

IDEAS & ISSUES (LEADERSHIP)

# Rethinking 'Loyalty'

What is its value?

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As an organization that lives by the credo, “Always Faithful,” the inclusion of *loyalty* as 1 of the 14 Marine Corps leadership traits seems only natural. Faithfulness and loyalty, though modestly distinct from one another in a semantic sense, both represent a fundamental idea of what it means to be a Marine. Indeed, it is difficult to find a formal definition of either term that does not reference the other. Hence loyalty, as a leadership trait, is described in Marine Corps doctrine as “[t]he quality of faithfulness to country, the Corps, to one’s seniors, subordinates and peers.”<sup>1</sup> That both of these terms carry exclusively positive connotations is largely unquestioned.

Yet, there is room to examine the value the Marine Corps places on loyalty. In an era when the strategic corporal thrives, when Marines of every rank are admonished to be continuous students of the profession of arms,

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when intellectual and mental agility are prerequisites for conducting distributed operations, traditional interpretations of loyalty that center on rote obedience can be antithetical to the moral and professional development of Marine leaders.

A more contemporary interpretation holds that loyalty, in virtually any form, carries with it both promise and peril. In the case of the former, when a demonstrated sense of loyalty materially benefits the Marine or unit in question, there is little likelihood that

the outcome depends on what has been “taught” about loyalty. Most often, loyalty emerges naturally, as a product of leadership, esprit de corps, and personal character, rendering the teaching unnecessary. Contrarily, when a commitment to loyalty on the part of a Marine ultimately proves detrimental to his mission or organization, the effort to instill it through intentional, structured means is ill-advised. A misguided sense of loyalty can thwart initiative, stifle valuable dissent, and lead otherwise stellar Marines into poor decisionmaking.

Loyalty should therefore be removed from the list of Marine Corps leadership traits. While it remains an eminently worthwhile subject for reflection and debate, as a leadership trait it has become an anachronism that no longer represents the qualities the Marine Corps seeks to instill in its commissioned officers and NCOs. Marine Corps professional military education curricula should likewise be adjusted to deemphasize the importance of loyalty and include discussions that warn of its potentially pernicious effects.

### Healthy Loyalty

There is, of course, a truly healthy, beneficial form of loyalty that exists throughout the Corps today. For any Marine who has relied on “the guys on his left and right” to overcome hardship, and for any Marine who has been inspired by a senior or subordinate Marine to persevere under difficult conditions, the desire and willingness to do so are rooted in the collective. Loyalty reminds one that being a Marine is a shared experience; an individual is rarely a good deal better or worse off than the other Marines in his unit. Battalions and squadrons do not have great majors but lousy corporals. Bat-



*Loyalty emerges as a product of leadership, esprit, and personal character. (Photo by Cpl Samantha H. Arrington.)*



talions and squadrons function as a whole, elevated above the sum of their parts by a cohesion that depends on loyalty to the unit and the mission.

The Marine Corps, of all of the Services, most completely recognizes this. Marine Corps recruiting campaigns and television advertisements consistently eschew personal financial incentives, opting instead to attract potential recruits based on the vaunted reputation of the Corps as a whole. Established at first contact, this sense of loyalty germinates throughout officer candidate and recruit training, becoming an ingrained feature of those who wear the eagle, globe, and anchor.

This is never more true than in combat. Few Marines can think of the sacrifice and valor of Cpl Jason L. Dunham and other renowned forebears without being awed by their utter selflessness. In the tradition of many other distinguished generals, MajGen James N. Mattis' now-famous message to the 1st MarDiv on the eve of the 2003 Iraq invasion tapped into this powerful reservoir, encouraging his Marines to live up to the expectations of the unit, Corps, and country.<sup>2</sup> Certainly this was no gimmick. Sociologists, psychologists, and military historians have long understood the factors that motivate soldiers and Marines to fight to the point of self-sacrifice. Loyalty stands out among them as the single most compelling.<sup>3</sup>

### **Loyal to a Fault**

There is, however, a distinct downside to the concept of loyalty. Leadership, especially under duress, is rarely an uncomplicated matter involving clear choices and obvious solutions. In both peacetime and under fire, leaders routinely face situations that are riddled with conflict. When intense external pressures are at variance with deeply held internal mores, a sense of loyalty can offer a convenient excuse for inaction, silence, or obstruction. Resolute, well-grounded officers and NCOs, when they are at their best, recognize this dilemma and choose to act, speak out, or intercede, despite the potential cost to reputation and career. That's

their job, after all. But it takes a rather uncritical eye to assume that this is the default condition under which most Marines operate. The reality is that most of us, lance corporals and lieutenant generals alike, do the best we can with what we have available at the time.

As an example, consider the case of retired Marine LtGen Gregory S. Newbold. In April 2006, the former Joint Staff J-5 Director penned an editorial in *Time* magazine titled, "Why Iraq Was a Mistake."<sup>4</sup> Though the personal conviction he displayed while serving on the Joint Staff and in writing the article is beyond reproach, by his own admission LtGen Newbold regrets that he did not do more, sooner, to make

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## ***The tendency toward misguided loyalty is not a new phenomenon.***

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known his opposition to the war. He is unsparing in his criticism, labeling the architects of the war "zealots" and asserting that the rationale for the war "made no sense."<sup>5</sup> Despite this damning, black-and-white assessment, the tenor of his editorial and the conditions under which it was published (3 years into retirement) demonstrate a tremendous, ingrained reluctance to break with the status quo. Four months prior to the invasion, he resigned his commission and then stewed over the issue for the next 3 years. That is loyalty at work.

