

## **Review - A Tactical Ethic: Moral Conduct in the Insurgent Battlespace**

Written by Harry Booty

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2011/10/25/review-a-tactical-ethic-moral-conduct-in-the-insurgent-battlespace/>

HARRY BOOTY, OCT 25 2011

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The conduct of America's wars today are fundamentally different from her wars in the past. Instead of major battles the duties of the forces deployed today are epitomised by small unit action, thus making the conduct of these small units of particular importance to the success of the mission. It is this issue that ***A Tactical Ethic: Moral Conduct in the Insurgent Battlespace*** by author and Vietnam veteran *Captain Dick Couch* attempts to deal with. In his handbook-style text he sets out the expectations and necessities that must govern US military conduct in places like Iraq and Afghanistan, the factors that may be behind the infamous failings in that conduct and what must be done by those in command to keep the possibility of these occurrences to an absolute minimum.

Captain Dick Couch served as a member of the US Navy as part of SEAL Team One from 1969 and during his active service he, as stated above, served in Vietnam as a platoon commander in his Team, and was involved in one of the few successful Prisoner of War rescue missions of the conflict. Following his release from active service he served in the CIA in various positions, as well as with the Naval Reserve, from which he retired from with the rank of Captain in 1997.

An interesting point to make here – and one which links into a point Couch himself makes – is that despite him carrying a relatively low-rank for a 'soldier-academic' – i.e. we would expect those from the higher echelons of the military hierarchy to write with authority – due to the nature of his subject – insurgent warfare and the conduct of small units – it is less a disadvantage and more the opposite, and his experience is much more relevant due to his close experience of much of his subject matter than a general or someone similar could hope to be; it is after all mid-level combat officers – the Lieutenants, the Captains and the Majors – that are of critical importance to the wars that are being fought.

With this in mind then, Couch's main themes and points are generally derivatives of the three areas discussed in the introduction – what should be happening, what has happened but shouldn't, and what can be done to prevent any reoccurrences. The author obviously uses different terminology to that used here, of which there are several major points, which can each be discussed in turn.

The initial and fairly pervasive theme of the book that permeates and leads to all the other judgements made is the centrality of the people in modern war. In a fairly Clausewitzian style, Couch stresses the importance of the people and their will. The way that war has changed – i.e. from major conventional operations for territory to lengthy, indecisive conflicts where trends of success are slow and incremental, and the object is not to 'take and hold' but to 'protect and persuade'. Troops in our modern conflicts are, as Couch states, much more akin to heavily armed policemen than combat soldiers. This recurs as ultimate justification and explanation throughout the book – for example by arguing the Coalition in Afghanistan should not use overwhelming force like the use of airpower for the potential damage it may cause to non combatants. This is of course nothing new – as said it is fairly reminiscent of Clausewitz in its terminology as well as being similar to authors such as General Mike Rose and Martin Van Creveld (authors of *the Utility of Force* and *On Future War* respectively) in content – but it is nevertheless it is a central theme – that the people are the prize, not the baggage of war and therefore have a new status in conflict.

The next major theme is that of 'pirates'. A term coined and frequently used by Couch, 'pirates' in this context is held to mean individuals who have skewed morals and commit actions wayward to the moral conduct of their unit. Couch likens these individuals to 'cancers' diseasing the body of the unit as a whole. It is these pirates which drive the actions of bad conduct – for example the military police at Abu Ghraib. They are few in number but devastating in impact – Couch utilises the existing concept of the 'strategic corporal' (i.e. low-level soldiers' actions having high level strategic effect) as evidence of how much impact they can have. This is another fairly pervasive theme which is felt throughout the text.

Another key point that Couch covers can be generally described as the clash between unit culture on the one hand and the training and moral courage of the individual on the other. As Couch – presumably with experience himself – states the bonds forged among men who risk for their lives for each other is often incredibly strong. Strong enough, it has been argued to condone misconduct, however severe, on the part of one's 'brother-warrior'. Against this we have the efforts of training which, Couch suggests, is focusing more and more on the moral conduct of its troops as well as the value of moral courage – i.e. 'doing what's right'. This is also excellently shown in the British film *the Mark of*

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*Cain* and as the film suggests and the author points out, the evidence of this clash is fairly negative – in other words, despite the best efforts of the authorities in charge of training the US soldier, marine or special operator, it is the culture and values of the unit of 'brother-warriors' that the recruit joins that often seem to win out. The unit cultures, it must be said, are almost always positive, or at the worst neutral. However there are a few units that contain the 'pirates' that Couch speaks of, and in the age of the 'strategic corporal', a few is all that is needed.

The final major area that should be considered is the style of the author and the general quality of the piece. This is fairly straightforward, as the text itself is similarly so. Firstly and most noticeably, it is short. Coming in at 111 pages minus appendices, *A Tactical Ethic* is much more of a pamphlet-style handbook rather than a full blown academic study, which affects its quality in both a positive and negative way. It does manage to be very accessible, taking little time to read and serving as a good introduction to the topic, but it does seem a bit stretched thin for what it tries to cover – for example Couch comments on the effect of the sport of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) as well as collective social psychology.

To conclude, due to his relevant military combat experience and mid-level command, Dick Couch is an individual well placed to deal with the issues of unit culture, training, combat experience, and the misconduct of the few, all of which forms the core of this text. Whilst the book does have several weaknesses – such as its depth in comparison to its short length – which do in essence limit it from being an outstanding text, it is nevertheless a very useful one as it provides a quick and easy-to-understand insight into a key issue affecting the US Military today. It is not a stand-alone authority on the issue of moral conduct in insurgency, but it certainly is worthy of being a supplement to or part of a list of texts on the topic.

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