

The Military Police Contribution to Moral Readiness in Just Large-Scale Combat Operations

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Introduction

With Large-Scale Combat Operations (LSCO) looming on the threat horizon of our increasingly unpredictable world, the nation looks to the U.S. Army to meet any challenge. Maximizing moral readiness for LSCO enables us to meet such challenges with lethality while honoring the principles enshrined in our nation's founding documents. The U.S. Army's Military Police (MP) Corps' connection to the cardinal virtues of justice and prudence throughout the range of LSCO ensures our inevitable victory reflects our ethical principles.

In this paper, I consider how the just war principles of legitimate authority, right intention, and distinction exemplify the MP Corps' contribution to the Army's "ethical application of land power."¹ MPs support the nation's and commanders' legitimate authority through assisting good order and discipline. MPs assure right intention by focusing on human dignity across the range of military operations. MPs assist in distinction by providing expertise in economy of force from the law enforcement (LE) mindset. The Military Police moral foundation, reflected in the MP Code of Ethics² and earned through hard lessons in the Global War on Terror (GWT), substantiates that any time we unleash the horrors of American war, our enemies know that our rightly measured lethality reflects the "most powerful force for good in human history."³

A Quick Review of the Just War Tradition

Anchoring ourselves in the Just War Tradition (JWT) clarifies the Military Police role in a just LSCO. "For a war to be just, three things are required, namely the authority of a prince [legitimate authority], a just cause, and upright intention."⁴ War is never good, but is narrowly allowed on moral grounds when considering a much worse alternative. Therefore LSCO "could hypothetically be obligatory and even virtuous" if it meets such conditions.⁵ Building on the historic foundation laid by Augustine through Aquinas, later thinkers add proportionality, meaning force that matches the provocation or the military necessity, and distinction between combatants and noncombatants, to JWT criteria.⁶

As members of the profession of arms, we recognize the brutality of LSCO but also its unfortunate necessity. Writing in late 1930s Britain, C.S. Lewis, an Oxford professor and World War I veteran, remarked "if war is ever lawful, then peace is sometimes sinful."⁷ Citing J.S. Mill, our current Secretary of Defense similarly notes that "war is not the ugliest of things," but much worse is "the degraded state of moral and patriotic feeling that thinks nothing is worth a war."⁸ The fierceness of American lethality is not the worst of things, for it is the forerunner of peace. LSCO unrestrained by justice and prudence, however, is the worst, for it forfeits any chance of a lasting peace. As MPs "assist, protect, and defend,"⁹ they secure the Army's moral readiness, even in dreadfully lethal LSCOs. By keeping us connected to the virtues of justice and prudence,

MPs win a peace that honors our founding documents.

Military Police as Guarantors of Legitimate Authority

Only legitimate authorities can prosecute just wars.¹⁰ Private individuals enjoy access to their country's justice systems to adjudicate disputes. Sovereign powers, like nation-states, thus include violence in their legal purview, and designate militaries and law enforcement agencies with the professional jurisdiction over violence.¹¹ MPs find themselves at the center of this Venn diagram, embodying America's legitimate authority as the guarantor of

lawfully employed violence.

The United States' legitimate authority extends from sovereignty sourced in the U.S. Constitution. In the Preamble, "provid[ing] for the common defence" reflects the Constitution's key to America's sovereignty. One also notes that "establish Justice" comes before "common defence" in the Preamble, with "insure domestic Tranquility" in between. The authority to justly wage war comes from Congress's power to declare war and establish the Uniform Code of Military Justice and, in the President's role as Commander-in-Chief.¹² For our ethical foundations in legitimate authority, Military Police connect constitutional principles of defense to justice by securing a lasting peace in domestic tranquility.

