

The Eyes of the World are Upon You: Effectively Communicating a Just War Framework

by Jon Butler

Introduction

Rules of engagement are not enough to serve as a just war framework. They often lack meaningful communication and are far too easily broken in an operational environment that relies upon mission command. The extreme nature of war demands a character-driven ethic that is purposefully communicated to the troops down to the lowest level. To be sure, there must still be rules, but societies and nations who send their soldiers to war must be ethically fueled by more than legalism. The leader's role is to speak to that greater vision. The harsh and existential realities of war demand a deliberate virtue ethic that can be comprehended at all ranks and positions. This paper highlights a historical example as a case study in ethical communication in the form of an accessible just war framework during times of armed conflict.

The Problem

The problem this paper addresses is that of articulating a character-based ethic during times of armed conflict. The tendency of military leaders to be laconic in their communication is a double-edged sword. While operational tempo requires shorthand, abbreviation, acronym, and the like, there are mission essential moments that require a well-spoken and purposeful word from the leadership. Those moments are ethical moments as rules fall short at such times. Not only do rules serve as a mere baseline ethic, but those rules are also often delegated to legal representatives, like the Judge Advocate General's Corps, or JAG. While rules have their place, they can change with circumstances and are not considered "Gospel." The so-called "Standing Rules of Engagement" are not well publicized, nor are they very accessible through the Joint Doctrine Library.¹ On a practical level, rules can simply be unknown, misunderstood, or ignored in an environment where soldiers are spread out and far removed from higher command authorities. Unfortunately, one does not have to look too far to see warriors on any side from a variety of conflicts breaking the rules of engagement in austere environments with the absence of accountability. The overall problem associated with preventing unethical behavior and supporting ethical conduct in warfare is significant. The more focused problem of this paper is miscommunication or a lack of communication and their impact on the mission.

The Ethical Triangle

Ethical theory plays a role in developing a more robust understanding of just warfare. In addition to a rule-based, or deontological approach to war fighting, there are two other essential theories that must be addressed. Consequentialism is a results-based ethic, concerned with victory in warfare. A virtue-based ethic is concerned with the character of the actors involved, whether that be the individual soldier, unit, or nation. The three underpinning ethical theories form what is known as the "ethical triangle."² It is understood here that all three ethical theories have a role to play in casting an ethical vision that can more effectively carry warriors during times of war. One key element of the ethical triangle is that it communicates in understandable language that there are key considerations in the application of force. While an operational just war framework that effectively communicates these important concepts can be difficult to find, it can be even harder to craft. Nevertheless, the quest must continue to get the best ethical tools into the hands of the warfighters who need to use them. Searching the archives of history produces one noteworthy example to learn from. We now turn to the rules angle of the ethical triangle before considering virtue.

The Benefits and Shortcomings of ROEs

Rules help to address the problem, but they cannot carry the weight of war. The rules of engagement (ROEs) are used by militaries to provide “left and right limits” and address the notion that it matters how they fight. Failure to follow the rules comes with consequences. Based upon aspects of just war doctrine, soldiers are sometimes provided with a pocket-carry version of ROEs that attempts to apply an accessible version of just war theory. This can be a good thing as rules help provide a common understanding of what not to do. It can also be argued that during the feverish pace involved with the preparation for war, something ethical is better than nothing ethical. ROE Cards can be a helpful tool to get everyone on the same page. Below, you will find a sample ROE Card from The Basic School of the United States Marine Corps³:

Supplemental Rules of Engagement Card (Sample) CFLCC ROE CARD

1. On order, enemy military and paramilitary forces are declared hostile and may be attacked subject to the following instructions:

a. Positive Identification (PID) is required prior to engagement. PID is a reasonable certainty that the proposed target is a legitimate military target. If no PID, contact your next higher commander for a decision.

b. Do not engage anyone who has surrendered or is out of battle due to sickness or wounds.

c. Do not strike any of the following except in self defense to protect yourself, your unit, friendly forces, and designated persons or property under your control:

- Civilians.

