

Column: The ethics of conviction and responsibility in the Trump administration

By William Felice, special to the Tampa Bay Times

Thursday, June 8, 2017 6:44pm

How do we serve both our country and our president honorably when core ethical principles collide?

Some individuals serving in the Trump administration have recently found the moral conflicts too extreme and resigned:

- The chargé d'affaires at the American Embassy in Beijing, David H. Rank, resigned after telling his staff he could not defend the decision to withdraw from the Paris climate agreement.
- Tesla and SpaceX CEO Elon Musk and Disney chairman Bob Iger resigned from the White House business advisory council over the #ParisAgreement withdrawal.

Others, while not resigning, are publicly speaking out with their disagreements with the Trump administration:

- The acting ambassador to Britain, Lewis A. Lukens, announced his support for London's mayor, Sadiq Khan, after President Donald Trump lambasted the mayor on Twitter.

Still others in the Trump administration have been criticized for not resigning or speaking out:

- Lt. Gen H.R. McMaster, the president's national security adviser, was sent out to speak at a news conference to deny that the president shared classified information with Russia. The next day the president himself confirmed the reports that he actually did so. A former speechwriter for George W. Bush, David Frum, asked: "How does McMaster not resign today? That thing he said 'did not happen' the president has just defended doing."

The famous sociologist Max Weber described two ethical approaches to politics: an ethic of conviction and an ethic of responsibility. An ethic of conviction is founded in one's principles and beliefs; whereas an ethic of responsibility focuses more on one's duty and loyalty. Weber insisted that these two sides could be brought together and through some "combination" produce moral character and right action. Weber wrote: "The ethic



mug of eckerd professor William Felice. He wrote a guest column for nay times.

of conviction and the ethic of responsibility are not absolute opposites. They are complementary to one another, and only in combination do they produce the true human being who is capable of having a 'vocation for politics.' "

But how is a government employee to act when, rather than bringing these two sides together, the White House veers into a direction that compromises the individual's deepest moral convictions? At that point, is an ethic of conviction more important than that of responsibility? How do individuals save their honor when the institution they work for assaults their fundamental conceptions of human dignity and democracy?

In my interviews with Foreign Service officers, I discovered that while these questions are discussed, there is a privileging of loyalty over all other ethical values in the American political system. From a perspective of democratic theory this partially makes sense. Policy should be determined by the elected representatives and not by the unelected civil servant or Foreign Service officer.

Yet, serious dangers have emerged for our country when loyalty and the ethics of responsibility become the primary virtue. For example, during the rush to war in Iraq out of misplaced "loyalty" to the administration, many Foreign Service officers kept their criticisms of Iraq policy to themselves and didn't challenge the inferior quality of the intelligence used to promote the war. Military officers didn't speak up with their misgivings about the poorly organized and executed Donald Rumsfeld war plan. Lawyers twisted laws to authorize aggressive war and torture.

Yet others in the U.S. government were unable to morally support the invasion of Iraq and said: "Not in my name." For most of their public careers, Brady Kiesling, John Brown and Ann Wright were able to faithfully discharge the duties of office as Foreign Service officers of the United States, despite moments of individual doubt, until the invasion and occupation of Iraq. All three diplomats were unable to publicly defend the policy of preventive war and they resigned.

To achieve the "balance" between conviction and responsibility that Weber seeks, loyalty must be balanced with other equally important values. The key issue for civil servants, indeed all citizens, is to have personal integrity and to act ethically in every circumstance. This means being true to one's personal moral convictions while carrying out the government's orders and, when the two conflict, more often than not one's personal moral convictions should carry the day.

The tremendous pressures to loyally support the government must be balanced with other virtues, including maintaining one's voice and moral autonomy. A patriotic defense of the public good demands nothing less, because a moral sensibility will make us not only a better people, but a more powerful nation.

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