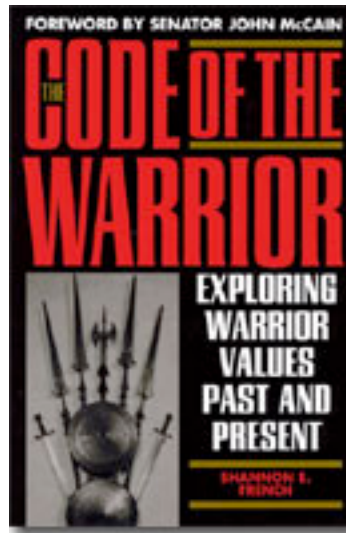


The essential element of a warrior's code is that it must set definite limits on what warriors can and cannot do if they want to continue to be regarded as warriors, not murderers or cowards. For the warrior who has such a code, certain actions remain unthinkable, even in the most dire or extreme circumstances.

—Shannon E. French



When Teaching the Ethics of War Is Not Academic

Shannon E. French

I remember watching the 1991 gulf war on television while I was working toward my Ph.D. in philosophy at Brown University. On philosophical grounds, I concluded that the war was justified. My study of history and the just-war tradition persuaded me that Saddam's aggression had to be checked. I was furious when the coalition forces stopped short of removing Saddam from power. I knew in my gut that he would pop up again like one of those go-

phers in a carnival mallet game. I did not want our troops to have to return to the desert. What I did not know then was just how directly I would know and care about those troops by the time that call came.

In 1997, I accepted a tenure-track position in the ethics section of the department of leadership, ethics, and law at the U.S. Naval Academy. My students are intelligent, well-rounded, surprisingly earnest, and extremely likable young people. My six years of teaching philosophy to these future Navy and Marine Corps officers have made it impossible for me to see discussion about the ethics of war as a mere academic exercise. The men and women in my classes have volunteered to be America's warriors. It is important for all of us to understand what that means.

With that in mind, in the spring of 1998 I developed a new elective course, "The Code of the Warrior," which in turn inspired my book, *The Code of the Warrior: Exploring Warrior Values Past and Present*. The aim of both the course and the book is to examine the values that are explicit and implicit within the "warrior ethos" and to try to make sense of those values in a modern American context. My students and I study the warrior's codes associated (in fiction or in fact) with the ancient Greeks, the Romans, the Vikings, the Celts, medieval knights, Zulus, Native Americans, Chinese monks, and Japanese samurai. We talk about how the purpose of a code is to restrain warriors, for their own good as much as for the good of others. The essential element of a warrior's code is that it must set definite limits on what warriors can and cannot do if they want to continue to be regarded as warriors, not murderers or cowards. For the warrior who has such a code, certain actions remain unthinkable, even in the most dire or extreme circumstances.

Some people might fear that encouraging young warriors to study the warrior traditions of the past will lead them to become Rambo-like or to embrace outrageous bigotries and out-of-date ideals. Granted, some of the qualities that ancient warriors or warrior archetypes possess do not play well in the 21st century. The key is to select for preservation only what is consistent with the values cherished by contemporary warrior cultures. For example, modern American warriors should resurrect only those traditions that cohere with the letter and spirit of the Constitution they have sworn to uphold and defend. They can emulate the humility, integrity, commitment to "might for right," courtesy, and courage of a Round Table knight without taking on board his acceptance of an undemocratic, stratified society (in which most of the population is disen-

franchised and women and serfs are treated as property) or his determination to “pursue infidels.”

Although warrior traditions may seem outmoded, the genuine emotional connection of today’s warriors to an intentionally idealized warrior tradition and their sense that they must not betray that legacy is more important than ever. That connection and devotion may help them summon the will to show restraint in situations that will sorely tempt them to throw self-control out the window, for the world is no longer arranged in such a way that conflicts are likely to arise among great powers that are evenly matched.

The privileged warriors of today increasingly will find themselves pitted against adversaries who fight without any rules or restraints because they see no other way to advance their objectives. These desperate adversaries are likely to employ methods that are rightfully viewed as horrific and appalling by the rest of the civilized world, such as terror attacks on civilian populations and the use of chemical and biological weapons. Since these adversaries already are willing to die, they will not be deterred by any threat of punishment for continuing to disregard the laws of war.

In the spring semester following the attacks of September 11, 2001, and the start of President Bush’s “war on terror,” I gave an unusual assignment to my students. I asked them to write essays detailing exactly why they are different from terrorists. The midshipmen were to spell out as clearly as possible how the roles they intended to fill as future Navy and Marine Corps officers are distinct in morally relevant ways from that of, say, an Al Qaeda operative. They dubbed the assignment “creepy,” but gamely agreed to do it. After they had read their efforts aloud, I gave the project a twist. I had them exchange papers, and told them each to write a critical response to their classmate’s paper, from the point of view of a terrorist. Then I had them read those responses aloud.

