



The Ironic Hindrance of Slaughter: A Case Study in Mission Command and Moral Autonomy

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If you affect valor and act with violence, the world in the end will detest you and look upon you as wild beasts. Of this, you should take heed.

—Emperor Meiji¹

The military has reveled in the notion of being a “band of brothers and sisters,” and rightly so. Camaraderie is the backbone of all worthwhile human endeavors, especially combat in a good cause. However, the time-honored traditions that make the military professional and *the good soldier* different from others depend on the operational ethics that have always separated the criminal who kills from one who kills with moral authority. We honor the soldier. The brigand, the bandit, the pirate, and the knave have always had an image morally distinct from the soldier, especially the citizen soldier and the professional. Even when soldiers did not and do not live up to the ideal of honor, our tradition has persisted in making the ideal plain. Our literature, our poetry, and our desire to remember our sacrifices always turn to the *good soldier*.

When Shakespeare makes the English King Henry V exhort his “band of brothers” to heroic action, he honors the soldier’s common faith, the moral standard. However, that ideal in literature stands in contrast to the real-world English terror-rides, called *chevauchée*, that Henry’s soldiers actually made upon the French population during the Hundred Years War.² *Agincourt* is synonymous with valor against the odds, yet history remembers that the English army’s *chevauchée* operations made the righteousness of Joan of Arc a real military possibility. History honors her above all other soldiers in the conflict.

Honor can only be given and received if a soldier deserves it. Therefore, in Shakespeare’s panegyric, the author makes the English King espouse a mature understanding of the Just War Tradition, and he presents it in argument to his soldiers while in disguise trooping the line.³ This Henry V is the heroic military leader of literature, the one soldiers aspire to every time they allude to our “bands of brothers and sisters.” We should not lose sight of the context in which the phrase was born. The military reality was that English depredations led to a strategic loss by rallying the French peasantry, and the French King and the nobility were able to boot the English off the continent with the moral superiority they held. They ended the war victoriously despite a century of almost unbroken tactical losses.

Disciplined Initiative. In mission command, the ideal is that the local commander wields the decision making authority to do what is best for local conditions within the commander’s intent. However, carried to the most effective level of the ideal of disciplined initiative, in a military sense, each and every soldier would understand in detail the commander’s vision, the mission at hand, and what is necessary for him or her to do to make that vision come about.

As war is a moral undertaking, a moral contest, decisions naturally carry a moral quality, an ethical quality. In our age, this ethical aspect of military action suggests that effectiveness in an operational context is forever and intractably connected to moral effectiveness, or what we might call “right action.” The honor involved in more than a decade of great sacrifice and its dissonance with the dishonor evident in acts of gratuitous cruelty visited on the natives of the conflict (and the concomitant strategic ramifications) have pushed the military into institutional reflection. This reflection has manifested itself in an examination of what really is the “profession of arms” and what really is its ethic. This ongoing effort runs parallel to recognition that the operational efficacy of and need for disciplined initiative in “mission command” warrants full attention in modern operational environments.



Operational autonomy devolved to any level will also include responsibility for right and wrong. This relationship is a practical, logical matter of primary importance in the age of instant information dissemination, an age in which atrocity and hypocrisy are not only bad but also hard to keep secret. The time to make the connection with *moral autonomy* is now.

Moral Autonomy

Timothy Challans demonstrates how the military can use moral autonomy to achieve right action in *Awakening Warrior: Revolution in the Ethics of Warfare*.⁴ Moral autonomy is not so much the idea that one acts independently, but more than that, one does so with moral authority stemming from reasoned principles. Moral autonomy, in ethics, is the ability to act on principle, not merely because of one's character, one's sympathetic imagination, one's reliance on tradition and values, or one's reference to example.

These non-principled elements of morality may factor into decision making as important and helpful, but only principle undergirds them all, and under duress, principle does not depend on external buttressing. In combat, one may come to see the rules of engagement as *ironic hindrances*, and when this happens, however internally, a soldier can lose his moral compass and his right to honor. Navigating in a world of ironies, it may be hard to avoid becoming morally jaded, numbed to the ethical reality in which military operations must occur. However, military leaders cannot ever allow such ironic detachment to overwhelm the ethics of the profession and the need to act on principle. Nowadays, this means squad leaders have to be experts at operational ethics.

The onus is on commanders to keep the discussion on ethics going and keep it relevant, much the same way the Army is trying to do with the Sexual Harassment and Assault Response and Prevention program. Command climate in an operational environment has a lot to do with sloppiness in sloughing off risk to noncombatants just as in the past the military sloughed off the risks of sexual assault onto the vulnerable within the ranks. I have no doubt the vast majority of American soldiers would do well, are doing well, in operational environments; the point is to minimize error (or crime as the case may be) not only for the sake of moral honor and but also for strategic effectiveness.

