

PRIORITY OF LIFE

By Sid Heal

It is a fact that tactical failures are chastened with death. What is often left unsaid, however, is that sometimes death is a necessary prerequisite for a satisfactory resolution. This harsh reality is one that the more timid choose to ignore but, in point of fact, human life is not equally valuable. If it were, any application of lethal force would be impossible since no one's life, including an innocent victim's, could justify the death of another. To say this point is contentious would be a gross understatement. The mere mention can put the mildest activist into an apoplectic fit. Notwithstanding, that does not make it any less true and it can be logically established using a hypothetical scenario that is merely a temporary substitute for reality.

Imagine a situation in which a person is being attacked by an assailant intent on killing the subject, and in which flight is not a viable option. If the only way to save the victim from certain death is to kill the assailant, nearly everyone agrees that lethal force against the assailant is both necessary and reasonable. Only exceptionally rare people would not use lethal force to defend themselves, and by extension, their loved ones. By definition then, they have placed the value of their lives (and/or their loved ones) over that of the assailant. Further arguments are then simply an extension of the same logic. For example, in a hostage recovery operation, it would require nearly inconceivable circumstances before any of us would consider the life of the hostage-taker as important as the life of a hostage. Moreover, we'd also choose

the lives of innocent bystanders over the life of the hostage-taker, not to mention our own and those of our fellow officers. And so a "priority of life" which clearly places more value on the lives of innocent victims than those who would harm them begins to emerge. By any understanding then, human life is not equally valuable.

Priority of life is a concept used to rank the intrinsic value of human life in certain situations; for our purposes here, tactical operations, disaster responses and the like. Understandably, such a ranking is not only highly subjective but not easily delineated. Therein lays the root of the controversy.

One of the surest methods for determining a priority of life for tactical interventions is by categories of people from opposite ends. It begins with self. While this sounds narcissistic, in actuality, none of us can accept the value someone else places on our own life, especially if it means sacrificing it solely on another's opinion. Consequently, the decision to give up one's own life is always personal and made only by the individual. This reveals an axiom¹ of self-preservation that is universal in all but the mentally ill. Conversely, the culprit is at the bottom of the hierarchy.

Using any sensible rationale whatsoever, it is patently impossible to place the life of the menace higher than anyone else's.

The analysis continues with two remaining categories: the lives of other officers and the lives of victims.² Some would impulsively identify the lives of victims as more important and be just as quick to defend their view by pointing out the risk to life of police officers or firefighters involved in rescuing hostages in tactical operations or injured persons in mishaps and disasters. As a matter of fact, however, a choice of alternatives between risking life and surrendering it is not the same. Any hope of survival involves the prospect, no matter how slight, of a favorable outcome. Such is not the case in the absolute certainty of death. This reveals a touchstone for determining whose life is most valued under the tragic circumstances. The question is posed to the decision-maker as a "conflicting binary option," meaning that there are only two options and the choice of one means forsaking the other. For example, if one must give up a life to save another, whose is it to be?

As terrible as this decision is on its face, it is deeper than it first appears in that a leader willing to sacrifice the life of a subordinate in order to save a victim

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makes the subordinate autonomous. This is based on the self-preservation axiom because no one willingly accepts his or her own death simply on another's decision. Only that individual has the power to make that decision. The implication is that subordinates who don't believe their leaders hold their lives in higher regard than others, quite naturally question even those decisions which may put their life at risk without forfeiting it. Lacking assurance, they do not accept orders on their face because of the distrust of their leader. Rather, they conduct their own assessments and make up their own minds. After all, there are virtually no penalties for insubordination greater than one's own death. The essential trust between leaders and subordinates is thus shattered.

As abhorrent as life and death decisions are, they are inherent in some types of tactical operations, especially when hostages are involved. Understanding the basic tenet — that human life is not equally valuable — then becomes a tactical imperative. Leaders handling these types of situations will be forced to decide who must die in order for another to live. The contemplation and consideration that such a decision deserves is best done without the agonizing emotional context and harsh time constraints of an unfolding situation. As Greek historian Thucydides noted, "Few things are brought to a successful issue by impetuous desire, but most by calm and prudent forethought." The most formidable leaders are those who prepare before they are tested. ■

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Endnotes

1. An axiom is simply a proposition whose truth is assumed to be self-evident even though there may be no ability to prove or disprove it.
2. While other categories might be defined, such as witnesses and bystanders, for all intents and purposes they would be indistinguishable from victims should their lives be in jeopardy.
3. Thucydides, 460-395 BC, author of *History of the Peloponnesian War*.