

PROFESSIONAL FORUM



On Loyalty

MAJOR ROBERT B. ADOLPH, JR.

A senior officer once told me this true story: While serving in Vietnam as a captain in command of a rifle company, he faced the ultimate test of loyalty. He was given orders by his battalion commander that would soon take his unit into combat. But after hearing the operations order, he perceived tactical flaws in his boss's plan and emphatically told him why. The battalion commander chose to discount his objections and ordered him to comply. When the combat operation had been executed, many of the soldiers within the captain's command were either dead or wounded.

The captain in this story did what many of us would do: After voicing his honest objections to what he felt was a flawed plan, he loyally executed his orders. But was he right? And can "right" be measured in terms of lives alone?

These questions beg for answers, but no meaningful answers are possible. We can only make subjective judgments. Another question comes immediately to mind. Was the battalion commander's judgment really wrong or as Carl von Clausewitz might have asked, "Was he caught in the fog of war?" After all, the conduct of war is calculated risk in which not all possibilities can be foreseen. Or was the battalion commander, in this instance, just unlucky?

There is another question here that must be examined: To whom does a subordinate commander owe his greater

loyalty in the situation described? To his commander or to the soldiers he commands? These questions strike at the very heart of command, and yet they are rarely examined in contemporary military literature. And since the discussion of loyalty is often as emotional and personal as it is professional, most of us have deep feelings concerning the subject.

Loyalty to those of us who share the profession of arms is the most important, most often misunderstood, and without question the most enigmatic of the traits considered essential in a good soldier. No military leader can hope to train an effective unit in peacetime or wartime without the loyalty of his subordinates. But what is this quality and why is it so important?

TIE THAT BINDS

A working definition of loyalty for the purposes of this article is the following: The patriotic, professional, and emotional tie that binds a person (a soldier) to something (the United States) or someone (a soldier's leaders). Loyalty is demanded of soldiers of all ranks. But loyalty to whom or what?

First, as soldiers we all swear an oath to "support and defend the Constitution of the United States." Therefore, let us start with the Constitution.

We as soldiers owe our first loyalty to

the ideals embodied in this document. These ideals are often summed up by the single word "liberty." We elect politicians to govern us and to "protect and preserve" the liberty that we consider so precious. The Congress, with the authority vested in it by the Constitution, raises armed forces as the instrument best suited for protecting and preserving that liberty. The Constitution also appoints the President as the Commander in Chief of those armed forces. And so begins the chain of command.

But the thread that binds us all is the thread of loyalty that is best represented in the first three words of the Constitution, "We the people." A soldier's loyalty starts here. We as soldiers are the instruments of that document and of the collective will of our people. On the basis of the ideals set forth in the Constitution, then, we risk our lives and *subordinate our wills* to the execution of the military means that are deemed appropriate to the ultimate preservation of the republic.

But since all human beings are flawed, so is all human endeavor, especially in the conduct of war. As a result, there are no perfect documents. The Constitution has been modified (clarified) many times by the Bill of Rights and by the decisions handed down over the years by the Supreme Court. And there are no perfect commanders. Yet our profession demands that we strive for perfection because lives hang in the balance.

Like a surgeon, a combat leader can ill afford to make mistakes. But unlike the surgeon, who has a quiet operating room, years of training and experience, and generous resources, the combat leader often conducts his operations under the most adverse conditions, in many cases without significant experience, and never with the resources he would like to have at his disposal.

Aside from those who have served in the position, nobody can truly understand the awesome responsibilities of a combat leader. Even in peacetime, leadership places enormous burdens on a soldier. Attempting to train a unit for combat—given the time constraints, resource scarcities, and personnel limitations—is a 24-hour-a-day and seven-day-a-week job.

Where does loyalty fit into this equation? In fact, it doesn't, because loyalty cannot be quantified. It can't be slipped in neatly between operations and maintenance. But loyalty is, without question,

the single most important *human* quality that makes a unit work.

Two things seem to influence loyalty more than others—competence and caring. Competence is something that can be learned. Since we have what many consider the best-educated officers and NCOs in the world today, let us assume that most of those who lead our Army today are competent. But what about caring? Can one truly learn to care about what is essentially a group of strangers, at least initially?

Caring about subordinates is, without question, essential in building that intangible bond of loyalty. Caring too little for his subordinates will have a devastating effect on a unit's command climate—that intangible feeling of well being that a soldier develops as a member of a high-quality military organization. At the tactical level, it is not only loyalty to the Constitution that makes a unit run but loyalty to one's comrades and leaders.