This conversation about operational ethics needs to be continuous and needs to be more visible to be effective. A morally jaded soldier still has to fight for strategic victory. With this in mind, command enforced ethics education should conscientiously prepare the squad leader for the day such principles will be needed. Military commanders should be fully engaged in aiming for such strategically sound action, and that means an ongoing commitment to education and honesty. Moral autonomy, in this sense, is a serious professional obligation as a *soldier attribute*, most importantly to rightfully accrue honor but also to attain strategic success. Worth reiterating is that moral autonomy will be essential for favorable strategic outcomes of future operations.

Regarding values and tradition, as an institution, recognizing the need for sympathetic imagination at the heart of morality is a good thing, but that recognition is only part of the equation—especially because “sympathy” (sometimes understood as compassion) will be, inevitably, misunderstood, misapprehended by soldiers in war. The Army has to make operational autonomy synonymous with serious moral responsibilities based on principles that transcend sympathetic imagination. This realization has to connect to strategic awareness. Obligations to persons, both noncombatants and enemy soldiers, must be met not as psychological ironies but as ethical realities that depend on one's ability to exercise moral autonomy. Respect for moral obligations and right action must occur regardless of one's loss of moral compass on an irony-laden battlefield.

Proper ethical execution of military operations, in the future, will be necessary for success. Operating more effectively will depend heavily on getting low-level Army leaders to act with moral autonomy, to be unafraid of being loyal to the legitimately ethical principles of international law, of the institution, and of the Nation's founding Constitution (principles of honesty, fairness, respect, restraint, and transparency where morality demands it). Simply being loyal to the appearance of ethics via the mouthing of “values” will not be enough. By operating more



morally in accord with specific principles, the Army will do business more efficiently, especially from the ultimate standpoint of strategy.

Case Study: Bloody Bill Anderson

The Kansas-Missouri border war leading into the American Civil War was a laboratory of the principles of disciplined initiative. In their book, *Bloody Bill Anderson: The Short, Savage Life of a Civil War Guerilla*, Albert Castel and Tom Goodrich detail the brief and sanguinary career of William Clarke Quantrill's former subordinate, and late-war competitor, William Anderson. Anderson's men demonstrated, in a handful of battles, the positive tactical effects of principles of disciplined initiative. But as the authors point out, his "bushwhackers were not soldiers, at least not in the normal sense. They killed because they liked to kill, and they were merciless."⁵ By default, they exhibited the varied goals that the U.S. Army would like to reach in preaching the virtues of mission command for small units, especially nowadays for the infantry squad.

Centralia, the tactical paradigm. In September 1864, William Anderson took his company of mounted guerillas to eastern Missouri in search of loot and revenge, but ostensibly to disrupt the rail network supplying Union troops and to cause distractions in anticipation of General Sterling Price's invasion from Arkansas, which intended to maneuver toward Saint Louis.

What is important from a "mission command" context is that Anderson's guerillas were all highly mobile, they all carried multiple multi-shot revolvers (their favorite weapon), they communicated through a system of signals, and they all knew what to do when the time came. They were all prepared to act independently in combat in support of tactical superiority aimed at operational success.

However, from the standpoint of moral autonomy, they were untrammelled by any sense of the laws of war or of common humanity. This too was part of what they regarded as military effectiveness, as the more trouble they caused and the more terror they spread, the more Union troops would be distracted from Price's invasion. Still the main motivation appears to have been the sheer joy of savagery and the desire to steal what they could. What they could not see was that their lawlessness was a critical strategic mistake.

The Battle of Centralia is the apotheosis of both the tactical and morale dynamics that bore military fruit for the Missouri bushwhackers at Lawrence and Baxter Springs in Kansas. Among the guerillas' battles, Centralia therefore best illustrates how mission command principles of disciplined initiative can work in action.

A Union commander, Major A.V.E. Johnston, with a company of 155 soldiers was near Centralia when Anderson's men were ravaging the town. He came into town and witnessed the slaughter that had occurred there and learned that Anderson's company had just departed. Johnston decided to pursue even after a Confederate sympathizer had ironically advised against it.⁶

Johnston followed the Confederates, thinking to catch them and force a battle in which his muzzle-loading Enfield rifles would outrange the guerillas' revolvers. However, Johnston's soldiers proved no match for the raiders. The guerillas acted instinctively in taking advantage of their weapons and their skill-enhanced cohesiveness—they were a band of brothers.

