



**THE NATIONAL  
D-DAY MUSEUM  
NEW ORLEANS**

# What Would You Do? A Discussion About the Ethics of War

A Lesson Plan from  
The Department of Education of  
The National D-Day Museum

“America’s World War II Museum”

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# What Would You Do?

## A Discussion About the Ethics of War

War brings about extraordinary circumstances that, at times, require ethical decisions of great importance. Sometimes decisions must be made between one's code of ethics and the military objectives of war. The following activity will allow the student to experience the complex reasoning process of ethical decision-making during the time of war.

**OBJECTIVE:** After studying real-life scenarios from WWII, students will debate ethical questions using their critical thinking and persuasive speaking skills to develop and present cogent arguments.

**BENCHMARKS: Grades 7-8:** ELA-1-M3; ELA-1-M5; ELA-7-M2; ELA-7-M1; ELA-1-M4; ELA-2-M6; ELA-2-M4; ELA-2-M2; ELA-4-M1; ELA-4-M3; ELA-4-M6; ELA-7-M4; ELA-4-M4; ELA-4-M2

**Grades 9-12:** ELA-1-H3; ELA-1-H4; ELA-1-E7; ELA-2-H4; ELA-7-H4; ELA-7-H2; ELA-7-H1; ELA-4-H1; ELA-4-H3; ELA-4-H4; ELA-4-H6

### DIRECTIONS:

1. Discuss the meaning of ethics—principles or standards of human conduct, sometimes called morals. Ask students to give examples from their own personal experiences when they made decisions that incorporated their personal value system. Emphasize the difficulty of making ethical decisions, especially in time of war.
2. Distribute and read aloud the three case studies. Do not discuss them at this point.
3. Divide the class into groups of three. Within each group, students should choose a recorder, timekeeper, and spokesperson for each question. (Students should choose a different role for each question, thus giving each student a turn with each job.)
4. Distribute student guidelines. Using the teacher commentary worksheet, read each question using the additional explanations to guide the students in the decision making process.
5. Students will discuss each question within their group, explore possible options, and record their final decisions within a chosen time frame. The recorder in each group should record the group's answers on their own paper. (Set a time limit for each question so that students do not get stuck on one question and fail to finish the complete assignment).
6. Students will present their findings orally. (The class should debate one question at a time before moving on to the next question.) Read aloud *What really happened* after each question has been fully debated. Emphasize that these are all real life situations and that difficult decisions like these had to be made many more times during WWII.

**ASSESSMENT:** Components for assessment include the group worksheet, oral presentation, and defense of their argument.

**ENRICHMENT:** Students can choose current ethical issues to debate such as cloning, euthanasia, or the U.S. policy on entering other nations' civil conflicts.

## *What Would You Do?*

### Three wartime ethical dilemmas

1. You are the president of the United States—Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces. Your country is at total war. Five years ago you signed an international treaty outlawing the use of poisonous gas on the battlefield. Your opponent has also signed this treaty. Now you are losing the war and facing a shortage of conventional weapons and soldiers. Intelligence reports indicate the enemy will be mounting a major offensive against your army in seven days. This greater force will have the advantage in men, vehicles, artillery, and ammunition. Your Army Chief of Staff informs you that your army could equalize conditions on the battlefield by firing artillery shells loaded with surplus poison gas at the advancing enemy army. ***What would you do?***
  
2. You are Chief of Intelligence for OSS (the forerunner of the CIA). Your agents in the field have captured an enemy agent working deep inside your office as a double agent. You suspect that he has vital information about the enemy's production of a nuclear bomb. The information he could provide about where the bomb is being built may allow you to destroy the factory, saving tens of thousands of lives. He refuses to answer any of your questions. ***What would you do?***
  
3. You work for the British Intelligence—MI-6. Your office has secretly cracked the German *Enigma* code—a program you call *Ultra*—which allows you to listen in on much of the secret German communication. On November 12, 1940, you intercept German messages describing Operation Moonlight Sonata—an air raid in great strength for the night of November 14/15, 1940, against the cathedral and industrial city of Coventry. You have only days to act on the information. But anything you do will alert the Germans that you had foreknowledge of the raid—probably from breaking their *Enigma* code. Germany will then change the code system that will eliminate any future information being retrieved. ***What would you do?***

## ***What Would You Do?***

### **Teacher Comments**

1. You are the president of the United States—Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces. Your country is at total war. Five years ago you signed an international treaty outlawing the use of poisonous gas on the battlefield. Your opponent has also signed this treaty. Now you are losing the war and facing a shortage of conventional weapons and soldiers. Intelligence reports indicate the enemy will be mounting a major offensive against your army in seven days. This greater force will have the advantage in men, vehicles, artillery, and ammunition. Your Army Chief of Staff informs you that your army could equalize conditions on the battlefield by firing artillery shells loaded with surplus poison gas at the advancing enemy army. *What would you do?*

#### ***Possible Options:***

- *Abide by the international treaty you signed five years ago and use the advance warning of the attack to mobilize your forces to their best advantage.*
- *Use every means available to you to ensure victory, including the outlawed gas.*

#### ***What Really Happened:***

*Poison gas was first used during World War I to break the trench warfare stalemate. Both the Allied and the Axis powers had poisonous gas weapons during World War II, but only Italy (in Ethiopia) and Japan (in China) used them. The decision not to use these weapons was not based on any treaty, but on the unpredictable behavior of gas weapons. (They could cause damage to one's own troops and were often ineffective.)*