With the Constitution establishing the ethical principle of legitimate authority, the Army maintains the legitimacy of LSCO through ethical conduct. Even if the republic for which we stand continues unquestioned, our legitimacy suffers when we conduct LSCO with wanton disregard for moral readiness. Further, eschewing limits on ethical conduct has strategic consequences¹³ and disconnects us from the JWT, even if LSCO legitimately started with the best of intentions. MPs keep military authority legitimate as the Army's law enforcement conscience, embodying the continued presence of justice even while at war. Neglecting justice in war threatens the sovereign authority of the United States and our moral standing towards our allies, toward our enemies, and even toward our own Soldiers charged to uphold the Army Ethic.¹⁴

The legitimate authority for LSCO extends from the Constitution to Congress to the Commander-in-Chief to the commander on the battlefield. In order to execute LSCO well and faithfully, the commander must establish good order and discipline. "War may be hell, but soldiers deserve a predictable form of rule-based discipline."¹⁵ Commanders carry the responsibility to enforce these rules, and MPs "operate in support of commanders to establish and maintain an orderly environment in which commanders and their forces can operate with minimal threat interference."¹⁶

The Military Police Code of Ethics ensures MPs support commanders with "the highest standards of Soldiering" and "Protect fellow Soldiers in a manner that is Fair, Courteous, and

Impartial."¹⁷ MPs do this because "[a]rmies without discipline are mobs; killing without legal and moral grounds is murder."¹⁸ Army doctrine trains MPs to anchor us to our values in the midst of the chaos of war, and ensure good order and discipline the face of the inevitable disorder of LSCO.¹⁹ MPs assisting with good order and discipline focus our lethality like a sharpened sword in a manner that reflects our legitimacy and honors our founding principles.²⁰

Right Intention – Our Values Expressed as Disciplined Lethality

I often remind students at the U.S. Army Military Police School that the purpose of the U.S. Army is to fight and win the nation's wars and secure a lasting peace.²¹ Our legitimate authority means we provide for the common defense through establishing justice. Today, we say Peace through Strength.²² Whenever we must unleash the full arsenal of American might, the Army Ethic validates that our intention is never wanton violence but disciplined lethality toward just goals. MPs put our national philosophy into action by embodying justice on the battlefield. "When we act morally, we are better than our philosophy."²³ Rather than setting aside our Army Ethic in pursuit of victory, our right intentions are the blood in our muscles that assure our victory. Guided by the ethical principle of right intention "prevents less honorable motives like bloodlust or the love of violence for its own sake."²⁴ The Warrior Ethos, as expanded into the Soldier's Creed,²⁵ reflects measured violence in service of our values, not values in service of our violence.

"The surest sign of good intentions in war is restraint in its conduct."²⁶ As MPs lead in the Protection Warfighting Function, they provide measured restraint to maintain our right intentions. "Soldiers fight best when they are disciplined and controlled, not wild and frenzied."²⁷ As we develop the moral muscles required to fight LSCO ethically, our restraint enhances our lethality not by limiting it but by properly focusing it. Consider how a parachute harness, along with the disciplined training before ever donning that parachute, restrains the paratrooper in the air but guides him into the battle on the ground. Our right intentions guide us before, during,

and after the battle not as constraints to victory but focusing us to victory as sure as gravity. Disciplined restraint enables the professional and moral Soldier to properly focus lethality through right intention.

The LE mindset provides this moral resource to the Army. “Police activities often complement other graduated response mechanisms that are intended to reduce violence and disorder within an area by mitigating the unnecessary escalation of force.”²⁸ MPs help commanders meet varied threats by offering varied response options. “The prudent and measured application of force is often critical to gaining and maintaining public support. Excessive force can alienate the population, undermine police efforts, and pose a threat to friendly forces.”²⁹ As experts in the measured application of lethality, MPs connect right intention to legitimate authority, upholding the Army’s ethical conduct even in the heat of unpredictable LSCO environments.

The right intention of our measured lethality brings LSCO to a swift and just conclusion, winning a victory that honors our people and our values. “The mix of lethal and nonlethal capabilities makes [MPs] relevant anywhere that a flexible force option is required.”³⁰ Military Police expertise in economy of force assists the Army morally by maintaining our connection to not only the virtue of justice but also prudence.³¹ MPs know when victory requires escalation or deescalation; when to use a hammer, or a scalpel, or handcuffs. Economy of force and distinction in the LE mindset protects our own by caring for the innocent, the enemy, and the criminal.

