

Where Obedience and Loyalty End

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Obedience and loyalty are often included in lists of military virtues. Clearly, command or organizational morale and discipline would be difficult to maintain without them. And professional military officers recognize that without adequate discipline and morale their objectives would be very difficult if not impossible to achieve. This suggests that for servicemen there is an important moral imperative at work--be obedient and loyal to your superiors--an imperative which leads to the inescapable conclusion that these virtues ought not end. The title of this paper will be disconcerting to some, then, because it presupposes that there is an end or limit to obedience and loyalty. In this paper my purpose is to examine the concepts of obedience and loyalty, to discuss whether there are in fact limits to them, and, if so, to determine what these are.

Obedience is usually defined as doing what one is told, or at least being willing to. Loyalty is being steadfast in one's allegiance to a person or cause or to one's country. Obedience and loyalty are compatible and mutually supportive. Both are highly regarded in military circles because they are essential to the "good order and discipline" of a command or organization and, consequently, to the accomplishment of one's objectives.

Servicemen have long recognized that their immediate obedience to orders may not only save their own lives but the lives of their comrades as well. They have also recognized that a command without loyalty--like a house divided¹--will

not stand. This gives rise to an institutional bias which sees the requirement for obedience and loyalty in absolutist terms. The result is an oversimplified view of a serviceman's duty to be obedient and loyal. A senior military officer's comment, which was carried in national newspapers several months ago, exemplifies this viewpoint. He was quoted as saying that an officer simply obeys his orders. The implication was that an officer has no choice in this regard. Whether this official was quoted out of context, I do not know. But rhetoric such as this is of little value if one really believes that moral qualities are important in one's servicemen. Genuine moral quality is a product of good will coupled with informed, free choice.

The view sketched above makes obedience and loyalty a very practical matter. It makes these qualities simply the means to an end--good order and discipline--which is essential for success in battle. What makes obedience and loyalty admirable in this analysis is that in instantiating these, the desire of the individual is consciously suppressed for a reason--the good of the whole command. Sometimes, however, one's obedience and loyalty is not praiseworthy, even if it contributes to good order and discipline. A serviceman, for instance, who is obedient and loyal because he is afraid of punishment is not virtuous at all. His action in that case is selfish rather than selfless. This shows that in judging whether one's conduct is admirable, or virtuous, other considerations are also important. The

question is, what makes obedience and loyalty in a serviceman praiseworthy?

What essentially makes these admirable is that in instantiating them one subjugates his own will, desire, and even safety for the good of the whole. The emphasis is on good will, but this good will can never be separated from one's knowledge of the situation. Knowledge is important because it provides us with understanding of the values involved and a way of sorting out what is right so that we may will to do it. Moral conduct requires good will and understanding in bringing about the right or that which is good in one's life.

We might say, then, that one's conduct is morally praiseworthy if he satisfies these four conditions. First, he must know the reason he is called upon to act, i.e., the end he is seeking or moving toward. Second, he must understand that the goal or end itself is good. Third, he must know whether the manner in which he is to accomplish the action is appropriate or compatible with the end he seeks. And finally, having satisfied himself that the first three conditions are morally acceptable, he must act in accordance with his understanding, even if he must subordinate his own welfare. Each of these conditions will be satisfied usually in light of American societal values or norms. In other words, the American value system is the context in which our moral decisions must be worked out.

History is replete with examples in which good will was present but understanding was not. Actions where obedience and loyalty lose their relationship to understanding lead to cases in which we recognize what Aristotle would have called an 'excess' in obedience and loyalty.² This excess accounts for German soldiers' actions in the holocaust in World War II. It accounts for Lieutenant Calley's actions at My Lai in Viet Nam. It also accounts for less tragic, but equally wrong actions today. But appeal to military virtues will not justify actions in any of these cases. In short, they will not routinely justify actions which violate the ethical norms of our society. Without some degree of moral understanding there is no moral quality to one's actions. Unconditional obedience and loyalty, then, are undesirable because, almost imperceptibly, they become the end in itself rather than the means to an end. Unfortunately, these virtues, seen as ends in themselves, are stripped of their moral quality because as such they lose sight of the end which defines the context of one's action and, consequently, its actual moral quality. Unconditional obedience and loyalty is dangerous because understanding of the ends and means and their proper relationship, which is essential to moral conduct, is either not present or is somehow suspended.

Knowledge of the end, means, and the proper relationship between them, brings to our actions those distinctly human qualities which constitute genuine

morality. The end identifies the reason we act or specifies our intention. The means is the way we act or will act to carry out our intention. Knowledge of both is essential to understanding whether an action is moral. But there is one other important task. We must also assess the relationship between the intended end and the action intended to achieve it. This relationship deserves the closest attention; for though I may act for a praiseworthy reason, I may also act to accomplish the end in a way that is immoral. I may, for instance, act for the welfare of my service, but if I lie, cheat, or steal in order to accomplish this then my action is not praiseworthy.³

The nature of moral responsibility is such that individuals must often choose between moral principles. We all recognize, for example, that it is not praiseworthy to tell lies. Yet we also know that it is not always praiseworthy to tell the truth. We understand from experience that our moral principles sometimes conflict and that when they do we often resolve the difficulties in favor of the higher principle. So if we lie to save someone's life, for instance, we are acting in a praiseworthy way because we are acting to preserve that which is most precious--human life. Some might say that the lie in this instance was wrong, but justified. Others that it was not a lie at all, but an instance of something else. However one works this out, the point is that moral choices often involve sorting one's values out. And when these values conflict,

they are in fact sorted out in terms of higher and lower values. Failure or inability to sort them out will usually result in indecision, unhappiness, or guilt.

