Enabling Factors of Killing:
Issues that Influence the Decision to Kill, or Not to Kill

By Lt. Col. Dave Grossman, USA (Ret.)


The first variable in the killing enabling process is the power of the leader or authority figure. Freud said, "Never underestimate the power of the need to obey," and in the 1960s a researcher, Stanley Milgram, demonstrated that over 60% of his study population would inflict potent electrical shocks on another human being in an "experiment" simply because a nearby authority figure demanded that they do so. If the "authority figure" was farther away, or if the victim was closer, the willingness to harm diminished. If, in combat, a legitimate leader is present and demands killing, it becomes extraordinarily difficult for the combatant to resist.

Another variable is the role of the group. Konrad Lorenz, in his book On Aggression, wrote that "Man is not a killer, but the group is." The group provides "mutual surveillance" (Ardant du Picq’s term) of each other. There is also a powerful "diffusion of responsibility" (a concept developed by John Darley and Bibb Latane) created in a group, which combines with a powerful drive toward "conformity" (a term coined by Soloman Asch) that makes it extremely difficult not to participate.

The "distance" (psychological or physical) between the killer and the victim is another ingredient that will enable killing. It is not difficult to get men to drop bombs from 20,000 feet, or to fire artillery from miles away, but it is extremely difficult to get a man to kill an enemy soldier up close and personal. Israeli research indicates that the victim of a kidnapping or hostage-taking is far more likely to be killed by the captors if the victim is blindfolded or hooded, because the blindfold creates a form of psychological distance that can enable the act of killing.

And, finally, there is the nature of the victim and the degree to which shooting this particular target can harm the enemy and help the shooters. Thus, enemy officers and those using key weapons become priority targets.

These dynamics are combined in a firing squad in such a way that the classic firing squad almost never fails to kill its designated target:

-- The nearby, legitimate leader who does not have to kill but who gives the order and demands that it be carried out.
-- The individual squad member, who has to shoot but does not have to make the decision, and who takes a form of "peace" from knowing that it may not have been "his" bullet that killed.
-- The victim is hooded, thus assisting the firing squad members in denying the humanity of their victim. The victim’s "crime" is known to the members, thus enabling them to rationalize the "need" for their actions, and psychologically and morally distancing themselves from the victim.

The dispersion of troops on the modern battlefield creates a distance between leaders and groups, and distance between members in a group. This dispersion can cause a breakdown in the classic enabling processes outlined above. In World War II, Brigadier General S.L.A. Marshall, the
Official Historian of the European Theater, found that only around 20% of the individual riflemen would fire their weapons at an exposed enemy (*Men Against Fire*, 1947).

Marshall’s findings have been somewhat controversial. Faced with scholarly concern about research methodology and conclusions, the scientist replicates his research. In the case of Marshall’s findings, other studies support his conclusions. Ardent du Picq’s surveys of French officers in the 1860s and his observations on ancient battles (*Battle Studies*, 1946), Keegan and Holmes’ numerous accounts of ineffectual firing throughout history (*Soldiers*, 1985), Richard Holmes’ assessment of Argentine firing rates during the Falklands War (*Acts of War*, 1985), Paddy Griffith’s data on the extraordinarily low killing rates among Napoleonic and American Civil War regiments (*Battle Tactics of the American Civil War*, 1989), the British Army’s laser reenactments of historical battles, the FBI’s studies of non-firing rates among law enforcement officers in the 1950s and 1960s, and other individual and anecdotal observations, all tend to confirm Marshall’s fundamental conclusion that man is not, by nature, a killer. Indeed, from a psychological perspective, the history of warfare can be viewed as a series of successively more effective tactical and mechanical devices to enable or force combatants to overcome their resistance to killing.

By 1946, the U.S. Army had accepted Marshall’s conclusions, and the Human Resources Research Office of the U.S. Army subsequently pioneered a revolution in combat training which eventually replaced firing at bulls-eye targets with deeply ingrained "conditioning" using realistic, man-shaped pop-up targets that fell when hit. Psychologists know that this kind of powerful conditioning is the only technique which will reliably influence a frightened human being, just as fire drills condition terrified school children to respond properly during a fire, and repetitious, "stimulus-response" conditioning in flight simulators enables frightened pilots to respond reflexively to emergency situations.

Throughout history, the ingredients of groups, leadership, and distance have been manipulated to enable and force combatants to kill, but the introduction of conditioning in modern training was a true revolution. The application and perfection of these basic conditioning techniques increased the rate of fire from nearly 20% in World War II to approximately 55% in Korea and around 95% in Vietnam. Similarly high rates of fire resulting from modern conditioning techniques can be seen in FBI data on law enforcement firing rates since the nation-wide introduction of modern conditioning techniques in the late 1960s.

One of the more dramatic examples of the value and power of this modern, psychological revolution in training can be seen in Richard Holmes’ observations of the 1982 Falklands War. The superbly trained (i.e., "conditioned") British forces were without air or artillery superiority and consistently outnumbered three-to-one while attacking the poorly trained but well equipped and carefully dug-in Argentine defenders. Superior British firing rates (which Holmes estimates to be well over 90%), resulting from modern training techniques, has been credited as a key factor in the series of British victories in that brief but bloody war. Any future army which attempts to go into battle without similar psychological preparation is likely to meet a fate similar to that of the Argentines.