

How Do I Save My Honor? War, Moral Integrity, and Principled Resignation, **by William F. Felice**

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Exit and voice are two options that individuals in liberal democratic states and free market economies often use to express their dissatisfaction and disappointment. The individual consumer dissatisfied or disappointed with his dishwasher detergent, for example, can stop purchasing it, thereby exiting from his relationship with the manufacturer. If enough consumers exit, the manufacturer will be forced either to correct its perceived deficiencies or risk going out of business (or at the very minimum, risk losing market share, as in the case of large corporate conglomerates with multiple businesses).

Similarly, the individual citizen dissatisfied or disappointed with a particular law or policy can through any number of means (e-mails, blogs, demonstrations, and so forth) protest it, thereby giving voice to his or her dissatisfaction and disappointment. If enough citizens give voice to their opposition, elected officials will be forced either to change the law or policy or risk being voted out of office.

Given the obvious remedial functions these options can serve, as well as their compatibility with liberal commitments to freedom, autonomy, and individuality (not to mention the fact that this nation owes its very existence to the exercise of such options), it is remarkable to realize the extent to which we restrict their availability in our nation's government and military, most especially during times of war. With very limited exceptions for such things as general conscientious objection, which is rarely granted, and when it is, is done solely at the discretion of the government, exit and voice are proscribed and penalized, sometimes, as in the cases of treason and desertion, under pain of death.

But is this wise? Or would we be better off, both individually and collectively, allowing, perhaps even promoting and encouraging, the use of exit and voice in our nation's government and military, not

least of all in times of war? William F. Felice, in *How Do I Save My Honor? War, Moral Integrity, and Principled Resignation*, makes a powerful, persuasive, and at times quite poignant case that in fact we would be better off, that our restriction of these options has been morally injurious and politically perilous, destructive of not only our values and ideals but our security as well. To wit, our 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq, which Felice argues was a horrible and costly mistake, all the more so because it could have been avoided had more than just the handful of brave individuals profiled in his book exited and spoken up in protest.

John Brady Kiesling, John H. Brown, Mary Ann Wright, Ehren Watada, and Aidan Delgado risked a great deal, including careers, colleagues, financial security, and, in the case of Lieutenant Watada, personal freedom, to stand up and oppose a war they believed to be illegal, unjust, and unwise. Kiesling, Brown, and Wright did so by publicly resigning their senior positions as U.S. foreign service officers and walking away in protest from their lengthy and distinguished careers. Lieutenant Watada did so by resigning his commission and publicly refusing the army's orders to redeploy to Iraq (he was at the time willing to deploy to Afghanistan), and army reservist Delgado followed suit by filing for conscientious objector status during his yearlong tour in Iraq, a status which was, along with an honorable discharge, ultimately granted. Felice's interviews and correspondence with these individuals (contained in the book) reveal them to be highly intelligent, thoughtful, and principled people with an uncommon willingness to act on those principles despite the often unpleasant consequences: They are, in a word, extraordinary. The problem is that they are extraordinary precisely because they are so few, and they are so few in large part because of the pains and penalties attached to exit and voice in our nation's government and military: Kiesling, Brown, and Wright, for example, are the only U.S. diplomats to have resigned in protest to the 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq, despite the fact that it was widely believed by a great many others, including their boss, then secretary of state Colin Powell, to be a catastrophic mistake.

As is well known, despite his obvious misgivings about the 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq, Secretary of State Powell chose to remain in office. Although Felice allows that in some cases staying and trying to fight from within can be an honorable or perhaps even preferred course of action (he cites Wayne White, who was deputy director of the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research Office of Analysis for the Near East and South Asia from 2002 to

2005, as an example), in his judgment this simply was not so in Powell's case, for while Powell stayed, he did little in the way of fighting, and the little he did was of no consequence. Furthermore, at some point Powell stopped fighting altogether and chose rather to become a central figure in selling the war to the American people and the world.

Part of the fault lies with Powell. Like many others, he abdicated responsibility through rationalization. In a letter to Felice declining his request for an interview (the letter along with Felice's request are included in the book), Powell suggests that the war, and the decisions to ignore the Powell Doctrine and suspend the Geneva Conventions, were a matter of policy, not ethics, and one doesn't resign over "policy disagreements," a claim made all the more difficult to swallow when one recounts, as Felice does, Powell's writing in 1995 that one of the lessons learned from Vietnam was to "not quietly acquiesce in halfhearted warfare for half-baked reasons that the American people could not understand or support."¹ But part of the fault lies with us, with our expectation that civil servants and soldiers as agents of the state should not exercise their individual moral autonomy but rather do as they are told. We, unlike the British, to whom Felice compares us, do not countenance public resignation as a means of moral protest. Instead, we punish it, but, as Felice makes plain, we do so at our own peril.

Should we wish to avoid further fiascos, we would be wise to consider Felice's counsel to cultivate an ethic of principled resignation, one that would lower if not eliminate entirely the costs of exit and voice in our nation's government and military, most especially during times of war. For while there is a need for loyalty, conformity, and even bureaucratization in government, in the military and indeed in all large-scale organizations, there is at the same time a need for individual moral autonomy and responsibility, so that individuals no longer think it necessary or desirable to quietly acquiesce when so very much is at stake.

Note

1. Colin Powell, *My American Journey* (New York: Random House, 1995), 149.

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