- Hospitals, mosques, churches, shrines, schools, museums, national monuments, and other historical and cultural sites. 24
Basic Officer Course B130936 Law of War/Introduction to Rules of Engagement Supplemental Rules of Engagement Card (Sample)
(Continued) CFLCC ROE CARD (Continued)

d. Do not fire into civilian populated areas or buildings unless the enemy is using them for military purposes or if necessary for your self-defense. Minimize collateral damage.

e. Do not target enemy Infrastructure (public works, commercial communications facilities, dams), Lines of Communication (roads, highways, tunnels, bridges, railways) and Economic Objects (commercial storage facilities, pipelines) unless necessary self-defense or if ordered by your commander. If you must fire on these objects to engage a hostile force, disable and disrupt but avoid destruction of these objects, if possible.

2. The use of force, including deadly force, is authorized to protect the following:

- Yourself, your unit and friendly forces.

- Enemy Prisoners of War.

- Civilians from crimes that are likely to cause death or serious bodily harm, such as murder and rape.

- Designated civilians and/or property, such as personnel of the Red Cross/Crescent, UN, and US/UN supported organizations.

3. Treat all civilians and their property with respect and dignity. Do not seize civilian property, including vehicles, unless you have the permission of company level commander and you give receipt to the property's owner.

4. Detain civilians if they interfere with mission accomplishment or if required for self-defense.

5. CENTCOM General Order No. 1A remains in effect. Looting and the taking of war trophies are prohibited.

REMEMBER:

Attack enemy forces and military targets.

Spare civilian and civilian property, if possible.

Conduct yourself with dignity and honor.

Comply with the Law of War. If you see a violation, report it.

These ROE will remain in effect until your commander orders you to transition to post-hostilities ROE.

There are clearly some benefits to having an ROE card and this example is a helpful one due to its thoroughness. It is accessible and could be printed out for distribution. What is missing is the “Why?” It is naïve to believe that since warriors carry with them a pocket-size version of the ROEs that they 1) understand them, or 2) see the deeper reasoning that ties them to just war theory, or 3) will commit to abiding by them, or 4) seek to go beyond the bare minimum requirements. ROEs are simply not designed to bear the ethical burden of war. As a starting point, ROEs only partially address the gap between just war theory and just war practice, so it is incumbent upon leaders to fill it with an accessible framework articulated from higher headquarters. Even in the beneficial example above, taken from the United States Marine Corps, the larger training document describes the purposes of rules of engagement as political, military, and legal. There is no ethical category listed.⁴ At their best, ROEs provide accessible conversation amongst units to discuss likely scenarios and how warriors should act and react. This is encouraged in the Marine Corps training document.⁵ Warfighters in the fog of war need ethical purpose, direction, and motivation communicated effectively from their leadership.

The Nature of War

The nature of warfare should provide the most careful and ethical description of why to fight (*jus ad bellum* or “just to war”) and how to fight (*jus in bello* or “just in war”). Terrible realities, glossed over by European nations in World War I for example, should give collective pause to the eagerness that sometimes characterizes the going to war. The weaknesses of a rule-based ethic are likely exposed when wartime realities surface. The de facto reliance upon ROEs in war is challenged by the very nature of what war is. Properly conducted battle is not a free-for-all, and the end does not justify the means. Just war practice does not subscribe to the popular phrase that “all’s fair in love and war.” Utilitarianism is not ultimate and rules do not satisfy, highlighting the need for virtue-based warfighting. Leaders must recognize how the nature of warfare requires ideas of substance to fuel a just war ethic that can withstand first and prolonged contact with the enemy.