Distinction – Applying the LE Mindset to Ethical Victory

With ready lessons from World War II to GWOt, we anticipate that any LSCO will involve innocents on the battlefield and surrendering enemy combatants. “When soldiers no longer pose serious external threats – notably by laying down their weapons and surrendering – they may no longer be targeted with force and should, in fact, be extended what international law calls ‘benevolent quarantine.’”³² A full discussion of detention doctrine is beyond the scope of this paper, but remembering the MP Corps’ detention expertise ensures the Army maintains justice and safeguards human dignity – yes, even for the enemy – during the horrors of LSCO.

The LE mindset helps discern proper conduct and appropriate use of force across a varied enemy population. “Even during LSCO, enemy forces often blend into the civilian population [and] criminals frequently escape or are released from jails and prisons...”³³ MPs buy down risk and buy up ethical conduct for combatant commanders by leading the detainee mission. Assuring human dignity by treating our detainees in a humane manner allows maneuver commanders to focus on achieving overall victory.³⁴

“MP units support [commanders] by preventing the diversion or tasking of operating forces.”³⁵ Trained for combat but also in the LE skillsets of population distinction and care for detainees, MPs “preserve combat effectiveness” for the rest of the Army.³⁶ Upholding the appropriate use of force and taking proper custodial care of enemy detainees ensures the rest of the Army can maintain its morally proper focus on mission accomplishment and achieving victory.

Any call for ruthless lethality³⁷ makes sense in the heat of battle, but we must also know when to sheath our sword. To break our enemy’s will, we cannot simply meet barbarism with barbarism. “To speak more frankly, that’s just not the American way. The forces of civilization remain civilized even as they confront ruthless barbarism.”³⁸ As a lethal and morally ready force, MPs provide the Army that continuance of civilization, connecting us to the JWT principle of distinction.

Addressing Contrary Arguments

With the barbarism of GWOt still a fresh memory for many of us, some wonder if we can maintain justice while winning in LSCO. Even our new Secretary of Defense, before his appointment, voiced doubts about our ability to win while upholding ethical principles. “Makes me wonder, in 2024—if you want to win—how can anyone write universal rules about killing other people in open conflict?”³⁹ His frustration stems from American warfighters upholding JWT standards not expected of our enemies. “We are fighting with one hand behind our back – and the enemy knows it.”⁴⁰ An ethically bound U.S. Army, then, unnecessarily lengthens LSCOs because our moral standards slow us down on the march to victory. As I’ve presented the case, our MPs seem to hold that hand back.

To reiterate, lowering our standards to match our enemy's barbarism just isn't the American way, no matter if we face "enemies who fight like savages, disregarding human life at every turn."⁴¹ Matching our enemy's brutal standards doesn't reflect our professionalism nor our commitment to our teams or mission. Nevertheless, does our current Secretary of Defense suggest that we abandon our moral readiness or the role of MPs in order to achieve swifter victory in LSCO?

If he, and others sympathetic to that line of argument, suggest that we should field an undisciplined and unethically ruthless force that sacrifices moral readiness for increased lethality, we must reject that line of argument out of hand as an invitation to war crimes and a violation of the

Warrior Ethos. Yet, given other comments amplifying the Warrior Ethos⁴² I suggest that the Secretary of Defense can't mean that, and offer an alternative reading.

If Secretary Hegseth means honing our craft, refocusing our disciplines, and enhancing professionalism toward mission accomplishment, then this allows for right intention guiding swift victories through overwhelming lethality. When trained in moral readiness to face the horrors of LSCO, then we *can* "unleash them [our warriors] to win."⁴³ MPs help with this by retaining that tether of justice and prudence in the chaos of LSCO and in the fog of war.