As Anderson's Confederates skirmished with Johnston, the contact drew some of the Union troops away. Johnston paused cautiously to regroup before proceeding each time. From the descriptions of the battle, it is clear Johnston was carefully keeping control of his company, wary of being tricked into a disadvantageous position. Nevertheless, the guerillas patiently drew the Union soldiers onward without ever revealing their true strength. As Castel and Goodrich describe it:

Intent on holding formation, Johnston and his officers failed to note the small but ever deepening ravines on either side of them and the increasing amount of brush and weeds that grew there. The soldiers reached the top of the ridge. Spread out before them lay a broad, open plain sloping gently a



quarter of a mile to a belt of trees along Young's Creek. From the trees, their horses moving at a slow walk, emerged lines of bushwhackers.⁷

There were around eighty of the Confederates currently facing Johnston's 115 men. Johnston dismounted his force and formed a line, sending his horses to the rear with twenty-three of his soldiers. He was at this point confident he could defeat the Confederate force. He arrayed his infantry in a double row and told them to fix bayonets. The Confederates dismounted, checked and prepared their weapons, removed the Union uniforms they wore as deceptive camouflage, rolled up their sleeves, and then remounted. Then they waited.

Johnston became impatient, but soon Anderson gave the order to advance. His cavalry came on slowly in a perfect line. Then another line of bushwhackers emerged from behind the first, but containing twice as many riders. Around the same time, lines of cavalry emerged from the ravines on either flank of the Union infantry. The Union troopers were terrorized by this sudden double-envelopment, and the one shaky volley they fired from their muzzleloaders struck only two or three of the 250-odd enemy bearing down on them at a gallop.⁸

As Castel and Goodrich say, the raiders opened up with their pistols at forty yards, and in mere seconds, they were over and through the Union line heading for the horse holders, all of whom were slaughtered.⁹ Most of the soldiers in the Union line broke and tried to flee. Johnston and a few others stood and fought to the end. It was over quickly, and no prisoners were taken, all captives being gruesomely butchered with knives almost immediately.

From a mission command perspective, it was a flawless operation. All Confederate sub-unit commanders knew exactly what to do and when to do it. All individual Confederates performed the minutest details for preparation and attack without having to be told what to do. In action, they behaved similarly to Mongols confronting Russian infantry during the Middle Ages—all cooperated toward attaining the objective.

There were no mistakes and no fratricides in this fight, probably owing partly to its small scale, but most likely because of the efficiency with which the Confederates acted. Once the order to attack came, every bushwhacker acted on his own initiative. Anderson's raiders were "professionals" in this sense, that they knew their weapons thoroughly, prepared thoroughly, understood the tactics, were expert equestrians knowing how to maneuver on the enemy, and they all understood exactly what had to happen to minimize their own casualties and to overrun the Union line. The irony is that many were drunk, having just ravaged the town and looted its stores, but their intoxication does not seem to have degraded their lethality or their way of fighting—an illustration of how deeply forged and practiced their methods were.

The bushwhackers lingered on the field only long enough to strip the dead and mutilate the corpses, and they returned quickly to the town to finish off the soldiers Johnston had left behind and any male civilians who stood in their way as they resumed drinking and looting.¹⁰ In the end, they had lost only three men, two killed outright in the charge, one mortally wounded. Ten others suffered wounds. The sole Union survivor of the massacre in town who was "reserved" for a prisoner exchange (Tom Goodman), managed to observe that the guerillas "possessed more in the way of military order and discipline than he had expected," and that "they were adept at caring for the wounded."¹¹ To maintain silence, he said, "they spoke to one another with strange hand signals and waves," and they made the woods their home, navigating by stars and by observing the way moss grows on rocks to navigate when the stars were not visible.¹² These bushwhackers moved in dispersion but converged uncannily whenever "a fight was in the offing."¹³ All of these observations indicate dreamt of virtues in realizing mission command.

Centralia, the strategic failure. After Centralia, the Union Army made every effort to eradicate the bushwhackers. Pro-Union terrorist groups also became far more active. The loss of the battle and the massacre in town were bad enough, but the dismembering mutilations that accompanied these events were stunning beyond compare, on par with the worst things seen in modern conflicts. The bushwhackers had also consistently exploited



the customary laws of war to surprise their adversaries, routinely using Union uniforms to gain the upper hand. They demanded surrender and then tortured and slaughtered those who did. Finding and eradicating the bushwhackers and all resistance to the Union became the main effort in Missouri. A Union force soon caught and killed Anderson, then photographed and mutilated his corpse.

