

Rules of Engagement

Combat is a chaotic endeavor. It's difficult to control the actions of soldiers when the bullets start flying, much less to guide the engagement to the desired end. To help manage this problem we have evolved what we call today Rules of Engagement (ROE). Rules of Engagement are developed to avoid escalating or widening the conflict and ensure observance of international law or guidelines. These rules aren't standard or universal, but are typically defined to address issues on the theater level when our forces enter the conflict, and are revised as necessary as the conflict develops.

Ideally, Rules of Engagement should be careful to:

1. Facilitate completion of the mission.
2. Meet the intent of international law, however still have the enemies be apprehensive about interacting with the US.
3. Avoid unnecessarily putting US troops at risk or demoralize the troops

ROE seem like a good idea; to define beforehand how our forces are to engage the enemy and under what circumstances. Off-limits targets are defined. Rules about what circumstances warrant a weapons release* are specified. This way, higher authority can define the conflict to prevent unfortunate actions that would harm the overall objectives, give the enemy a propaganda coup, or harm noncombatants.

In practice, this has rarely been the case. The higher authority has a demonstrated habit of defining ROE that obstruct the stated mission objectives given to the military units. ROE are often defined at a level too far removed from the realities of combat, with unrealistic expectations or understanding of the enemy or the battle space.

The most classic and frequently cited example is the air war over North Vietnam. The ROE were specified from the White House, frequently by politicians with no operational military experience whatsoever. These men had no real experience in managing a combat situation, and were insulated from the undesired consequences of the unrealistic limitations placed on the military.

In the early days of Vietnam, American airpower heavily leveraged technology to develop the ability to safely shoot down enemy aircraft from beyond visual range. No American aircraft were equipped with a gun, because dogfighting was considered an anachronism. But the Rules of Engagement dictated that fighter pilots visually identify an enemy before opening fire, requiring our pilots to close well inside the minimum effective range of their missiles before they could engage.

Air superiority requires that the skies be swept clean of enemy aircraft, that the enemy's ability to defend its sky is minimized. In Vietnam the ROE made this effectively impossible, because the politicians were worried that escalating the conflict would trigger a Chinese intervention, like what happened in Korea, and that Russian advisors were in the line of fire. These ROE included:

- Enemy fighter aircraft could not be destroyed on the ground.

- Surface to Air missile sites could not be engaged when under construction, but only after they had fired on American aircraft.
- Targets within a twenty mile radius of Hanoi were off-limits.
- Ships off-loading munitions and military equipment in Haiphong Harbor could not be attacked.
- American aircraft were prohibited from going within twenty miles of the Chinese border, to avoid an accidental border incursion.

Target selection was done in the oval office, which frequently risked our pilots on relatively worthless targets, ignoring militarily significant targets because of some ridiculous attempt to “send messages” to the North Vietnamese enemy. The enemy quickly understood the limitations placed on our pilots, and exploited those weaknesses to their advantage. The ROE gave the US pilots a huge handicap and were of little military or political value.

A more recent example occurred in Iraq, where the army was tasked with securing the main road between Baghdad and Mosul and making it safe from saboteurs placing IEDs, which were killing Americans at a shocking rate. The army took this mission and executed it successfully by employing snipers to protect the highway and keep it clear of saboteurs. Then a professional officer started to worry about the propaganda value if sniper teams accidentally killed a civilian. He failed to understand the reality that a civilian in Iraq was effectively anyone not actively shooting at you at the moment. The ROE were revised, the sniper teams were ordered to stand down, and IEDs resumed the wholesale killing of Americans.

A common result of incompetent and politically driven Rules of Engagement is that our soldiers get the feeling that they're not allowed to win. Losing a limb, being disfigured or blinded is harder to accept if you were called on by your government to do a job, then told you weren't allowed to do it the way any rational person would. PTSD is nothing new in warfare, but our experience in WWII showed that PTSD was more manageable when the victim understood that the job got done, and that his mental scars weren't the result of idiotic policies by his own commanders. The veteran's question of “Why?” has no acceptable answer when an arbitrary, ill-advised ROE is the culprit.

Correction Towards the Ideal

The challenge facing our leadership is to develop ROE that achieve the objective of keeping our fighting forces within the bounds of the international laws of warfare and achieve our National Security objectives but at the same time avoid unnecessarily handicapping our soldiers and place them at a disadvantage in combat. To meet this challenge we propose policy initiatives and criteria to be considered when establishing ROE.

As has been stated, the general problem with ROE development and tuning is that it is done at too high a level in the military and civilian chain of command. Modern technology allows remote control of firefights, theoretically all the way to the oval office. The temptation is to bypass the chain of command by higher authority, resulting in decisions being made by people who aren't familiar with the context of the engagement or the immediate capabilities of the combatants. Even if the chain of command is observed, direction from too far up the chain of

command results in delays and the good idea fairy having more opportunities to foul things up. The temptation to micromanage activities beyond the scope of one's command should be avoided at all costs.

