

The Ethical Protectors

In 1996, Marines Jack Hoban and Robert Humphrey formed the Ethical Protectors program to teach Marines to use their powers to protect people by deescalating rather than escalating a conflict. This program combines the martial arts with character training to teach police officers and Marines what it means to be an “ethical protector”—that is, a person who protects life, self, and others, all others, including the enemy.¹

Hoban started with the Marines’ core values of honor, courage, and commitment. While these values are noble in purpose, without care, honor can become conceit, courage can become martyrdom, and commitment can become zealotry. The difference between Marines and the enemy, then, is a universal commitment to protect life. This protection extends to the enemy (all others) as long as they have stopped taking life. Protecting life, however, does not preclude taking life if the enemy is shedding blood.

Hoban’s first hurdle was to redefine a warrior as a person who



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kills only to protect others. The second hurdle was to demonstrate that protectors are far more ferocious than killers. A lion protecting a warthog dinner from a pack of hyenas may fight for it to some extent, but a mother lion protecting her cubs will fight to the death. The third hurdle was to stop the practice of dehumanizing the enemy by calling them “trash” or using racial slurs. Hoban wanted to be clear that killing people just because they disagree with our beliefs is indefensible.

Some Marines struggled to adjust their thinking, reminding Hoban that they were facing a ruthless enemy that terrorized civilians and beheaded soldiers. Being soft against a callous adversary would get innocent people killed. In response, Hoban argued that treating people with respect and dignity is not going to make a Marine less capable of doing what needs to be done.

Everyone deserves to be treated with respect and dignity, even the enemy. This is justice embodied.²

1 Personal, firsthand experience by Peter Rea in Jack E. Hoban’s seminar, “The Ethical Warrior Program,” New Jersey, September 2013.

2 Rea, P., Stoller, J. and Kolp, A. (2018). *Exception to the Rule: The Surprising Science of Character-Based Culture, Engagement, and Performance*. New York: McGraw-Hill Education, pp. 101-104.