

# America and the Plague of 'Moral Idiocy'

By [Prof. Lawrence Davidson](#)

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*When it comes to applying rules of international law and ethics, the U.S. government and its mainstream media operate with stunning hypocrisy, what might be called "moral idiocy," says **Lawrence Davidson**.*

*It was on Aug. 12, 1949, that the nations of the world, with Nazi atrocities still in mind, updated what are known as the [Geneva Accords](#). This constituted an effort to once again set limits on the wartime behavior of states and their agents.*

Among other things, the accords set the range of acceptable behavior toward prisoners of war, established protections for the wounded and the sick, and the necessary protections to be afforded civilian populations within and approximate to any war-zone. Some 193 countries, including the United States, have ratified these agreements. Now, as of August 2016, they are 67-years-old. Have they worked? The answer is, in all too many cases, no.

In just about every major conflict since 1949 the Geneva Accords have been partially or completely ignored. Certainly that was the case in the Vietnam War, where civilian deaths came close to 1.5 million people. The treaties have had minimal impact in Afghanistan (during both the Russian and U.S. invasions), Iraq, the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories, Russia's military activity in Chechnya, and various conflicts in Africa and Asia.

The International Red Cross, which oversees observance of the accords, has not been able to do much more than shine lights on the breaches of the law and pick up the bloody pieces in the aftermath. At the rate our nation-states slaughter the innocent, it is a wonder there is an overpopulation problem.

## **Honored Only In the Breach**

There are likely two main reasons why the Geneva Accords have had so little influence on behavior: hypocrisy and ignorance.

As to hypocrisy, it is the case that, except in rare instances, there are no serious consequences for violating the law. Particularly, if you are agents of a strong state, or the ally (like Israel) of a strong state, the chances of state leaders or agents being arrested for war crimes or crimes against humanity is exceedingly low.

One wonders why nations bothered writing and enacting the Geneva Accords in the first place. The reason might have been specific to the moment. Faced with the atrocious behavior of leaders and soldiers (it is most often the behavior of the defeated party that is pointed to, so think here of the Holocaust), and the immediate outcry this behavior produced, the pressure for some sort of reaction carried the world's leaders forward to make

and ratify agreements to prevent future repetitions of such crimes.

Yet, as it turns out, these were not serious efforts except when applied to the defeated and the weak. For the strong, it is one thing to enact an international law, it is another thing altogether to apply it to oneself or other strong states.

As to ignorance, to date it is obvious that the politicians and soldiers who wage war, or who are responsible for the arming and training of allies who do so, do not regard seriously, and in some cases are not even familiar with, the Geneva Accords. In my experience, they often cannot, or will not, discuss them when asked, and regard statements referencing the [disobeying of illegal orders in the Uniform Code of Military Justice](#), to be rightfully honored only in the breach.

And that is the important point. We can safely say that when it comes to waging war, or for that matter, aiding and abetting others doing so, the accepted behavior of both soldiers, statesmen, and diplomats is that called moral idiocy.

### **Moral Idiocy**

Moral Idiocy is not something this writer, creative as he is, has simply made up. It is a real concept in psychology that has been around for over a century. However, in our increasingly relativistic societies, it has fallen into disuse.

Briefly, it means the "[Inability to understand moral principles](#) and values and to act in accordance with them, apparently without impairment of the reasoning and intellectual faculties." The key word here is "understand." It is not that moral idiots do not know, intellectually, that something called morality exists, but rather [they cannot understand its applicability to their lives](#), particularly their professional lives.

At best they think it is a personal thing that operates between friends or relatives and goes no further – a reduction of values to the narrowest of social spaces. This is paralleled by the absence of such values as guiding principles for one's actions in the wider world.

There are innumerable examples of such apparent moral idiots acting within the halls of power. The following short list specific to the U.S. reflects the opinion of this writer: George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, John Bolton, Oliver North, Richard Nixon and, my favorite, Henry Kissinger. Those reading this both in and outside of the United States can, no doubt, make a list of their own.

A particular incident related to Henry Kissinger's behavior gives us [an excellent example of this moral failing](#). The story is told by Stephen Talbot, a journalist and documentary producer, who in the early 2000s interviewed Robert McNamara, who had been U.S. Secretary of Defense for much of the Vietnam War years and was, by the 1990s, full of remorse and feelings of guilt for his behavior while in office.

Then, shortly thereafter, Talbot interviewed Kissinger, who had been Richard Nixon's Secretary of State and National Security Advisor during the Vietnam War's final years. Here is how Talbot describes what, for us, is the relevant part of his interview with Kissinger:

I told him I had just interviewed Robert McNamara in Washington. That got his attention. . . . and then he did an extraordinary thing. He began to cry. But no, not real tears. Before my eyes, Henry

Kissinger was acting. 'Boohoo, boohoo,' Kissinger said, pretending to cry and rub his eyes. 'He's [McNamara] still beating his breast, right? Still feeling guilty.' He spoke in a mocking, singsong voice and patted his heart for emphasis.

Kissinger obviously held McNamara and his feelings of guilt in utter disdain. He had actually committed greater crimes than McNamara - crimes documented in Christopher Hitchens's 2001 book, [The Trial of Henry Kissinger](#) - and yet apparently felt no remorse at all. How does one get like that?

## **A Learning Deficiency**

Let's start our speculation in this regard by stating that none of us is born with a gene that tells us right from wrong. Those notions are cultural, though some basic principles (say, seeing murder within one's tribal or clan network as morally wrong) come close to being universal.

Nonetheless, because we are not dealing with something genetic, it is quite possible that all of us have a potential for this moral failing. That being said, the vast majority of folks do successfully learn from their cultures that moral indifference is wrong and that committing what their society deems bad behavior should result in remorse and feelings of guilt.

It also seems that a minority does not learn this, or learn it only superficially. Most of this minority, realizing that such indifference is viewed negatively, keeps it hidden as much as they can. Yet when, on occasion, these closet moral idiots reach positions of power and influence, they can cause enormous damage.

There is a corollary to this. One can get socially sanctioned subgroups within which one is expected, at least temporarily, to act without reference to moral values. The military is a good example of this environment. And, under certain circumstances, so is the State Department or other foreign offices. In such a situation, most people "go with the flow" even if they know better, and then, in later life, some suffer from the trauma of the experience.

Moral idiocy can be seen as a very long-standing cultural flaw that often gives license to the violence that law and cultural mores are, simultaneously, trying to control. And, who are those who most often take advantage of this loophole? Ironically, it is the very people who lead our societies and those assigned to defend the culture and enforce the law. Lack of accountability makes for very poor public hygiene.

**Lawrence Davidson** is a history professor at West Chester University in Pennsylvania. He is the author of [Foreign Policy Inc.: Privatizing America's National Interest](#); [America's Palestine: Popular and Official Perceptions from Balfour to Israeli Statehood](#); and [Islamic Fundamentalism](#).

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Articles by: **Prof. Lawrence Davidson**

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