Even when determining broader ROE policy, a properly educated civilian leadership must question the mission if they find themselves concerned with rules of engagement. American soldiers should never be committed to combat where the rules of engagement provide sanctuary to the enemy or hamstringing the ability of our forces to bring the full weight of our military advantage to bear.

The Rules of Engagement development and usage protocols

Rules of engagement should be developed with strict adherence to the following factors. Other influences should be dismissed.

Developed at an appropriate level: It's difficult to ensure that Rules of Engagement can be developed at a low enough level of command to be immediately relevant to the situation at hand. Low-level commanders aren't sensitive to international sensitivities or National Command Authority policies. It's also the nature of our command structure for higher levels of command to add their "good ideas" to any policy proposed from below. This is how our non-combat officers distinguish themselves for promotion. One possible remedy to this misuse would be for regular congressional oversight of the ROE to ensure that the safety and combat capability of US soldiers is not compromised.

The culture of the enemy: The culture of the enemy should be considered when developing ROE. The successful prosecution of any conflict requires that the enemy and his support population be convinced that continued conflict will be difficult to useless, and possibly lethal. If the culture reveres violence and sees restraint as effeminate, the ROE should be written to avoid that perception being applied to American soldiers. If the enemy does not observe international laws of warfare, this should influence our ROE. Playing any game or activity by rules when the opposition has no rules is a losing proposition. ROE need to be modified to appropriately combat such an enemy. An enemy that doesn't observe the international laws of armed conflict should alert policymakers to be extra cautious of participating at all. The following sections on 'the enemy should be allowed no sanctuary' and 'civilians' provides more details.

The enemy should be allowed no sanctuary: Population centers, "neutral" countries, and religious structures should not be sacrosanct. Hot pursuit into these areas shouldn't be limited by rules that only our soldiers have to abide by. In both Vietnam/Laos and Afghanistan/Pakistan we've seen our forces limited by an imaginary line in the battlefield that the enemy does not recognize and the "Neutral" country cannot control. In such cases, American forces should be free to operate without regard to arbitrary restrictions. As a matter of national policy, we need simply declare that we would welcome the "Neutral" country's efforts to control their borders and not allow combatants of either side to cross. We declare that we will observe religious sites as non-combat zones only if the enemy does. In a part of the world where mosques have traditionally functioned as local armories in support of holy Jihad, it seems pretty stupid to afford them any respect as religious shrines in the spirit of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Civilians: ROE regarding the safety of civilians should be informed by the value that the enemy places on civilians. Rules of engagement and normal American sensibilities caused our soldiers to hold fire in Somalia

when enemy combatants used civilians as human shields to cover tactical movement, and even when civilians were actively and obviously spotting and directing fire, secure in the knowledge that our men would not fire on them. The undesired consequence of this policy was that the enemy saw it worked, and expanded their use of civilian human shields – sometimes with the cooperation of said shields. This placed more civilians at risk. If US soldiers had disregarded civilians as human shields and fired through them, it would have made this tactic useless, and eroded the support of the local population for the enemy fighters for so employing them. In the long run, this would have made civilians in the theater safer overall. The effort to design 'human rights' elements into the ROE will tend to kill more people over time as the ROE would not contribute to accomplishing the mission and would tend to create drawn-out conflicts – quagmires, in the parlance of a hostile media.

Civilians in many countries where we fight the War on Terror support the enemy materially, cheer their successes and mourn their defeats. The locals support enemy activity in their communities, and they know that our ROE ensure there are no consequences for such support.

Civilians in these theaters aren't stupid. They know what's going down. In Iraq our soldiers were happy to see kids playing in the streets. No kids meant trouble was brewing and the mothers were keeping their children indoors.

Differentiating civilians from non-uniformed combatants is difficult, and the ROE should not second-guess the instincts of the soldiers on the ground. Civilians generally know that sketchy behavior will get them shot, and go out of their way to avoid such behavior. Thus, it's reasonable to assume that someone acting suspiciously is a potential combatant.

To avoid giving the enemy propaganda victories: If propaganda is a concern for our civilian leadership when it's defining the employment of the military option, then the leadership should be reflecting on the scope and objectives of the mission. For example, the idea that America is out to win the hearts and minds of a native Islamic population is a sucker's bet. Fourteen hundred years of experience with Islam teaches us that this isn't a realistic objective. Reasons for entering into a military operation in one of these countries should carefully define the objectives based on the proximate cause for such consideration, and not concern itself with the pipedream of nation building, or establishing a functioning secular democracy in these countries.

