

Ends and Means

BY ROY SPECKHARDT

Many people are outraged that George W. Bush ordered the invasion of Iraq on false pretenses. Since Britain's Downing Street memo and other revealing information has come to light, more and more people are concluding that a primary excuse for the invasion was the neoconservative agenda of spreading Western-style democracy—at gunpoint if necessary. With such an agenda, the decision was made to use unethical means in support of the abstractly laudable end of transforming dictatorships into representative democracies. And these means specifically included the fabrication of information and stretching of available facts to their conceivable limits so as to offer the public a more palatable set of reasons for starting a war: saving the Iraqi people and increasing security for the United States and its allies.

But prior to the invasion a number of knowledgeable parties predicted that such a war would increase instability in the region and escalate hatred against the United States. And now it's hard to argue that this incursion increased *anyone's* security—as exemplified by the daily raids on U.S. troops and Iraqi citizens, the frequent kidnappings of officials, the 2004 bombing in Spain, and the July 2005 rail and bus bombings in London. Moreover, the projected financial costs were far above publicly stated figures and have been used as an excuse for deep cuts in social services affecting millions of Americans.

So, the purported reasons were false in and of themselves and certainly not sufficient cause to engage in the unethical action of starting a war. But what about the real reasons related to spreading democracy neocon style? Even if successful, the war would still be an unethical means toward that end, considering the many consequences of invading Iraq.

Bush, of course, isn't the first person in history

to favor unjust means to achieve a seemingly positive end. During the early Renaissance Niccolò Machiavelli argued that the ends can justify often brutal means. What, then, should the Humanist response be to this longstanding ends-means problem?

To begin such an inquiry, it is necessary to acknowledge that an ethical question of this type is more complex than what a religious conservative like Bush might take it to be. Humanists don't see the world in stark, black and white contrasts, or even in a definitive shade of grey. There are infinite shades and colors, discernable differently from diverse perspectives. So interpretations are important and worth the effort. So each situation must be considered separately.

In making such considerations, however, it is important to see that rare, ostensibly unethical, acts may be positively employed in certain situations to accomplish critical ends—but only at great risk. These are cases when the end has a higher value than the direct costs and all the likely indirect costs of the means. Even then, due consideration is necessary for at least the following three reasons:

1. The unethical means may result in unconsidered or underestimated negative ends.

To analyze the suitability of any means, one needs to give careful consideration to how the chosen means might also affect *other* valued ends. For example, shooting an annoying neighbor is certainly a direct means to the end of putting a stop to the undesired behavior. But using such means would contradict many other important ends, including the desire to stay out of prison, to live in a peaceful and law abiding society, and to keep one's empathetic sensibilities intact. In like manner, when contemplating war as a means to some

end, it's important to recognize that the assumedly positive ideal or goal for which one is killing won't be the only outcome. Many results spring from the decision to fire that first shot.

When it comes to smaller ethical violations, such as telling a lie, it may be more challenging to recognize the existence of multiple outcomes. The more factors involved, the harder such analysis will be. But a single lie can have far reaching consequences—even affecting the individual.

2. Unethical actions may degrade the character of those who regularly engage in such behavior. People are easily tempted to inflate the positive benefits of their goals and justify their actions with mere rationalizations, leading to choices of unethical behavior not really warranted by the goal.

An action as extreme as killing, for example, can permanently crush the character of the person killing, and would do so more often if it weren't for the multitude of psychological defenses available. The belief that there is no choice and that killing is necessary for self-defense can, in certain circumstances, provide a recognized legal or ethical justification. And while it is often maintained that the force used should only be sufficient to repel the attacker and no more, defense of oneself and others is the most widely agreed upon justification for killing. Other justifications—such as faith, ideals, or patriotism—may initially prevent degradation of the personality, but consistent, intentional unethical behavior will negatively impact the character of even the most deluded.

One's ability to evaluate challenging ethical situations also breaks down with increased unprincipled behavior—lies beget lies. As rationalizations fall apart, the moral fiber of an individual will degrade and, with it, her or his lofty ideals. How many separate lies must a person tell before that individual becomes dishonest? How many times must someone repeat the same lie before he or she begins to believe it? Believing in one's own lies will surely erect barriers to personal and social progress. How can we rationally pursue the truth, uncover falsehoods, and work for positive social change when we can't even recognize the falsity of our own thoughts? And if we accept that regular unethical acts for ethical ends may result in the

degradation of moral character—literally damaging our ability to distinguish right from wrong—then it's only intuitive that an immoral character will be more likely to conceive of immoral ends, which may then lead to the choice to use further unethical means, and so on, in an ever descending spiral.

3. Unethical actions may even taint the original goal itself.

Persistent unethical behavior, even for some progressive goal, not only corrupts the individual but will likely also shift the goal into something less positive. Even when we work against such an undesired result, the means may contribute to shaping the ends. For example, the revolutionary goal of “freeing the people” has often become degraded into a slaughter that replaces one set of despotic rulers with another.

As the situation becomes more complicated and extended over time, using immoral means to achieve a positive aim will put that aim at risk of corruption. This happens because the larger the number of factors the more chance there is that the decision-making process will become tainted by ill-conceived rationalizations.

Part of the cost calculation made before engaging in immoral behavior, therefore, must include the potential damage done to the goal. And this careful consideration should be made not only prior to engaging in questionable behavior that directly affects nations but prior to relatively small intentional lapses from upstanding behavior—even when telling what are assumed to be “white lies.”

By the same token, if people stand silent against some enormously popular political opinion with which they don't agree merely for the sake of not disturbing others or not having others think negatively about them, society might, at first, be forgiving. However, had all such people openly stated their opinions and protested inhuman government actions, couldn't such atrocities as the Holocaust have been at least partially averted? The horrors of complicity are historically innumerable because complicity is a shade of dishonesty that frequently goes unrecognized. It is an act of passive dishonesty to refrain from expressing your sincere opposition

when such expression is called for. The silence of complicity and the cacophony of lies can be equal in their ability to halt social progress.

To sum up, then, using unethical means—from killing to “simple” dishonesty—can have unforeseen ends. They can degrade the character and even damage the very end for which they were engaged. These are reasons why, under Humanist ethics, such actions shouldn’t be entered into lightly and should be avoided save in exceptional and infrequent circumstances. 🌐

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