If Secretary Hegseth wants our warriors "to get the overwhelming benefit of the doubt"⁴⁴ in the face of wartime mistakes, then we must provide them with moral readiness to match their physical readiness. Military Police secure both. Similarly, he also says "we should fight to win, or not go at all."⁴⁵ If we can't live up to the moral standards of American warfare, with MPs anchoring us to justice and prudence in the process, then he's exactly right – we shouldn't go at all.

The way we maximize the lethality of the American warrior is not to lower our moral readiness or unhinge us from the JWT, but rather to receive this same Secretary of Defense's guidance on the Warrior Ethos and on the power of America's founding documents.⁴⁶ We double down on the Soldier's Creed, the Army Values, and the MP Code of Ethics to defeat the enemy in action *and in philosophy*. In the same breath, every Soldier says "I am ready to deploy, engage, and destroy, the enemies of the United States of America in close combat. I am a guardian of freedom and the American way of life." We have a both-and, not an either-or, for if it is an either-or, our enemies defeat us *and* we forfeit our way of life. But with Selfless Service, Personal Courage, and by promoting "by personal example, the highest standards of Soldiering"⁴⁷ in our MPs, our moral readiness supports the American warfighter toward certain victory while upholding our American values in the process.

If our founding values remain "the most powerful force for good in human history,"⁴⁸ we should demand nothing less, reflected clearly in our moral readiness. Lessons learned in GWOt mean that this especially falls on the shoulders of the MP Corps. To repeat our mistakes undermines our intentions, dishonors our warriors, and enables our enemies who lay scorn on our founding principles. Undisciplined ruthlessness – enabled not by the Warrior Ethos but wanton violence, a lack of moral readiness, and becoming untethered from justice – stumbled us into atrocities like Abu Ghraib. Precisely because of prior mistakes, MPs must lead the way in preventing "adverse strategic impacts."⁴⁹

"The United States is capable of projecting its power like no other state can."⁵⁰ Every person on the planet must know that American warfighting is undeniably lethal and presents inevitable defeat to any enemy who is foolish enough to face us. Yet, *also*, conduct below our rigorous moral standards must be understood as so foreign to the American Warrior Ethos as to be unrecognizable to us in current and future fights. Winning in a way that creates more enemies or generates longer wars is no victory at all. Following through on this requires a well-honed moral foundation garnered through learning hard lessons tethered to justice and prudence, both which MPs exemplify.

Conclusion

Secretary Hegseth recently wrote that "The United States military was designed to act as the immune system of America's sovereignty...[as] the promise of consequence against foes of freedom."⁵¹ As argued above, Military

Police serve as the guarantors not just of our legal foundation of a just LSCO, but also the moral. As our anchor to the cardinal virtues of justice and prudence, MPs who are “Of The Troops and For The Troops” utilize the combat-honed LE mindset to ensure that our economy of force matches right intention. With MPs on our teams at every echelon, we win because of, *not in spite of*, our high moral standards. Our renewed commitment to the Warrior Ethos and our founding documents reflects this. By assisting, protecting, and defending our moral readiness, MPs guarantee that America’s immune system is functioning properly and doesn’t develop an autoimmune disease that undermines Peace Through Strength.