The blowback from Centralia contributed to defeating Price's failed invasion at the Battle of Westport in October, but for the secessionists, it also led to the murder of anyone suspected of being a Confederate sympathizer. Reprisals back and forth after Centralia accounted for the depopulation of several counties in Missouri. By November, less than two months after the battle, Missouri had become a wasteland. Castel and Goodrich sum up the Battle of Centralia and its aftermath:

The Civil War produced many slaughters and many of them had much higher butcher bills. But few of them were as one-sided as this one three miles southeast of Centralia, Missouri, and none equaled it in gruesome, obscene viciousness. It was the war's epitome of savagery Quantrill . . . spread the word that he intended to go to Kentucky and would welcome good men to accompany him. Bushwhacking in Missouri, he declared, was "played out," whereas the Bluegrass state offered fresh fields of opportunity—meaning plunder. Moreover, should the war end—and it could not last much longer—the chances of being able to surrender without being executed as bandits afterward would be much better in Kentucky than in Missouri.¹⁴

Said another way, Quantrill understood that things had been taken too far in Missouri, that it was a strategic failure for him even if he did not understand its ramifications for Price and hope for the Confederacy in the western war.

Postscript. What Bloody Bill Anderson rendered at Centralia and elsewhere was similar to what the English *chevauchée* tactics rendered in France—*strategic failure*. In almost every sense, Anderson's actions were those of a terrorist, not a soldier, and his practices led to final defeat and helped contribute to a bitter reconstruction after the war. That the bushwhackers were effective as a Confederate military force can only be claimed at the tactical level, where their habits of disciplined initiative proved immensely successful. Since their moral methods contributed to failed operations and an abortive strategy, one must conclude—yet again—that military effectiveness has a moral component. From the standpoint of operational ethics, to honor these men, thinking of them as soldiers, is wrong. Few do. The bushwhackers were detrimental to Confederate strategy in the west just as *chevauchée* tactics of the English proved detrimental to their cause in the Hundred Years War.

Philosophy

The reality we live with and that which we desire to live with depend upon the actions we take and the lapses we allow. Just as tactics serve strategy, actions serve moral reality. Moral legitimacy serves political legitimacy, and war is wholly political. Therefore, the manner in which U.S. soldiers attain military objectives connect directly to the political and ethical reality the Nation aspires to. In this relationship, means connect to ends.

In this endeavor, one has to be wary of flawed arguments. To make the mistake of thinking that "taking the gloves off" is justified by the end we envision is the same thing as putting the cart before the horse. The institution is bigger than the individual is, morally speaking, and the actions of individuals in the name of the institution have to conform to a larger, loftier set of principles (and values, as the case may warrant).

Defending the Constitution of the United States "against all enemies, foreign and domestic," as military leaders are sworn to do, will entail action consistent with the principles espoused in the Constitution. Getting operations right includes getting ethical legitimacy right, as a strategic concern. The Constitution binds us to respect the treaties of the Nation, and that respect entails a commitment to principles enumerated as human rights. Being loyal to institutional obligations, legitimately held and time-tested principles of right action, regardless of one's



loyal to institutional obligations, legitimately held and time-tested principles of right action, regardless of one's individual feelings, is what the oath entails.

Mission command, as a way of doing business, must therefore include an ongoing education in these principles. The ethos and the ethics of the profession cannot be assumed away. Nor can a hope for right action be left up to values and law training alone. The reason for focusing better on ethics education about principles is that gaming the law will not do—and this often becomes the default position for those not imbued with principles, those for who the discussion is not much more than the layering of platitudes in unit training schedules.

Nor is there room for *ironic detachment* from ethical principles in this relationship—leaders, at least, have to be fully engaged in the integrity of morally correct action, eschewing a check-the-block mentality about abiding by the law of armed conflict. Even if they feel themselves ironically detached from the values embodied in adherence to principles, they cannot detach themselves from the obligation to act in accord with them. The Army and Marine Corps should make their main concern educating the force at the squad leader level and stewarding constant ethical operational awareness through education.

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NOTES:

1. "Primary Documents," *Japan at War: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Louis G. Perez (Santa Barbara, 2013), 532.
2. Patrick J. Shrier, "The Hundred Years War: An Analysis of the Causes and Conduct of the Longest European War," *Military History Online*, July 15, 2007, accessed 7 July 2016, <http://www.militaryhistoryonline.com/medieval/articles/hundredyearswar.aspx>.
3. William Shakespeare, *Henry V*. Act IV, scene i. In the scene, John Bates, Alexander Court, and Michael Williams—all soldiers at Agincourt—confront the king on the moral legitimacy of the battle and its likely effects.
4. Timothy Challans, "The Fully Reflective Life and Military Ethics," in *Awakening Warrior* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), 177.
5. Albert Castel and Tom Goodrich, *Bloody Bill Anderson: The Short, Savage Life of a Civil War Guerilla* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1998,) 1.
6. *Ibid.*, 88.
7. *Ibid.*, 89.
8. *Ibid.*, 91.
9. *Ibid.*, 92.
10. *Ibid.*, 93.
11. *Ibid.*, 105.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*, 106.



13. Ibid., 106.

14. Ibid., 133.