The Code of the Warrior

Further evidence that warfighting demands something deeper than rules of engagement can be seen in what is known as a “code of the warrior.”⁶ Phenomenologically, there seems to be a sense of humanity that is culturally communicated in warfighting societies that goes beyond mere rules or regulations. These codes of honor are quite remarkable because they speak to the values and virtues of warriors that are deeply held and understood. Even while some wars and conflicts are more lawless than others, one still finds evidence of restraint stemming from such codes. Shannon French has demonstrated that these codes are widely used by cohesive people groups.⁷ In a large society with patchwork cultural identity, there is more importance placed upon *developing* organizational culture. Any sort of grassroots warrior code needs external validation. When a leader is building a coalition, messaging becomes more important in the modern mosaic environment.⁸ Without a meaningful, strong, and unifying message communicated to all levels of combatants, the *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello* easily become casualties of war. Through an analysis of an historic Order of the Day, this paper examines a past example of moral leadership rising to the occasion and speaking to a critical moment as the “eyes of the world” were upon the Allied Expeditionary Force.⁹

The Order of the Day

Perhaps the most well-known communiqué that addresses the moral conduct of war is Eisenhower’s Order of the Day given on the eve of D-Day. The printed version is seen in Figure 1 (page 20). The carefully worded Order served as succinct moral guidance for all 175,000 personnel who would take part in the Normandy invasion. It showed how just war guidance can effectively communicate deep words to a wide audience at the right time in history. Its brevity is a testament to its thoughtfulness and is a challenge to leaders at all levels to go and do likewise. The now-famous document continues to help articulate an ethical way ahead in three ways. First, it emphasizes character (virtue ethics). Second, it anticipates results (consequentialism). Third, it expects the rules to be followed (deontology). Eisenhower’s Order of the Day presents a battle-ready ethical framework in the just war tradition that emphasizes character while expecting victory in the process of carrying out one’s duty. It hits

SUPREME HEADQUARTERS
ALLIED EXPEDITIONARY FORCE



Soldiers, Sailors and Airmen of the Allied Expeditionary Force!

You are about to embark upon the Great Crusade, toward which we have striven these many months. The eyes of the world are upon you. The hopes and prayers of liberty-loving people everywhere march with you. In company with our brave Allies and brothers-in-arms on other Fronts, you will bring about the destruction of the German war machine, the elimination of Nazi tyranny over the oppressed peoples of Europe, and security for ourselves in a free world.

Your task will not be an easy one. Your enemy is well trained, well equipped and battle-hardened. He will fight savagely.

But this is the year 1944! Much has happened since the Nazi triumphs of 1940-41. The United Nations have inflicted upon the Germans great defeats, in open battle, man-to-man. Our air offensive has seriously reduced their strength in the air and their capacity to wage war on the ground. Our Home Fronts have given us an overwhelming superiority in weapons and munitions of war, and placed at our disposal great reserves of trained fighting men. The tide has turned! The free men of the world are marching together to Victory!

I have full confidence in your courage, devotion to duty and skill in battle. We will accept nothing less than full Victory!

Good Luck! And let us all beseech the blessing of Almighty God upon this great and noble undertaking.



Dwight D. Eisenhower

Figure 1. Letter from General Eisenhower on the eve of D-Day.¹⁰

all angles of the ethical triangle, while emphasizing the character of the conflict in understandable language.

It is noteworthy that Eisenhower began working on this Order in February of 1944.¹¹ This fact speaks to the intentionality of the document as the assault did not occur, nor was it planned to occur, for another three months. The Order was not only printed for all warriors, regardless of rank and Allied nationality. It was also read aloud by Eisenhower himself and sent over airwaves on June 6, 1944, ensuring everyone received the message.¹² The timing was precise in its delivery to ensure operational security and the widest dissemination. There was risk involved with the delivery, but it was worth taking.

The following is a brief exegesis of the Order. The purpose of the exegesis is to provide historical case study to support the argument that military personnel need an understandable just war framework communicated to

everyone from the higher command.

***Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force
Soldiers, Sailors, and Airmen of the Allied Expeditionary Force!***

The authority line is the highest command in the European Theater. This is significant for this paper due to the argument that higher headquarters must set the tone for ethical communication. The audience is joint and multinational. While Joint, Interagency, Intergovernmental, and Multinational (JIIM) is frequently used in military doctrine today, this was a substantial coalition the likes of which the world had never seen. It introduces a complexity into the equation that is identifiable today with diversified audiences and a pluralistic military in the United States.

You are about to embark upon the Great Crusade, toward which we have striven these many months.

