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When Loyalties Compete: Making the Right Choice

by the editor

What guides members of the armed forces when they face the dilemma of choosing between competing loyalties? At the Leavenworth Ethics Seminar in November 2011, two participants presented a paper on competing loyalties. They defined loyalty as primarily an emotional, non-rational attachment to a person or idea. They concluded that, in itself, loyalty is morally and ethically neutral. It takes on moral/ethical content when it is exercised in specific, concrete situations that require a personal sacrifice or a choice among competing moral or ethical convictions.

It is the object of our loyalty-in-action that determines its moral and ethical content, for good or ill. Inseparably intertwined with the moral character of that object is our motive for acting loyally toward it in a specific situation. When loyalties compete, people can be placed under very intense emotional stress.

For example, if a soldier knows that another member of his unit has committed a criminal act in combat, there are two possible objects that compete for his loyalty. Does he respond with loyalty to the legal and ethical obligations expected of unit members by reporting the act to his chain of command, or does he respond with loyalty to the soldier who committed the crime by remaining silent? These kinds of situations have occurred during our engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan in recent years.

Since at least the time of SLA Marshall's reporting on soldier loyalties in small units during the Korean Conflict, we have been very aware of the strength of the bonds that are formed within squads and platoons under the intense stress of combat. Unit cohesion has become a significant subject of research and practice in the training and education of military personnel and units. Strong cohesion is essential to effective performance of a unit's mission at all times, and especially during the confusion and emotional stress of the battlefield, or similar crises.

The strength of unit cohesion in such emergencies depends in large part on the loyalties that have been formed beforehand among members of the unit and between unit leaders and their subordinates. Such strong cohesion, however, is not unique to the military forces of Western Civilization. We see it displayed powerfully in our studies of ancient warfare as well as in the various civilizations of our day. The Greek soldiers at Thermopylae, the Legionnaires of Caesar in Gaul, the Persian warriors of Darius, the sailors, aircrews, and soldiers of World War II Japan, Germany, and the Soviet Union, and the jihadists of the 21st century have also acted on the basis of intense loyalties within their units, to their nations, or to their concept of God's will.

The ultimate aims of the leaders of those peoples and their warriors, however, differed greatly in moral and ethical content from the goals of the American people and, indeed, all of the English-speaking peoples of the modern era. The visions of a Japanese Empire in the western Pacific, a Thousand-Year Reich in Europe, the eventual domination of the world by Communism, and the vision of a world united under an Islamist theocracy are quite different from the goals of the peoples and leaders of Great Britain, Poland, Canada, Australia, America, New Zealand, France and other nations who opposed them during WWII and the Cold War—and who are opposing them today. Thus the higher loyalties of the military men and women who fought in those forces were attached to widely different visions of how the world should be organized and how international relationships should be conducted.

Is the nation-state, or a people group—or a band of committed Islamists—the bedrock source of moral and ethical content for the Western soldier's loyalties? The answer, clearly, is "No!"—because people may choose to follow political, religious or military leaders whose goals are evil and destructive, and loyalty to such leaders and causes is, thus, itself evil.

In the movie, "Chariots of Fire" (1981), a crisis occurs during the 1924 Olympic Games in Paris when the fastest British 100-meter runner, Eric Liddell, is scheduled to run his final race on a Sunday. A devout Christian who sets aside Sunday as a day of rest and worship, he informs the leadership of the British Olympic Team that he cannot compete on that day of the week, out of respect for his duty to God and his understanding of biblical truth. He is summoned to a meeting of the top British Olympic leaders, including the Prince of Wales, his future king. They seek to persuade him to change his mind. After a somewhat testy opening round of comments, in which Liddell affirms his commitment to follow his conscience even if it costs him Olympic Gold, the following excerpts from the script bring out the conversation most relevant to our topic of loyalties, with an opening statement that sets the terms for the competing loyalties in this situation:

Lord Cadogan (who had served in the Boer War): "Hear, hear. In my day it was King first and God after."

Duke of Sutherland (Under-Secretary of State for Air): "Yes, and the War To End Wars bitterly

proved your point!"

Eric Liddell: "God made countries, God makes kings, and the rules by which they govern. And those rules say that the Sabbath is His. And I for one intend to keep it that way."

HRH Edward, Prince of Wales: "There are times when we are asked to make sacrifices in the name of that loyalty [to country]. And without them our allegiance is worthless. As I see it, for you, this is such a time.

Eric Liddell: "Sir, God knows I love my country. But I can't make that sacrifice."

The leaders soon discover that Liddell would be glad to change places with another strong runner who is scheduled to compete on a weekday, and the crisis is resolved. Liddell leaves the room.

Duke of Sutherland: "A sticky moment, George."

Lord Birkenhead (who had served in WWI and was a former Lord Chancellor): "Thank God for Lindsay [the other runner, who offered to make the exchange]. I thought the lad had us beaten."

Duke of Sutherland: "He did have us beaten, and thank God he did."

Lord Birkenhead: "I don't quite follow you."

Duke of Sutherland: "The 'lad', as you call him, is a true man of principles and a true athlete. His speed is a mere extension of his life, its force. We sought to sever his running from himself."

Lord Birkenhead: "For his country's sake, yes."

Lord Birkenhead: "No sake is worth that, least of all a guilty national pride."

(Note: This movie is based upon fact. Eric Liddell interrupted his preparation to go to China as a missionary in the mid-1920s in order to compete in the 1924 Olympics. After winning the 400-meter race, he completed those preparations and lived for the rest of his life as a missionary in China, dying in 1945 in a Japanese internment camp.)

This scenario, based upon a real situation, introduces the question that the American military, and the forces of other nations, must address. What is the spiritual source that serves as the bedrock from which we derive our military moral and ethical values and beliefs? My answer to this question is that, for America—and all of the English-speaking peoples—the bedrock source of moral and ethical standards and ideals is the Bible, the Old and New Testaments. Our nations were founded largely by men and women who derived their worldview from Scripture. Their understanding of the histories of Greece, Rome and Europe were also influential, but in order to discern God's purposes in human history, they turned to the Bible. This influence on the founding of America arose not only from the political and military leaders during the process of our nation's founding, but also from the large majority of Christians who shaped the culture and society of their time.

Therefore, we in the U.S. Armed Forces must acknowledge and respect the fact that American military "values" and the moral and ethical content of our Declaration of Independence, Constitution and statutory requirements are derived primarily from the Bible, and thus from belief in the God who reveals Himself there. Other streams of moral and ethical belief may be intermixed in that bedrock foundation, but awareness of God's nature, purposes, and commandments is the indispensable support for our military values, our understanding of our duty, and the relationships we form with those among whom we serve. What do you think?

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Send comments to: jfweditor@faithandwar.org