The loyal officer, it is perceived, may freely voice dissent up to a point but must eventually salute and carry out orders when directed. That is absolutely necessary and correct, but it is based on law, not loyalty. Per the Marine Corps definition, loyalty to the country enjoys precedence above all things, and it is easy to conclude that LtGen Newbold would have been acting in the interests of the country had he been more forceful in his dissent

while in uniform (as he urges current military leaders to be). Yet reality intrudes. Courses of action that seem entirely plausible in a staid, academic environment are decidedly less attractive in real-world settings.

The tendency toward misguided loyalty is not a new phenomenon. GEN Douglas MacArthur railed against it in 1951:

I find in existence a . . . dangerous concept that the members of the armed forces owe their primary allegiance and loyalty to those who temporarily exercise the authority of the executive branch of the Government, rather than to the country and its Constitution they are sworn to defend. No proposition could be more dangerous.<sup>6</sup>

While the average lance corporal or captain might rarely contemplate his fealty to the executive branch, he is no less susceptible to analogous pressures and conflicts. Whether it involves witnessing an unsafe maintenance practice in an MV-22 squadron, a questionable act committed in a remote Afghan village, or an administrative violation during a routine workday, his response to the infringement should be guided by his own moral assessment of *justice, judgment, integrity*, and any other germane leadership trait. Nagging questions about loyalty and the perceived fear of being branded disloyal only serve to obfuscate the picture and reduce the likelihood that he will act in the best interest of his unit, his leaders and peers, and the Corps.

### **Creative Destruction**

Somewhat paradoxically, forceful decisionmaking that elevates integrity over loyalty often heightens respect for both the individual and institution involved, and serves to reestablish the bedrock principles on which the military depends. During his tenure as the head of the Defense Department, Secretary Robert M. Gates has dismissed the Secretaries of the Army and Air Force and has fired (or caused to resign) extremely accomplished flag-level officers in high-visibility assignments





**We recognize the sacrifices made in the name of "loyalty."** (Photo by LCpl Reece E. Lodder.)

from each Service. The lesson taken from these instances, whether in the media or among servicemembers, is normally depicted as a demonstration of accountability, but there is an equally compelling narrative regarding the appropriate limits of loyalty. Unceremonious dismissals at the secretary and four-star level are rare, as they should be, but were it not for a willingness to push loyalty aside, they might well be nonexistent.

It is on this side of the loyalty coin that far too little light shines. The current dialogue addresses the duality of loyalty by emphasizing that it extends both up and down the chain of command, but there is virtually no institutional discussion acknowledging that a sense of loyalty can be, and quite often is, adhered to in excess. Not so long ago corporals were far less strategic and battlefield operations weren't nearly as distributed. It was sufficient to inculcate in our junior personnel a narrow understanding of loyalty that did little more than foster its growth. The national security landscape has changed, as have our junior personnel. There are myriad examples of both civilian and military leaders recognizing the exceptional intelligence of the officers and enlisted men and women who make up today's technology-centric Armed Forces, but

there is no commensurate recognition of their readiness to navigate more complex moral and ethical waters. As we laud the agility of the young minds currently waging our three block wars, we would do well to recognize that it's inadequate and potentially harmful to steep them in a one-dimensional understanding of loyalty.

## Trimming the Fat

Enshrined as 1 of the 14 Marine Corps leadership traits, the concept of loyalty carries more heft than it otherwise would. Would a hard-as-nails gunnery sergeant care a whit about *tact* were it not on the list? As an officially sanctioned leadership trait, Marines are programmed to give pause when questions about loyalty arise. This should not be the case.

The healthy form of loyalty that cements the collective resolve of a fighting unit is borne of character and leadership. The commander whose Marines are described as fiercely loyal to him had no intention of making them so. Their loyalty emerged as an ancillary product of his ability to lead and his enthusiasm for command. Likewise, the commander who is fiercely loyal to his Marines needed no guidance to become so. Further, the Marine labeled disloyal is likely as not

to have earned the descriptor by acting in the Corps' best interest, perhaps at the expense of an individual or organization above him. For every legitimate whistleblower who corrects a wrong or exposes a fraud, there's a corollary whisper campaign questioning his loyalty. Finally, the Marine who shuns being branded disloyal, electing instead to remain silent in the face of adversity, may do untold damage to the Corps.

The difference between loyalty and obsequiousness shouldn't be shades of gray. When we ask our Marines for boldness, we are obliged to foster and reward it. By removing loyalty from the list of leadership traits and reframing the discussion of it in our professional military education venues, the Marine Corps will remove an impediment to candor, innovation, and clear-headed thinking. The associated risk is slight; Marines follow orders and always have.

## Notes

1. *Marine Corps Reference Publication 6-11B, Marine Corps Values: A User's Guide*, Headquarters Marine Corps, Washington, DC, 20 October 1998, pp. 15-20.
2. Mattis, MajGen James N., Commanding General, 1st MarDiv, "Commanding General's Message to All Hands," March 2003.
3. Costa, Dora, and Matthew Kahn, "Cowards and Heroes: Group Loyalty in the American Civil War," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Oxford University Press, Harvard University, MA, May 2003, p. 250.
4. Newbold, LtGen Gregory S., USMC(Ret), "Why Iraq Was a Mistake," *Time* magazine, 9 April 2006, p. 36.
5. Ibid.
6. MacArthur, GEN Douglas A., quoted in Telford Taylor, *Sword and Swastika*, Nautical & Aviation Publishing Company of America, Mount Pleasant, SC, 1992, p. 354.

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