

Random Thoughts About Personal Loyalties

Recent Washington Post stories, based on documents from an inspector-general review of the 2001-2019 war in Afghanistan, are fascinating. I see parallels to our story and to my core views developed at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in 1989-1992. Namely, I believe an inherent tension exists between people who mostly want to serve their institution and leaders, and people who mostly want to serve the public and the law.

This tension is natural and unavoidable. I do not think one side is right, the other wrong, even though I'm naturally drawn to serving the public and the law, and naturally repelled by automatic or reflexive loyalty to institutions and leaders. The trick is to require and demand that leaders and institutions serve the public and the law as a condition for loyalty. In fact, I too am drawn to institutional and personal loyalty when that loyalty can be proven to be deserved.

The excerpts of interviews with Michael Flynn were fascinating. People in the know on the ground in Afghanistan from 2001 until 2018 saw fundamental flaws in policy goals and fundamental failures to achieve policy goals at every single stage. Yet, officialdom, from the ground right up to each U.S. President, reported only glowing reviews of both policy and results. It's very similar to Vietnam in that sense.

I also noticed parallels in The Crown on Netflix. It routinely highlights the tension between the monarchy and the government, including individual struggles about how to serve the public, the law, the government, and the monarchy.

In all of these instances, I notice the same tension. Most people struggle to decide how much loyalty they owe to the public, the law, their institution, and their leaders. Most institutions experience internal warfare between groups of people who make different choices about these loyalties (the Catholic Church, as described by Bokenkotter 1990 and Pagels 1979, 1988, 1995, is another great example).

I like to argue that there are “good” solutions for resolving this tension, as well as “bad.” However, I recognize that neither camp is necessarily better than the other. Essentially, my argument is that a handful of straightforward principles can simultaneously improve personal, institutional, legal, and public outcomes. These few principles work whether one is a leader, serves other leaders, serves institutions, or is a hermit. The principles are intellectual honesty, close attention to empirical facts, and close attention to mechanistic principles. These will not uncover all truth, prevent all differences of opinion, nor win all disputes. However, they usually can prevent blind, reflexive loyalty to obviously corrupt leaders, institutions, laws, and purposes. They can also uncover flawed leaders, institutions, laws, and purposes, even when not obvious.

My strongest objections and greatest willingness to enter a fray occur when I believe I've discovered purposeful deviation from intellectual honesty, empirical facts, and mechanistic principle. I'd like to convince more people to do the same. If most people followed these straightforward (but often difficult) principles, a lot of shenanigans would be stopped in their tracks.