Today's audience has a difficult time hearing about a "Crusade" of any sort, considering the controversy surrounding the Medieval Crusades (1095-1291) that left residual tension in Southwest Asia that remains to this day. In the 1940s until the early 2000s, the word "crusade" held some positive connotations as well and was used for several Christian school mascots, Billy Graham evangelistic events, and a ministry organization. The idea here is that there is a good purpose for the invasion and it satisfies the *jus ad bellum* requirements. This is the starting point for a just war framework because it sets forth a reason for why the service members are fighting. It should be noted here that just because something is labelled as a just cause (or in this case, a "crusade" against evil) does not necessarily mean that it is. The greater argument for the just cause of the liberation of Europe in World War II is beyond the scope of this paper but suffice it to say that if someone is looking for an example of a just war, they often look to World War II.¹³

The eyes of the world are upon you.

This is perhaps the most striking phrase in the communique because it sets forth the framework for accountability. It goes beyond the Articles of War (the predecessor of the Uniform Code of Military Justice).¹⁴ This sentence speaks to worldwide accountability which forms the basis for the Geneva Conventions (1949) and International Humanitarian Law (IHL). When talking about moral integrity, one does not have to go far before finding a quote about "who you are when no one is watching."¹⁵ This phrase is a challenge to the Soldiers, Sailors, and Airmen of the Allied Expeditionary Force to recognize that out of all the conflicts, these large-scale invasions had more eyes on it than any that had gone before.

The hope and prayers of liberty-loving people everywhere march with you.

In Christian theology, there is a strong ethical passage of Scripture that encourages believers to grow in their faith and to do the right thing by closely following the example of the "great cloud of witnesses" who demonstrated their faith.¹⁶ This part of the Order ties into the idea of prayerful throng of like-minded "liberty-loving" people who go with them in spirit.

In company with our brave Allies and brothers-in-arms on other Fronts, you will bring about the destruction of the German war machine, the elimination of Nazi tyranny over the oppressed peoples of Europe, and security for ourselves in a free world.

Your task will not be an easy one. Your enemy is well-trained, well equipped and battle-hardened. He will fight savagely.

The Order turns toward optimism, with the confidence of victory. One cannot escape the consequentialism found in the ethical triangle because winning still matters. The language sounds like it is coming from a football coach during a pre-game locker room speech. Yet optimism sobered by the reality of combat as this is no game. The message is that eliminating tyranny, liberating the oppressed, and establishing security for the Allies is a worthy and justified goal before the watching world. There will also be strong opposition.

But this is the year 1944! Much has happened since the Nazi triumphs of 1940-41. The United Nations have inflicted upon the Germans great defeats, in open battle, man-to-man. Our air offensive has seriously reduced their strength in the air and their capacity to wage war on the ground. Our Home Fronts have given us an overwhelming superiority in weapons and munitions of war and placed at our disposal great reserves of trained fighting men. The tide has turned! The free men of the world are marching together to Victory!

As he openly confesses the challenges that lie ahead, Eisenhower reminds his audience that times have also changed. When blitzkrieg forced Europe to capitulate, the Nazi war machine seemed unstoppable. Four years later the situation changed, and victory on the battlefield is now within reach. The enemy is not invincible and indeed has been weakened through campaigns. Not only is there reasonable hope of success, but the Allied troops are also reminded that the Home Front is behind them. This battle is not simply about tactics and maneuvers, but what we would today call a “whole-of-government” approach with a societal effort to provide logistical and scientific support to the war effort. There are trained reserve forces as well and the Soldiers, Sailors, and Airmen have reassurance that they are not alone in this effort. The world not only watches but is actively behind them in this effort. These are not empty words either, as the Supreme Allied Commander wields the war of words with accurate statements based upon truth rather than mere rhetoric.

***I have full confidence in your courage, devotion to duty and skill in battle.
We will accept nothing less than full Victory!***

Ike brings up the virtues of courage and devotion as something that the warfighters have. Although he is not an educational theorist, he utilizes here what is now known as the Pygmalion effect—the idea that people rise to the level of expectation.¹⁷ With the world watching, the enemy vulnerable, and a necessary victory, Eisenhower coaches the troops by upholding virtue with the expectation of “full Victory!” There is no other option. Their cause is just. The conditions are right. The timing is now.