The ultimate moral guide for an officer, who wants to sort out questions of obedience and loyalty, is his oath of office.⁴ Imbedded in this guide are the values by which a citizen-soldier must resolve his day-to-day moral conflicts.

I do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign or domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or spirit of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which I am about to enter. So help me God.

Lieutenant Colonel W. C. Gregson, USMC recently pointed out that the officers oath is often confused with the enlisted. He writes, "the difference between these oaths is fundamental. Officers often mistakenly assume that their oath requires obedience to the president and superior officers; but it requires obedience only to the Constitution of the United States."⁵

The officer's oath is the basis of his obligation to this country. It contains the values he is sworn to uphold and by which he is expected to conduct himself. The officer,

then, must focus on this oath in determining when to be obedient and loyal, and to whom. He must keep in mind that he is first of all a servant of the Constitution and the American people. He must understand that his service is the means to an end, the preservation of our liberty. And that he is sworn not just to preserve the good order and discipline of his unit, but to preserve the integrity of the American way of life. He must understand that discharging his duties "well and faithfully" entails being an obedient and loyal servant because he is supporting and defending the Constitution. The presumption is that his superiors are also obedient and loyal servants of the Constitution.

For the serviceman, then, the nature of service may well imply the imperatives--be obedient and loyal to your superior. But there is an implicit material conditional in our culture. The conditional is: if your superiors are acting as responsible, moral executives of the United States. It is this conditional which provides the basis for legal sanctions against harassing or firing "whistleblowers."

The conditionality of our obedience and loyalty to superiors supports the belief that unconditional obedience and loyalty is a greater threat to good order and discipline in a command than conditional obedience and loyalty. It also supports the idea that while the means is often justified by the end, not every means is so justified. Our society implicitly expects our obedience and loyalty to be conditional in this way. It is yet another facet of our society which assures the survival of our freedom.

This suggests that every decision I make affects the freedom of our country. That's an alluring thought but, surely its not the case. One might bring the question back to the 'practical' level by asking, what happens when one is supposed to be obedient and loyal to a superior who uses immoral means to accomplish the desired end. Or what happens when one's senior is doing something that is not for the good of the country?

The oath of obedience, as I have suggested, helps us put the matter into proper focus and perspective. But this does not change the fact that the implementation of one's values and the preservation of one's integrity is a personal matter. Ultimately, personal values and situational factors will determine what one will do in a difficult situation. The decision about the actual limits of one's obedience and loyalty is, therefore, also personal. This having been said, we should be careful not to delude ourselves. We should not believe that we can fall short in our moral obligations without compromising our integrity. Integrity implies no bending, however slight.

I would suggest three points at which one's obedience and loyalty to a superior should end.

- 1) When your personal integrity is at stake, i.e., when you are personally asked or ordered to falsify, misrepresent, or perform morally objectionable actions.

2) When the actions of your superior seriously compromises or undermines good order and discipline in the command, organization, or service.

3) When the actions of a superior compromises or undermines the welfare of the nation.

The first point is, in my opinion, a clear line. It is easy to discern and is one that should not be crossed by any commissioned officer. One's reputation, sense of self-worth, and value to the command depend on integrity. You cannot "well and faithfully" discharge anything by being dishonest.

The second and third points are more troublesome. These points, which I have suggested as limits to obedience and loyalty, are relatively obscure. What does it mean to compromise or undermine, or to do so seriously? The answer is a personal one. Only the officer concerned can determine what seriously compromising or undermining good order and discipline in a command means. That is not to say that there is no answer. There are actions in fact which fit the description and ought to be exposed. But these will, as a matter of course be relatively uncommon.

The second and third points depend a great deal on one's rank, position, and authority. While the second and third points pertain to senior officers, the third point is

almost exclusively the concern of the most senior military officers. Major General Singlaub's opposition to the removal of troops from Korea, for example, may be seen as a personal response to the third point. Few junior officers would have the opportunity to act in response to this point. Their action would be limited almost exclusively to the second.

There is, perhaps, a legitimate concern that the young and relatively immature would be overzealous in their interpretation of the second point and question orders which are in fact proper. There is no solution to this, other than their proper moral education. Through professional education and experience they will learn quickly what is proper or improper in their commanders.

If an officer must disobey or be disloyal to a superior because one of these three principles has been breached, his conduct is actually admirable in so far as he is responding to higher values. His actions are praiseworthy in that they preserve the integrity of the country, service, family, and self.

Some may feel uneasy about this. They may feel that servicemen who believe their obedience and loyalty is conditional may begin to question orders and that the result will be chaos. This is not true. This country has always known that its leaders must, ultimately, use their own judgment in deciding what is good for the country. That is what "special trust and confidence" is all about. And it is important to note that the concept of special trust and

confidence applies to all commissioned officers. Moral considerations are not just for seniors but for officers, because moral problems occur at every level.

At the beginning of this paper I said that the title suggested that there is a limit to obedience and loyalty in servicemen. I have argued here that there isn't. The question is not whether one should be obedient and loyal, but to what or whom. I have also argued that an officer's oath binds him to support and defend the Constitution and that this entails obedience and loyalty to his superiors. I have further argued, however, that this obedience and loyalty is conditional and that this conditionality is not only acceptable in our society, but expected. Absolute obedience and loyalty, then, are not the aim. The aim of these military virtues is the establishment and maintenance of good order and discipline through moral conduct based on understanding and good will.

ENDNOTES

¹Mark 3:25.

²Aristotle, The Basic Works of Aristotle, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), p. 959.

³I do not intend to dismiss summarily such things as covert operations which might require deceit. Treatment of this facet, however, would take us too far from the question at hand.

⁴This oath is contained in Title 5, United States Code.

⁵W. C. Gregson, "The Officer's Ethic," Proceedings, September 1987, p. 22.

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