The midshipmen found the entire exercise very disturbing because it forced them to reflect on that thin but critical line that separates warriors from murderers. In their initial essays, several of them stressed the facts that as members of the U.S. military they will not target innocent people, and that there is a moral difference between intentionally causing civilian deaths and doing so unintentionally as the result of attacks on legitimate military targets, or what is known as “collateral damage.”

Here is a segment of an argument from a student in that class: “It is wrong to kill innocent people even if it does further the cause

of the United States. There are rules to war. ... We learned in ‘Naval Law’ [class] about the Law of Armed Conflict and the Rules of Engagement. There are targets that are acceptable and have ‘military value’ and there are targets that are simply killing for the sake of killing. Terrorists see targets of military value as too difficult to strike. They do not have the means to strike these targets. They instead will take out the easy targets for shock value, just to disrupt the lives of those they hate.”

The second part of the “Why are you different from a terrorist?” assignment required my students to try to get inside the heads of those who commit terrorist acts. It forced them to consider how easy it might be for someone to rationalize crossing the line between “warrior” and “murderer” in the interest of what he believes to be a noble cause. As most of the students recognized, terrorists do not see themselves as murderers. They believe that they are warriors—“freedom fighters” struggling against those they have dubbed their “oppressors.” But no matter how they may justify their actions, if they refuse to accept any rules of war, they forfeit the right to be regarded as warriors.

While there are many differences among them, warrior codes tend to share one point of agreement: the insistence that what distinguishes warriors from murderers is that warriors accept a set of rules governing when and how they kill. When they are trained for war, warriors are given a mandate by their society to take lives. But they must learn to take only certain lives in certain ways, at certain times, and for certain reasons. Otherwise, they become indistinguishable from murderers and will find themselves condemned by the very societies they were trained to serve. Individuals can fight for an objectively bad cause or a corrupt regime and still be warriors, as long as they have a warrior’s code that requires them to observe the rules of war. There can be no honor in any conflict for those who believe that they have no moral obligation to restrain their behavior in any way.

Some of my students reported having trouble understanding how anyone, no matter what his convictions, could agree to take part in terrorist operations that are not limited by moral constraints and that involve intentionally targeting innocent civilians. They wondered: Are the people who can do these things inhuman monsters? How can they create meticulous plans to slaughter unsuspecting civilians without being stopped in their tracks by impossible-to-ignore pangs of conscience?

We discussed the fact that it is unlikely that those who have been bewitched by the rhetoric of Osama bin Laden and others like him feel no revulsion at the thought (or in the act) of killing unarmed, helpless civilians. Rather, it is more probable that they are persuaded that any apparent pricks of conscience they may feel are not the screams of their precious humanity hoping to be heard but rather their human weakness battling against their will to perform their sacred duty. They would therefore consider it a triumph of will to carry out the charge to kill without mercy or discrimination.

I gave my students this assignment because they need to understand how the line between warrior and murderer can be crossed, so they can avoid crossing it themselves. Unfortunately, it is most difficult for warriors to keep from slipping over that line when they are fighting against those who have already crossed it. In his modern classic on the experience of war, *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle*, J. Glenn Gray, a U.S. veteran of World War II, brings home the agony of the warrior who has become incapable of honoring his enemies and thus is unable to find redemption.

Gray describes how the atrocities committed by Japanese soldiers (including the torture and murder of prisoners of war and wounded GI's) in the Pacific theater during World War II led Allied soldiers to view their enemies as unworthy of any respect or humane treatment. Otherwise unthinkable actions, such as collecting enemy body parts as "trophies" (a practice that also occurred in the Vietnam War) and refusing to accept surrenders, became acceptable within some circles of Allied fighters. As Gray notes, "The ugliness of war against an enemy conceived to be subhuman can hardly be exaggerated."

Gray's conclusions match those of psychologists Jonathan Shay, author of *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*, and Lt. Col. Dave Grossman, author of *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*. Both Shay and Grossman have worked extensively with American combat veterans. Their research reveals that the lasting psychological damage suffered by some veterans (such as debilitating post-traumatic stress) is most often the result of experiences that are not simply violent, but which involve what Shay calls the "betrayal of 'what's right.'" Veterans who believe that they were directly or indirectly party to immoral or dishonorable behavior (perpetrated by themselves, their comrades, or their commanders) have the hardest time reclaiming their lives after the war is over.