To avoid giving the enemy propaganda victories, American leadership needs to communicate realistic objectives and missions for the military when it's employed. These objectives should not involve nation building or winning the hearts and minds of inherently hostile populations. These objectives should be clearly communicated to the world and to the enemy, then overwhelming force should be employed to achieve these objectives. Upon mission completion, the military should be withdrawn, and the world told that we did what we came to do and left. Leaders should recognize that it's not the role of the US military to enforce peace among our enemies. The idea expressed by Secretary of State Colin Powell that "If we break it, we own it" is patently absurd. If the United States conveys the clear message that if you offend us badly enough, we will break your stuff and we won't fix it for you, the world will respect us for our clarity of purpose—in spite of some international handwringing.

Onsite command latitude for tuning ROE: The commander on the scene with bullets snapping around his head should be free to exercise his best judgment and not have his hands tied by overly restrictive ROE. As a corollary to this, local commanders shouldn't fear for their careers if they make a justifiable decision that ends

with innocent lives being lost. Second-guessing the guy at the point of the spear is a sure way to dull that spear. We should promote a culture of letting the onsite commanders accomplish the mission and understand that remote military and civilian leaders are not only less effective, but by their meddling can discourage the front line soldiers. Operational orders should originate through the chain of command. Execution details (within the ROE) should be the responsibility of the local commanders and field leaders. Target lists and mission execution details should not be interfered with in real-time from the Oval Office.

ROE Impact on operations: ROE should not handicap US soldiers or nullify a tactical or operational advantage. For example, an ROE that requires a local commander to coordinate with local law enforcement will almost certainly result in the enemy having advance intelligence concerning that operation. Using local employees in any stage of mission planning will result in the enemy having details of that mission. We saw this repeatedly in Vietnam where Vietnamese administrative workers in Saigon headquarters knew our target packages before our pilots did, and transmitted that information to the enemy.

ROE should be deaf to politics and propaganda: War is not precise, nor is it clean or comfortable. Everyone in a war should have it at the front of their mind to end the war as quickly as possible. The role of our military is to convince the enemy to end the war on our terms as quickly as possible. The Public Affairs branch of the military should be prepared to explain to the critics that there is no nice way to kill someone and force them to give up violence as a means of achieving their goals. The US should have a full-court press to erode the enemy's support network through propaganda that clearly explains our goals and motives. It's a communication failure that most of the Afghan civilians affected by our war there had never heard of 9/11. Had such information been broadcast, we may have found a population that would have understood our actions—as compared to the reaction to an apparently unprovoked invasion. That culture understands provocation and revenge, and would have generally supported our response to the injustice of 9/11.

Notwithstanding all of this, certain politicians, media, and others will constantly be wringing their hands about how such ROE is cruel and violates laws and other basic human rights. They'll begin doing so almost immediately and there should be a well-planned and vigorous information campaign to mitigate the effects of these handwringers. The point should be made that war is hell and bad things happen, so particular events should not be spun to favor the enemy propaganda. Our military and civilian leaders do not do this well today.

*weapons release is the authorization for a unit to employ their firepower. Until weapons release has been authorized, a unit must hold fire.

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MilitaryValues.org Principles and Mission

The content of these topical white papers from MilitaryValues.org is aligned with the organization's principles and mission statement. At the core is the protection of America and the founding principles—mainly summarized by freedom and liberty for citizens and a federal government with limited and enumerated powers. All of this is made abundantly clear in our Constitution and the founder's many writings. The US military's role to protect this is made very clear by the oath that is taken by military officers today:

"I, [name], do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office upon which I am about to enter. So help me God."

For details on the MilitaryValues.org principles and mission statement go to www.MilitaryValues.org.

About MilitaryValues.org

The effectiveness of the United States military has been significantly compromised over the last 20 years by social engineering and politically driven decisions. This is especially true and serious with military units that face front line combat duties. In stark terms, this problem has unnecessarily cost the lives of our front line men and women—while many more suffer various combat-related physical and mental traumas. And there are untold tangents of pain and loss suffered by families, fellow soldiers, and others.

Combat units, and those that support them, greatly benefit from a culture in which there is a focus of effectively prosecuting missions and wars—and rejects unnecessary risk to the military personnel. This culture creates trust and increases effectiveness and loyalty—which is truly critical for the best shot at success in the complex and dangerous endeavor called combat. However on the other hand, if a military is constantly beat down by forces that do not care about its well-being—then a culture of distrust, failure, and despair will increasingly result. This second culture is what we have today in America's military.

MilitaryValues.org exists to educate millions of citizens on what has gone wrong and how it can be reversed. We hope you will continue to our website and learn more!