



**A Tactical Ethic: Moral Conduct
in the Insurgent Battlespace**

By Dick Couch

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Reviewed by

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There probably is no better writer in the country to address the important subject of ethical and moral conduct on the insurgent battlefield than Dick Couch, a Naval Academy graduate who served in Vietnam with the Navy SEALs and later taught ethics at the Academy after a career in the Central Intelligence Agency. While a platoon leader with SEAL Team One in Vietnam, he led one of the few successful prisoner of war rescues of that conflict. Couch addressed aspects of the topic of ethics in the military in three previous works: *Chosen Soldier: The Making of a Special Forces Warrior* (Three Rivers Press, 2008), *The Sheriff of Ramadi: Navy SEALs and the Winning of al-Anbar* (Naval Institute Press, 2008), and *The Warrior Elite: The Forging of SEAL Class 228* (Three Rivers Press, 2003). His current offering, *A Tactical Ethic*, is significant because it brings this discourse directly to the genre of conflict found on our battlefields in Iraq and Afghanistan and to the actions of our Soldiers, Marines, and Special Operations Forces (SOF) responsive to the insurgent threat.

The message of this slim volume is simple: the two strands

of a unit's technical competence and its moral compass are equally critical, with the moral health reflected in the actions and words of our junior leaders possibly more important to combat effectiveness—especially in the insurgent environment, where the war is waged and won at the small unit level and the target is not the insurgent, but the trust and support of the local population.

Couch presents his thesis through a rational and highly readable discourse on the process of building and maintaining integrity and a culture of moral strength in the Army, Marine Corps, and SOF. While maintaining that the great majority of our forces are highly motivated and morally well grounded, he acknowledges that there have been instances of extremely bad behavior that undermine and subvert efforts to maintain discipline and support right conduct in critical operations in the insurgent environment. Couch identifies a phenomenon that we have all seen firsthand or been aware of: an aggressive and proficient natural leader hijacks or pirates a group within the unit to his own ends, subverting its effectiveness and corrupting its values. The framework of this discourse is to understand why this happens and to ensure that training and leadership within these units address the problem and redress its effects.

The training regimen within each of the Services is addressed and compared in terms of the focus of each in developing mental toughness and a moral centerline that will withstand the rigors of combat and battlefield pressures and uncertainty. Each training regime gets high marks. Weighted with these highly effective training packages are not only the cultural pressures and baggage reflected in the history, upbringing, and lingering old values of each individual Soldier, SEAL, or

Marine, but also the climate of the unit and the social pressures to conform and sometimes to accede to bad behavior. This can be especially critical, according to Couch, in the window between the completion of training and the eve of the first deployment.

As Couch points out, conduct is largely governed by the culture of the unit. That culture and its development begin in the training commands. The current practice of assigning our best to these commands is critical to initial development of correct values and a clear understanding of why good judgment and proper, disciplined actions are key to unit effectiveness in areas such as Afghanistan, where the goodwill of the local populace is imperative. Unfortunately, a few corrosive individuals within a squad or platoon can hijack a unit and sap its effectiveness. Strong leadership must be exercised not to tolerate these behaviors. Indeed, this direction need not come just from the designated leaders; it is equally effective and important coming from de facto leaders within a small unit with the moral courage to step forward—often extremely difficult to do in close-knit units where loyalty trumps all. In these circumstances, the actions of unit and de facto leaders must reflect the values-based conduct that is a key element and an essential part of the warrior ethos and its training. When Marines or Soldiers understand that their responses to everyday circumstances are as important as their conduct on the battlefield, their leadership has matured, and it becomes more difficult for pirates to gain traction within these units.

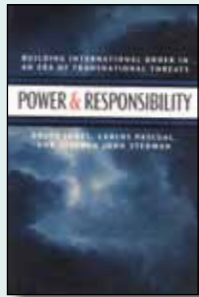
The rules of ethics (ROE) that Couch addresses at the conclusion of this text are common-sense guidelines. In explaining the truism that ground combat unit members cannot perform up to expectations if those expecta-

tions are not clearly defined, he urges all unit leaders to reflect on the fact that a clear understanding by unit members of moral expectations is as critically important as tactical training. Similarly, he notes that today's warriors closely watch their leaders and that leadership by example cannot be oversold. He states persuasively that good leaders must have a sounding board and that growth in cohesion of a unit is closely tied to effective communication among its members. Likewise, he points out that alcohol usage is different for different troops, but that a leader must know his men and understand the line between recreation and addiction. Most important, the abstinence rule on deployment, and always in the battlespace, must be clear and enforced. The boredom rule demands that unit members be constantly engaged so that they are neither uninformed nor misled on unmet expectations, whether as to the possibility of nonengagement or lack of tactical challenges. Similarly, the recognition and intolerance rules are flip sides of each other. Effective and positive role models must be recognized just as definitively as those exhibiting negative values must be neutralized. In the same vein, leaders must be clear that wrong action on the battlefield is a form of disloyalty. Finally, all small unit leaders must be taught and encouraged to exhibit the courage of their convictions and to follow through on those convictions, however difficult. This is the most difficult of the ROEs, but the most important.