A leader who does not care about his

subordinates, or who cares too little, cannot build that intangible bridge that is so important. Instead, he must walk the tightrope between mission and men. The responsibility borne by a leader in this context is without equal in any other profession; the cost of a wrong decision must sometimes be measured in terms of lives and mauled bodies.

At the other end of the tightrope is mission accomplishment, which is no less important. In combat, a leader's decisions are generally judged correct by his superiors if, in the end, the mission is accomplished. The cost in terms of lives is subordinated to the greater good of the whole—meaning the larger organization's mission and ultimately that of the nation.

On the other hand, it is possible for a leader to care too much, and this is equally dangerous. A leader who cares too deeply for his soldiers runs the risk of becoming emotionally involved with the people he may, in turn, have to expose to their potential deaths. The emotional



trauma that leader experiences, brought about by feelings of ultimate responsibility, can be crushing and can make him ineffective as a leader.

Walking this tightrope successfully depends upon the individual leader's human as well as professional qualities. Aside from developing his own competence, his most important goal should be the establishment of the ties of loyalty upon which trust grows. It is almost axiomatic that a leader who is not trusted will not hold that position of responsibility for long or function effectively in it while he does.

Some of us may have known leaders who seemed to equate being loyal subordinates with being "yes men." Perception, of course, is not always reality, but it must be understood that what superiors and subordinates alike perceive is often reality for *them*. Therefore, just as he must establish a good relationship with his subordinates, he must also establish a relationship with his superiors that is loyal yet wholly professional.

A loyal subordinate can be defined as one who states his opinion candidly but who loyally executes his superiors' orders as though they were his own. Any soldier who strives to live up to the precepts of this definition knows the pitfalls—in some cases, his own subordinates will view him as a "yes man" or worse.

To keep such perceptions from becoming the reality for his subordinates, a leader must loyally support his subordi-

nates. It is his loyal support to them that encourages initiative, forgives honest errors, and in turn develops loyalty in them. Loyalty is never given, though; it is earned. A leader who demands the support of his subordinates but fails to support them is a fool. This may mean supporting them in some cases even if he believes they are wrong. Leaders should encourage their subordinates and avoid being negative at all costs.

Counseling is a key to developing loyal relationships. Unfortunately, though, counseling has come to have a negative connotation in the Army. But counseling sessions, formal and informal, that concentrate on the positive aspects of a subordinate leader's performance cultivate the tie that binds.

In the best interests of both the individual and the organization, those who, in the leader's view, will never make the grade have to be relieved of the responsibilities of leadership. Any officer or noncommissioned officer who has had to "fire" a subordinate leader knows how difficult it can be. Yet the officer or NCO's first loyalty within his organization must be to the unit as a whole and not to individuals. Again, lives may hang in the balance.

In summary, there are few more emotionally charged subjects in our service than loyalty. But the essential truths are these:

- Genuine loyalty cannot be bought or sold. It can only be given freely, and therein lies its greatest value.

- Loyalty is a two-way street. Leaders who want their subordinates' loyalty have to earn it.

- The only way to earn their loyalty is by first being loyal to them. An officer or NCO must stand up for his subordinates.

- The loyalty that a leader owes to his superiors is directly related to his loyalty to the nation and his oath.

Despite all of the issues that have been raised, though, and regardless of personal feelings, unless a directive is illegal or immoral, a superior's orders must be loyally obeyed. A leader can take issue with his boss and, if time allows, even go over his head. But for a leader in combat, time will be a luxury. Ultimately, the oath he takes must take precedence over his personal feelings or professional opinions. In the final analysis, loyalty to his nation outweighs all other considerations.

Finally, returning to the captain who told me about his test of loyalty with his battalion commander and his decision to follow orders that he did not agree with, it is difficult to see how he could have done otherwise.

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Map Course Distances

MAJOR CHARLES F. COFFIN III

Setting up a good map-reading course is tough work. If you're lucky, you have one nearby that has been checked for accuracy and guaranteed correct. But you may not be that lucky, especially if you

are in an Army Reserve or National Guard unit. And even if there is a course nearby, you may not be able to use it when you want to—another unit may have priority, the scheduling may not

work with your unit's training plan, or the course just isn't suitable for the kind of map-reading training you want to conduct.

Whatever the reason, one day you may