"

Courage: "Courage . . . is the mental, moral, and physical strength ingrained in Marines. It steadies them in times of stress, carries them through every challenge and aids them in facing new and unknown confrontations."

Commitment: "Commitment . . . is what impels Marines to serve our country and the Corps. Every aspect of life in the Corps shows commitment, from the high standard of excellence to the vigilance the Marines show for training."

Military values sound very good in theory. But the real test is whether they reliably guide conduct. When U.S. service members are involved in prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib or accused of committing atrocities in Haditha, we have to wonder if the training provided stateside is good enough to prepare our soldiers for the challenges of war.

Some of our military leadership may believe that atrocities are flukes committed by a few bad apples and that they say nothing about the quality of ethics training overall. Maybe they're right. But it isn't too much to hope that the need to improve both ethics training and the evaluation of fitness to serve is being considered at the highest levels.

If the lessons taught in the relative calm of the academy or training camp aren't effective, there is nothing a short refresher course in the theater of war can do to help. In all likelihood, it's too little, too late.

It's hard to imagine anything harder than teaching someone to be both effective in killing and respectful of innocent human life. But we either have to keep trying or give up the ugly business of war.

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