Endnotes

- 1 Department of the Army. *Army Leadership and the Profession (ADP 6-22 C1)*. Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2019, para 1-8.
- 2 Department of the Army. *The Military Police Code of Ethics*. Central Army Registry, April 1975. Accessed February 26, 2025, at <https://rdl.train.army.mil/catalog-ws/view/100.ATSC/7922CEA4-6758-4418-B8C4-73C3E7A9FAE5-1274429920420/gta1901-001b.pdf>, April 1975.
- 3 Hegseth, Pete. *Secretary Hegseth’s Message to the Force*. Washington DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, January 25, 2025, Accessed February 26, 2025, at <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/4040940/secretary-hegsethsmessage-to-the-force/>, 2.
- 4 Reichberg, Gregory M. “The Doctrinal Status of Just War in the Contemporary Teaching of the Catholic Magisterium” *Studies in Christian Ethics*, Vol. 37 (3): (2024) 484-506 II.II.40.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid, 488.
- 7 Downing, David C., “C.S. Lewis on War and Peace.” January 2, 2010, accessed February 25, 2025. <https://www.cslewisinstitute.org/resources/c-s-lewis-on-war-and-peace/>
- 8 Hegseth, Pete. *The War on Warriors*. New York: Broadside e-Books, 2024, xx
- 9 The Military Police Regimental Motto.
- 10 Reichberg, “The Doctrinal Status of Just War,” 487.
- 11 Lucas, *Military Ethics*, 182-185.
- 12 U.S. Constitution, Articles I, Section 8, Clauses 11 and 14, and Article II, Section II.
- 13 *cf* Department of the Army. *Military Police Operations (FM 3-39)* Washington DC: Department of the Army, 2019, p. 2-20, para 2-66.
- 14 Dept. of the Army, *Army Leadership and the Profession (ADP 6-2, C1)*, p. 1-7, Table 1-1.
- 15 Orend, Brian. *The Morality of War*. Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, 2006, 134, sic.
- 16 Dept. of the Army, *Military Police Operations*, p. 1-1, para 1-2.
- 17 *The Military Police Code of Ethics*, Clauses 6 and 5
- 18 Vineyard, Jared L. “The ETHICAL Warrior.” *INFANTRY*, Fall 2020: 45, quoting General Stanley McCrystal.
- 19 *cf* Lucas, *Military Ethics*, 102-106.
- 20 Orend, *The Morality of War*, 112.
- 21 Dept. of the Army, *Army Leadership (ADP 6-22)*, p.1-1, and *cf The Army (ADP 1)*, throughout.
- 22 Hegseth, *Message to The Force* (25 January 2025).
- 23 Kreeft, Peter. *Back to Virtue*. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1986, 25.

- 24 *cf* Lucas, *Military Ethics*, 84.
- 25 <https://www.army.mil/values/soldiers.html>
- 26 Orend, *The Morality of War*, 116, quoting Walzer.
- 27 *Ibid*, 178.
- 28 Dept. of the Army, *Military Police Operations*, p. 1-11, para 1-36.
- 29 *Ibid*.
- 30 *Ibid*, p. 1-13, para 1-48.³
- 31 *Ibid*, p. 2-3, para 2-5.
- 32 Orend, *The Morality of War*, 110.
- 33 Dept. of the Army, *Military Police Operations*, p.2-20, para. 2-63
- 34 A worthy discussion of Diplomatic, Informational, Military, Economy (DIME) could flow from here.
- 35 *Ibid*, p. 2-21, para 2-67.
- 36 *Ibid*, p. 2-21, para 2-66.
- 37 Hegseth, *War on Warriors*, 184.
- 38 Orend, *Morality of War*, 112.
- 39 Hegseth, *War on Warriors*, 180, sic.
- 40 *Ibid*.
- 41 *Ibid*.
- 42 Previously cited SECDEF memos dated January 25 and January 29.
- 43 Hegseth, *War on Warriors*, 183.
- 44 *Ibid*.
- 45 *Ibid*, 184.
- 46 Hegseth, Pete. *Restoring America's Fighting Force*. Washington DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, January 29, 2025, Accessed February 26, 2025 at <https://media.defense.gov/2025/Jan/29/2003634987/-1/-1/1/RESTORING-AMERICAS-FIGHTING-FORCE.PDF>, 2.
- 47 *Military Police Code of Ethics*, Clause 6.
- 48 Hegseth, *Restoring America's Fighting Force*, 2.
- 49 Dept. of the Army, *Military Police Operations*, p. 2-21, para. 2-66.
- 50 Elshtain, Jean Bethke. "Military Intervention and Justice in Equal Regard." In *Religion and Security: The New Nexus in international Relations*, edited by Robert A Seiple and Dennis R. Hoover, p.115-130. Oxford, UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004, 128.
- 51 Hegseth, *War on Warriors*, xiv.