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Refusing Orders in Iraq: Moral Courage or Disloyalty?

by Rushworth M. Kidder

When sergeants Larry McCook, Michael Butler, and 16 other U. S. Army reservists refused to drive fuel convoys along ambush-prone Iraqi highways, were they heroically calling attention to a fatal flaw in U.S. military operations? Or were they avoiding danger by offloading their mission to other drivers who later made the trip? By demanding higher standards to protect their platoon from risk, were they saving future military missions from disaster? Or were they potentially jeopardizing other troops who depended on their delivery of supplies?

One thing is clear: They disobeyed direct orders in wartime, a very serious charge. Was theirs an act of moral courage or a display of disloyalty?

We don't yet know all the facts. But it appears that, called for an early-morning briefing on October 13, these 18 men and women of the 343rd Army Reserve Quartermaster Company refused to report for duty. Their mission that day would have been to drive seven fuel tankers northward from Tallil air base, near Nasiriyah, through the streets of Baghdad to a base in Taji.

Facing what some of them described as a suicide mission along a highway noted for attacks by insurgents, they balked. They complained that their aging and sometimes unreliable trucks, which had operated only on safer routes in southern Iraq, lacked the heavy armor common to other convoy vehicles. They felt they would not be sufficiently protected by the small defense force accompanying them. And they warned that the helicopter fuel they were carrying was contaminated and could endanger the safety of aircraft flying from Taji.

Brig. Gen. James E. Chambers, who leads the 13th Corps Support Command to which the 343rd reports, discounted that description of the fuel. But he recognized that the trucks had not yet been equipped with armor. Following the event, he ordered a two-week stand-down of the 343rd while he investigated both the readiness of the equipment and any violations of the Uniform Code of Military Justice. Five of the men, including McCook and Butler, have been transferred to other units. And there, for the moment, the matter stands.

Whatever the results of the investigation, the ethical questions persist. Should these reservists be punished for disobedience to orders, or should they be protected as whistle-blowers exposing serious wrongs? Is loyalty paramount, or is truth-telling? There's a serious moral case to be made for each.

The argument for loyalty rests on an organization's need to preserve the chain of command. Unless orders stick -- unless those in command are confident that troops will do as they're told -- the fast-breaking action of war could overwhelm any mission. In this view, those at the top know more about the big picture than soldiers on the ground. They're more inured to the shards of rumor, spin, and misinformation that fly about every battlefield. To permit any second-guessing of the commanders is to invite a wholesale collapse of teamwork. To prevent that collapse, you punish.

By contrast, the argument for truth-telling rests on an organization's need to expose wrongs, correct mistakes, and protect against harm. It recognizes that those closest to the situation can

read details their superiors might miss. It also acknowledges that power, habit, and consensus can cause even the finest leaders to dull their objectivity through self-esteem, so they need periodically to be called to account. If that accounting doesn't arise from peers or superiors, then (in this argument) it must come from below. Without it, battles and lives are lost. To prevent losses, you speak up.

Speaking up, of course, is what civilians do in a democracy. But is the military democratic? Or must it remain an oligarchy run by the few at the top for the benefit of the rest? As reservists, Sgts. McCook and Butler and their colleagues are the closest thing the Army has to civilians. In a military increasingly dependant on a part-time, reserve fighting force, are they the wave of the future? Will they be more apt to bring to the battlefield a set of non-military assumptions, making it easier for them to turn to such civic institutions as whistle-blowing?

To some extent, the answers depend on how the nation sees them -- and how the military responds. So far, these reservists are being popularly cast as exemplars of moral courage who, recognizing the risk to their careers if they acted and the moral values at stake if they didn't, were willing to stand for principle. If Gen. Chambers chooses to punish them, he may have to cast them as disloyal and disobedient -- perhaps even as physical cowards for shrinking back from dangers that their military peers face each day.

Either way, the issue reminds us of the importance of moral courage in wartime, and how it often grows out of agonizing right-versus-right dilemmas that, having been decided, must then be implemented. McCook and Butler, reflecting a more civilian set of values, decided that truth should trump loyalty, and had the moral courage to act accordingly. If Gen. Chambers reflects a more military set of values and decides otherwise, he too will need moral courage to implement what may be an unpopular judgment.