Good luck! And let us beseech the blessing of Almighty God upon this great and noble undertaking.

A Clausewitzian “Good luck!” is added towards the end as a familiar send-off to all involved.¹⁸ However, the ending is not irreligious or irreverent. It welcomes prayer. Here we see that it is not only the eyes of the world, but there is a watchfulness of the Almighty God. The cause is understood to be great and noble, but the blessing of God is sought out and encouraged.

Ethos: The Character of the Speaker

One remarkable document written by Eisenhower helps ground the entire conversation and offers insight into the Order. Ike understood that the invasion could fail, and if it did, he wrote an alternative message that would be sent out should the invasion force be turned back. The message was never sent, as they secured the lodgment, but it provides a window into the leadership ethic at the same time as the Order.

The message reads: ¹⁹

Our landings in the Cherbourg-Havre area have failed to gain a satisfactory foothold and I have withdrawn the troops. My decision to attack at this time and place was based upon the best information available. The troops, the air and the Navy did all that Bravery and devotion to duty could do. If any blame or fault attaches to the attempt it is mine alone.

In this handwritten copy, Eisenhower reiterates the bravery and devotion to duty, while accepting responsibility if the D-Day mission “failed to gain a satisfactory foothold.” It reveals something about the Supreme Allied Commander, taken with the Order of the Day, and provides a key ingredient to the effective delivery of a just war framework—the character of the speaker.²⁰ An ethical analysis of these historic documents cannot be removed from the one who delivers the message(s). While World War II is often thought of as a just war, Dwight D. Eisenhower is often thought of as a leader of character. The two often reinforce each other as we search for bright lights in the dark spaces of war. It is fitting then that the most remarkable just war framework message

delivered on a large scale was given by Ike. One could hardly say that this is a coincidence. While certainly imperfect, he is historically regarded as a leader of stature in the landscape of the twentieth century.

VUCA Requirements

In a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) operational environment, it is even more important for a just war framework to be widely circulated and comprehended to prevent moral confusion. Failure to provide leadership beyond ROEs sends warfighters to battle with a very limited moral arsenal. Today's military leaders will do well to consider the framework communicated in the famous Order of the Day with its emphasis on victory through virtue. It is incumbent upon military leaders to continue the just war tradition and provide accessible frameworks that go beyond rule following.

Conclusion

Michael Walzer writes that for those at war, "the rules often don't seem relevant to the extremity of the situation."²¹ It is time to come to grips with the idea that rules of engagement simply do not meet the need for just war practice. As a starting point, they help with the "what?" but not the "why?" Eisenhower's Order of the Day stands out because in contrast, it rises to the occasion. The Order encompasses the ethical triangle with an emphasis on virtue-based wartime conduct in a thoughtful economy of 237 words. Eisenhower knew that the Expeditionary Force must answer to the world...and ultimately to God. Sending the message using both written and spoken words across the entire force set the tone for the invasion. Today if you go to Normandy, you see evidence that the invasion was necessary and just as ceremony after ceremony in early June remember those who covered the cost. This is in no small part thanks to Ike's leadership and awareness that warfighters need ethical purpose, direction, and motivation that cannot be manufactured. A coherent and believable message needed to be communicated at the precise moment when they needed it as "the eyes of the world" were upon them.

Endnotes

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- 5 United States Marine Corps, *LAW OF WAR/ INTRODUCTION TO RULES OF ENGAGEMENT B130936 STUDENT HANDOUT*, 24.
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- 19 "Message Drafted by General Eisenhower in Case the D-Day Invasion Failed and Photographs Taken on D-Day," accessed March 19, 2026, <https://www.archives.gov/files/education/lessons/d-day-message/>.
- 20 Christof Rapp, "Aristotle's Rhetoric," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2023, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2023), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2023/entries/aristotle-rhetoric/>.the so-called Peripatetic philosophers (see Fortenbaugh/Mirhady 1994
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