2. You are Chief of Intelligence for OSS (the forerunner of the CIA). Your agents in the field have captured an enemy agent working deep inside your office as a double agent. You suspect that he has vital information about the enemy's production of a nuclear bomb. The information he could provide about where the bomb is being built may allow you to destroy the factory, saving tens of thousands of lives. He refuses to answer any of your questions. *What would you do?*

#### ***Possible Options:***

- *Increase your intelligence efforts to find out where the bomb is being built, continue to root out double agents.*
- *Administer truth serum to the double agent (which may or may not work.)*
- *Deprive the double agent of sleep, food, and water. (This process will not reach its maximum potential for at least four days.)*
- *Torture the double agent with bodily harm until he reveals the information.*

#### ***What Really Happened:***

*Throughout the war, the OSS carried out special operations in many European countries. These "cloak and dagger" operations often turned violent as agents vied with each other for information about their enemy's strengths, positions, and plans. There is a great deal of documentary evidence about the Nazi's cruel treatment of captured special agents. Evidence*

*exists that the Allies, too, engaged in brutal treatment to extract vital information in extraordinary situations, but never on the systematic, government-sponsored level of the Nazis.*

3. You work for the British Intelligence—MI-6. Your office has secretly cracked the German *Enigma* code—a program you call *Ultra*—which allows you to listen in on much of the secret German communication. On November 12, 1940, you intercept German messages describing Operation Moonlight Sonata—an air raid in great strength for the night of November 14/15, 1940, against the cathedral and industrial city of Coventry. You have only days to act on the information. But anything you do will alert the Germans that you had foreknowledge of the raid—probably from breaking their *Enigma* code. Germany will then change the code system that will eliminate any future information being retrieved. *What would you do?*

***Possible Options:***

- *Increase air defenses around Coventry and evacuate as much of the city as possible even though it will alert the Germans.*
- *Allow the raid to take place, thereby protecting the secret that you have broken the German code. Hundreds, possibly thousands of people will be killed in the air raid.*
- *Secretly evacuate the children, elderly, and hospitalized from the city and hope that any German agents do not detect this evacuation and report it to the German high command.*

***What Really Happened:***

*Churchill made the difficult decision not to warn the city of Coventry about the impending air raid. He felt that the panic that might ensue could cause more casualties than the actual bombing. And Ultra had to be protected at all costs. The ability to read the German codes had largely saved England during the Battle of Britain over the summer of 1940. On the night of November 14/15 the raid took place just as the Ultra messages had indicated. The city's gas mains and railroad connections were destroyed. Twelve aircraft industry factories were badly damaged. Five hundred and fifty-four citizens of Coventry were killed and 4,865 people were wounded. But Ultra had been protected. The Allies continued to benefit throughout the rest of the war by being able to decode German communications.*

*What Would You Do?*  
Guidelines for Ethical Decision Making  
**Student Worksheet**

**Directions: for each of the three ethical situations, answer the following questions.**

1. What is the ethical issue or problem?
2. Who are the interested parties?
3. What facts must be considered?
4. What are the values involved?
5. What are your options? List at least three. For each option consider the following questions:
  - What are the best-case and worse-case scenarios if you choose this option?
  - Will anyone be harmed by this decision? If so, how will they be harmed?
6. Make a decision. Consider the following questions:
  - Is the good brought about by your decision outweighed by the potential harm that might be done?
  - Will this decision produce the greatest good (or the least amount of harm) for the greatest number of people?
  - Are you choosing an option that gives priority to that which boosts the human spirit? Why or why not?
  - Are you willing to make your decision a rule, policy, or precedent that you and others in your situation can follow in similar situations in the future?
7. Be prepared to defend your decision.

# *What Would You Do?*

## Guidelines for Ethical Decision Making

### Teacher Comments

1. What is the ethical issue or problem?  
*It is important to recognize that every problem has more than one component, and that not every component involves an ethical decision. Therefore, clearly identify the ethical issue involved in the case and make sure that it is not confused with any other elements of the problem.*
2. Who are the interested parties?  
*Identify who has a stake in the decision. Often there are more parties whose interests should be taken into account than is immediately obvious.*
3. What facts must be considered?  
*Do not list all the facts, only the facts that pertain to the ethical decision.*
4. What are the values involved?  
*Think through the values that are at stake in making this decision. Is it a question of trust or fairness? Is justice a consideration?*
5. What are your options? List at least three. For each option answer the following questions.
  - What are the best-case and worse-case scenarios if you choose this option?
  - Will anyone be harmed by this decision? If so, how will they be harmed?
6. Make a decision.  
*People often begin the entire decision-making process by coming into a case with a decision already in mind. However, as the students proceed through this worksheet, they are forced to look at each case from multiple perspectives rather than a fixed position. Remember that the process is as important as the decision.*
  - Is the benefit brought about by your decision outweighed by the potential harm that might be done?
  - Will this decision produce the greatest good (or the least amount of harm) for the greatest number of people?
  - Are you choosing an option that gives priority to that which boosts the human spirit? Why or why not?
  - Are you willing to make your decision a rule, policy, or precedent that you and others can follow in similar situations in the future?
7. Be prepared to defend your decision.  
*If the students have thought through the process and made a decision based on sound reasoning, then they should be able to defend their decision.*