It is easier to remain a warrior when fighting other warriors. When warriors fight murderers, they may be tempted to become like the evil they hope to destroy. Their only protection is their code of honor. The professional military ethics that restrain warriors—that keep them from targeting those who cannot fight back, from taking pleasure in killing, from striking harder than is necessary, and that encourage them to offer mercy to their defeated enemies and even to help rebuild their countries and communities—are also their own protection against becoming what they abhor.

It is not just “see the whites of their eyes” frontline ground and Special Forces troops who need this protection. Men and women who fight from a distance—who drop bombs from planes and shoot missiles from ships or submarines—are also at risk of losing their humanity. What threatens them is the very ease with which they can take lives. As technology separates individuals from the results of their actions, it cheats them of the chance to absorb and reckon with the enormity of what they have done. Killing fellow human beings, even for the noblest cause, should never feel like nothing more than a game played using the latest advances in virtual reality. Modern warriors who dehumanize their enemies by equating them with blips on a computer screen may find the sense that they are part of an honorable undertaking far too fragile to sustain. It is important for warriors to show respect for the inherent worth and dignity of their opponents. Even long-distance warriors can achieve that by acknowledging that some of the “targets” they destroy are in fact human beings, not demons or vermin or empty statistics.

In class, I try to stress the point that once that thin line between warrior and murderer has been crossed, the harm to the individual who crossed it may be severe. In response to this, a student in my 2002 “Knowing Your Enemy” seminar raised the issue of whether a warrior who had crossed the line and allowed himself to become a murderer could ever find redemption and, in a sense, regain his warrior status.

My response was that I believe it depends a great deal on the individual’s own reaction to having crossed that line. If he refuses to examine the immorality of his actions, he may do further damage to his character. He may tell himself that it was naive ever to have clung to a code—that there is no real difference between, for example, killing an enemy combatant in the thick of a firefight and killing an unarmed civilian in cold blood. On the other hand, if he rejects his ignoble behavior rather than excusing it, he may be able to re-


store his sense of honor and renew his commitment to the path of restraint.

In 1989, my father had a conversation with a World War II fighter pilot who knew firsthand what it feels like both to see an enemy cross the line from warrior to murderer and, in response, to cross the line himself. The veteran described an experience that had haunted him for more than 40 years. He and his friend Jimmy had been in a dogfight with three German ME-109s. Jimmy was hit and bailed out. One of the German pilots shot him while he was drifting down in his parachute. The veteran was horrified and went after the German pilot, forced him to bail out, and killed him in *his* parachute. My father asked the veteran how it had felt to take that revenge. At first, the man claimed that it had felt good. A moment later, however, he admitted, “No. ... OK, ... I cried.”

Legend has it that when a Spartan mother sent her son off to war, she would say to him, “Come back with your shield, or on it.” If a warrior came back without his shield, it meant that he had laid it down in order to break ranks and run from battle. He was supposed to use his shield to protect the man next to him in formation, so to abandon his shield was not only to be a coward but also to break faith with his comrades. To come back on his shield was to be carried back either wounded or dead. Thus the adage meant that the young warrior should fight bravely, maintain his martial discipline, and return with both his body and his honor intact.

The warriors’ mothers who spoke this line were not heartless—far from it. It was spoken from great love. They wanted their children to return with their sense of self-respect intact, feeling justifiably proud of how they had performed under pressure, not tortured and destroyed by guilt and shame. To come back with their shields was to come back still feeling like warriors, not like cowards or murderers. The Spartan mothers’ message is timeless. Everyone who cares about the welfare of warriors wants them not only to live through whatever fighting they must face, but also to have lives worth living after the fighting is done.

The warrior’s code is the shield that guards our warriors’ humanity. Without it, they are no good to themselves or to those with whom and for whom they fight. Without it, they will find no way back from war. I have dear friends—many of them former students and Naval Academy colleagues—who are currently in harm’s way. They are our pilots, surface-warfare officers, submariners, Navy SEALs, and Marines. Come May, more of my current students will join them. When and if they go into combat, I want

them to be able to return from war intact in body and soul. I want all of them, every last one, to come back with their shields. 

Shannon E. French is assistant professor of philosophy at the U.S. Naval Academy. Her book, *The Code of the Warrior: Exploring Warrior Values Past and Present*, has just been published by Rowman & Littlefield.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Greatly appreciate the Stringfellow Barr article on dialectical discussion. He was my discussion leader for two years at St. John's College. I was 16-17 years old.

I now realize he led with more astuteness and skill than I could observe as a child.

Thanks for helping me remember and become aware.

Journet Kahn

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