
The Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation Adds Ethics to the Human Rights Program

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“Building on the Democracy and Human Rights Program” described in *The Disam Journal* (Fall, Volume 27, No. 1, p. 137), The Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC) has added yet another block to an already outstanding program. In mid-2006, WHINSEC incorporated a two-hour class on Ethical Decision Making into the existing Democracy and Human Rights Program. The class is taught in all WHINSEC classes (about 1,000 Latin American and Caribbean military officers, police personnel and civilians each year) by the Institute chaplain and incorporates the following material.

The two-hour class opens with a scenario based on actual events that occurred in a Western Hemisphere country. In the scenario, an Army patrol enters a returned refugee camp by invitation from the refugees but in direct disregard of an international accord prohibiting any military presence – particularly when armed – in the camps. Their arrival is welcomed by most of the refugees, however, some are disturbed by the patrol’s presence and ask the patrol to leave the village. When the patrol momentarily delays their exit, some of the refugees take action by trying to forcibly disarm the patrol. Feeling threatened, some of the patrol’s members then open fire in what may be legitimate self-defense while other members of the patrol simply open fire on any and all refugees, in the process wounding and killing about twenty people.

On hearing the firing, a second Army patrol hurries to the camp to assess the situation and respond appropriately. It is noteworthy that, initially, the second Army patrol is unaware of the circumstances and events that are unfolding; they are simply responding to the sound of gunfire in an effort to provide security for the refugees.

Confronted with the unfolding events, the second patrol then must determine how to respond – particularly in defense of the refugees. They face an ethical dilemma as they ponder the question, “Are we prepared to fire upon our comrades who are indiscriminately killing innocent refugees?” Additionally, the second patrol faces the ethical dilemma of how they will respond in the event of an ensuing investigation of the matter. They must wrestle with the question, “Are we prepared to tell the truth of what we saw or will we attempt to cover up the slayings to protect our fellow soldiers?”

In the second part of the presentation, the Chaplain/Instructor proceeds to develop a series of ethical paradigms such as:

- Paradigm 1: Truth versus Loyalty
- Paradigm 2: Individual versus Community
- Paradigm 3: Short Term versus Long Term
- Paradigm 4: Justice versus Mercy

A consideration of these paradigms forces the students to discuss the various ethical choices to be made. These choices are developed and discussed within a context of real-world examples and scenarios.

The participants consider ethical principles and choices involving three philosophical schools of thought. These principles or perspectives, which influence our ethical decision-making processes, include:

- Perspective 1: End-based Thinking, where the focus is on “the greatest good for the greatest number (Consequential and Utilitarian Outlook)
- Perspective 2: Rule-based Thinking, which prompts one to ask, “What is the highest rule that should be followed?” (The Categorical Imperative)
- Perspective 3: Case-based Thinking, where, unlike the ends-based or rules-based thinking, the primary goal is to do to others what we want others to do to us (widely regarded as “The Golden Rule”).

The third part of the presentation ties the previous elements together by considering the Military Ethical Decision-making Process and its implications/applications to the students’ personal ethical decision-making process. It drives the point home by analyzing a scene from the movie, “Hotel Rwanda,” wherein the lead character prevents the killing of innocent civilians at the hands of a rebel militia leader. The class strives to apply the Military Ethical Decision-making Process by defining the problem/issue at hand, identifying the applicable rules/regulations/principles, and evaluating the lead character’s course of action. In particular, the class analyzes the Rwandan case with the goal of identifying the governing paradigms and principles and determining the ethical fitness of the lead character’s course of action.

Finally, the instructor concludes by pointing out that, while he can teach the students about ethical principles and offer them examples of possible choices, he cannot make them ethical officials. That will have to come from within.

In fact, the class forces participants to acknowledge the inherent risks and responsibilities of ethical fitness: the class confronts the reality that, while ethical fitness brings great personal, organizational and social benefits, it may come at great personal cost. It forces participants to consider the gamut of ethical choices, which they may confront during their careers, and to think about those choices before they have to face them in real life.

This is the same principle used in yet another addition to the Democracy and Human Rights Program, the use of a recently-acquired Engagement Skills Trainer (EST) which has a number of “shoot, don’t shoot” scenarios. Once a class uses those scenarios, they engage in a classroom discussion of why or why not they chose to shoot and what human rights and ethical principles were involved in each of those decisions.

Through the new ethical decision making class and the use of the Engagement Skills Trainer, WHINSEC students are forced to consider which are the right actions and what are the consequences and implications of those actions. Having faced these dilemmas in advance, the expectation is that these students will be far more likely to make the right choices when confronted with real life problems in their military and police activities.

About the Authors

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