A Tactical Ethic is not a preachy book, but rather a comprehensive and personal review of what each of us knows and needs to be reminded of from time to time. When I had a platoon in Vietnam with the Third Marines in 1968–1969, I had each of the personality types addressed in this text. I admit I enjoyed

reflecting on my own experiences as I read these pages. This is an immensely important text for those responsible for operational planning and execution in today's military. It is even more compelling for our small unit leaders and noncommissioned officers. **JFQ**

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**Power & Responsibility:
Building International Order in
an Era of Transnational Threats**

By Bruce Jones, Carlos Pascual,
and Stephen John Stedman
Washington, DC: Brookings
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ISBN: 978-0-8157-4706-2

Reviewed by
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This book is the second of two products from the Managing Global Insecurity (MGI) project, the ambitious purpose of which was to determine how to best organize the globalized world to manage pressing issues that no single nation has the power, credibility, or will to tackle unilaterally. The collective experiences of the authors (all international consultants) at the United Nations (UN) coupled with years in dialogue with diplomats, academics, and policymakers from every major nation provided a perspective that is both distinctive and accessible. In many ways, Jones, Pascual, and

Stedman amalgamate well-known multilateralist and neo-idealist works (for example, those of Robert Axelrod, Robert Keohane, and Hedley Bull) with their collective practices. But this book is not a highly theoretical one. It is probably not going to find its way into any undergraduate courses on American foreign policy. Rather, it is a convenient guide for foreign policymakers. But those looking for a justification for abandoning American-led institutional reform will not find it here. The authors are clear about the type of world they see: one in which “American leadership has been shallow and sometimes misguided, but is greatly needed” (p. 3).

An important assumption permeates this book: the line between national and global security has all but been erased. Consider that “most Americans would agree on most of the threats to their national security: transnational terrorism, proliferation of nuclear weapons, a pandemic of a new deadly disease, global warming, and economic instability and crisis” (p. 4). Could these threats be managed through unilateral action alone? The United States and its allies may have developed the global system after World War II, but much has changed since 1945. National interests alone have not ensured global security.

The authors offer the concept of “responsible sovereignty” as the centerpiece of their blueprint for ensuring global security, arguing that “all states [have] to be accountable for their actions that have impacts beyond their borders, and make such reciprocity a core principle in restoring international order and for providing the welfare of one’s own citizens” (p. 9). In short, they declare, “International order in an age of transnational threats requires power in the service of responsibility” (p. 15). Related to responsible sovereignty would be the creation of a Group of 16 (G-16), representing

“the smallest (and therefore most efficient) number of states that includes all major powers and rising and key regional states” (p. 16).

The book is neatly divided into three sections: “Power,” “Responsibility,” and “Order.” In part one, “Power,” the authors articulate what they call an “effective international architecture” by employing “nine lessons of institutional innovation” (pp. 47–51), which can be summarized as the requirement to build a system with U.S. and other G-16 support on a platform through improving the credibility of the process and the institutional support of the globalized system. The authors use their constructs to answer their own questions. How will this be done? The G-16 will be formed and based on the concept of responsible sovereignty. Why should the United States take the lead? In their view, the United States is too weak or lacks the credibility to act unilaterally but is essential to a multilateral policy approach. Such a dichotomy may indeed be false because world affairs are often more complex than either/or scenarios. By the close of the first part, the authors have made their case that something has to be done if global security will be managed.

The second part is titled “Responsibility,” but it reads like a litany of failings that the present system has produced. Climate change is discussed in a matter-of-fact manner that exacerbates an often teleological approach to the entire subject. If, as the authors state, “close to 90 percent of all carbon emissions” will come from rising powers, then it begs the question: what good is the G-16 in setting and enforcing policy? If the authors stopped there, they would have stumbled badly. But they link climate change to nuclear policy and expand the surface area of diplomacy to approach a multilateral and possible successful regime (a word

they do not actually use, but one that applies). This is significant because it could allow many states to forge an agreement across multiple issues instead of only pursuing bilateral agreements.

Perhaps the most relevant chapters are the ones on terrorism and economic security because of where the United States and its allies rank such issues among all others today. The authors’ mindset is apparent from statements such as: “If the United States took a lead role in reshaping the institutional counterterrorism architecture, it would go a long way toward reassuring other countries that its commitment to rebuilding international order is real” (p. 232). On the other hand, it could fuel the fires of terrorism by justifying a fear of American hegemony.

In the third section, “Order,” the Middle East is the focus. The authors show insight as they lament the failings of most efforts to establish order by the United States and the UN. But they appear to ignore one of the most pressing undercurrents for the region: how can you rely upon responsible sovereignty when many regional players lack sovereignty in the first place or when Israel’s sovereignty is being threatened? One suggestion was to bring together the UN and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (p. 287) for security and force all parties to become more “responsible.”

In all fairness to the authors, it is easy to point out mistakes or misjudgments for a book with such a sweeping agenda as reformulating the global security system. Even as the book ends, the authors make note of their “substantive and political difficulties” (p. 314) in formulating a central thesis that would be acceptable to all states. Yet they may have assembled the best argument for moving into a new direction: America’s (and hence the world’s) security demands that a new trail be blazed. **JFQ**