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Obedience to Orders **by Jacob G. Hornberger**

I couldn't help but be struck by the photograph in the mainstream press last week in which an Iraqi soldier who had been taken captive was resting in the arms of two American GIs. The prisoner was drinking water from a canteen that had been given to him by his American captors.

My immediate reaction was: Now that's what being an American soldier is all about: a decent respect for one's adversary on the battlefield and proper treatment of one's prisoners of war.

But I couldn't help but think about what had to be the obvious reaction from officials in the Pentagon on seeing that photograph: "What in the hell do those American soldiers think they're doing? Don't they know that Iraqi soldiers are al-Qaeda terrorists who are attacking American troops and that Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden planned September 11? Issue an immediate order to cork those canteens and instead to torture those Iraqi terrorists until they tell us everything they know about Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction. Or send them to Pakistan where our army general there can do the dirty work for us. Or send them all to our camp in Cuba, where what we do to prisoners is nobody else's business."

In the meantime, after Iraqi forces captured several American GIs over the weekend, President Bush declared, "I expect them to be treated humanely, just like we will treat any prisoners of theirs we capture humanely. If not, the people who mistreat the prisoners will be treated as war criminals."

In the four years I spent at [Virginia Military Institute](#) and the eight years I spent in the Army Reserves as an infantry officer, I couldn't help but notice the marked difference between West Point officers and VMI officers. At the risk of being somewhat judgmental, the West Pointers were, by and large, a lower-caliber type of officer than the VMI men. And I wasn't the only one who noticed this: At infantry school at Ft. Benning, more than one NCO commented to me that he'd much rather serve under a VMI officer than a West Point officer.

Over the years, I've asked myself, Why the difference? I've concluded that it's because the military academies, by and large, attract a different type of person from the one who goes to VMI. In order to get into the professional military academies, one needs the recommendation of a member of Congress. Thus, that type of selection process is inevitably going to have a skew that favors those individuals who come from families that curry favor with politicians.

Those who apply to VMI, on the other hand, are generally self-selected. They don't need the recommendation of any politician to gain admission.

I think that's why there has never been a schoolwide cheating scandal in the 160-year history of the Institute, unlike the history of the [professional military academies](#). It's also why there hasn't been a serial raping scandal and cover-up at VMI, unlike the situation currently unfolding at the [Air Force Academy](#).

When the U.S. government's files are ultimately opened 30 years from now with respect to the [torture of U.S. prisoners of war and criminal suspects in the government's "war on terrorism,"](#) I have absolutely no doubts that there will be no VMI officers in the chain of command in those acts of misconduct. I also have no doubts that that chain of command will be filled with officers from the academies.

The administration at all military schools, including VMI, attempt to inculcate in their cadets an unswerving obedience to orders. The difference between the professional academies and VMI, however, is that at the academies the attempt is successful. At VMI it is not.

Even though VMI has one of the most highly regulated and controlled military environments that anyone could ever imagine, there is a strange, spontaneous phenomenon that inevitably arises within every class and ends up operating as a countervailing force to the administration's demand that cadets blindly follow and obey its rules, regulations, and orders. This tradition, which might even stretch back as far back as the Institute's founding in 1839, creates and nurtures a deep internal sense of right and wrong — of morality — of conscience — of honor — within each VMI cadet.

Sometimes that internal standard of right conduct comes into collision with the military's need for blind obedience to its rules, regulations, and orders. What distinguishes the VMI officer from the graduates of the academies is that VMI grads will inevitably place their conscience above orders, even if that means disobeying an unlawful or immoral order and even if it means the sacrifice of their military careers. Academy graduates, on the other hand, for whom achieving the rank of general is usually their foremost goal, will tend to blind obedience to orders, especially since that is likely to be the safest and surest means of achieving their goal.

Although it's not often widely publicized, at various times in VMI's history the conflict between conscience and obedience to orders has produced student rebellions — or “step-offs” as they were called when I was cadet — against the VMI administration.

For example, when I was a VMI cadet at the height of the Vietnam War, when many VMI graduates were losing their lives in another stupid, senseless U.S. government war, one of the administration's tactical officers found some liquor in the room of a first-classman (senior), and he placed him on report, which meant immediate expulsion despite the fact that the cadet was close to graduation after spending four years at VMI.

Now, yes, the cadet had violated the rules and the tactical officer was in fact doing his job by enforcing the rules. But given all the circumstances, including the fact that the senior was very likely soon to find himself in a Vietnamese rice paddy fighting for “freedom,” the possession of a bottle of liquor was a violation that could easily have been “overlooked.”

That night, we gave that tactical officer what we called the “silent treatment.” As we marched past him toward the mess hall for dinner, we remained totally silent instead of singing our usual cadence songs. Then, when the officer entered the mess hall, no one said a word — you could hear a pin drop. When he sat down to eat his supper, every single cadet in the corps — more than 1,000 of us — arose in unison and silently walked out, preferring not to eat in the same room with a man of his caliber.

And when we returned to barracks, I'll never forget the screaming, yelling, and door slamming from a thousand cadets, not to mention the loads of garbage and junk we all threw into the courtyards in protest.

Knowing that that tactical officer's effectiveness at VMI had come to an end, the administration had him transferred away, which could not have helped the advancement of his military career.

One tragic consequence of the Pentagon's new policy of torturing and mistreating prisoners is that such a policy will inevitably endanger the lives of U.S. soldiers in combat, including those fighting in Iraq, in two ways: It will operate as a disincentive for enemy soldiers to surrender; and it will provide a ready excuse by enemy forces to subject American POWs to the same torture and mistreatment.

That's one reason why the U.S. government should immediately abandon its policy of torture and mistreatment of prisoners and open all its prisoner camps, including the one in Cuba, to public inspection. Another reason is that such misconduct is just plain wrong and immoral. We should never permit our nation or our nation's troops to fall to the level of the war criminal.

Finally, once the president's war is over and U.S. military rule takes over in Iraq, the president should do all he can to put both Iraqi prisoners of war and Iraqi women into the care and custody of VMI officers rather than West Point or Air Force Academy officers. It's the least the president could for the Iraqi people in post-war, occupied Iraq.

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