



## **Politics and the Ethics of Loyalty**

*July 3, 2008*

Recently I gave a talk to a civic club on the topic of the importance of integrity. During the talk a gentleman shot out the question: “What about Scott McClellan?” I wasn’t sure what to say, so I sent the question back: “What about Scott McClellan?” It quickly became clear that the gentleman thought that the former White House press secretary was an outstanding example of a person who lacked integrity. McClellan had just published a book, titled, *What Happened*, on his years in the Bush administration. The book is highly critical of the President and most of his senior staff. McClellan, a Texan, had previously demonstrated a high degree of loyalty to the President, so his book was a shock—sort of like your faithful Golden Retriever gaining the powers of speech only to tell you, what he *really* thought. This book could be seen as an act of disloyalty, demonstrating a lack of integrity.

I decided to investigate the question about Scott McClellan and bought his book. After looking at the book, I don’t know enough about McClellan’s motives to judge if it indicates a lack of integrity—there are a lot of former Bush loyalist jumping ship right now and for various motives, some, no doubt, impure. However, this controversy does provide the opportunity to think about public service and loyalty. In writing such a critical book McClellan knew that he would be accused of disloyalty. It is clear that he thought seriously about this issue and offers some interesting reflections on partisan politics and the ethics of loyalty.

McClellan’s first reflections on public service and loyalty are found in the book’s introduction. There he owns up to personal moral failures in his role as press secretary. He writes: “I failed in my duty to myself, to the president I served, and to the American people... Because I didn’t stay true to myself, I couldn’t stay true to others” . These comments point to the relationship between loyalty and integrity. In terms of important commitments in our lives we all have many loyalties. For example, we have loyalties to family, friends, employers, and to the civic, religious and political organizations that we join. Sometimes those loyalties come into conflict and we must decide which ones are most important. McClellan is saying that our first loyalty is to the basic moral commitments that form our character. Integrity implies having a reliable moral character; this requires loyalty to our better-selves. Stated differently, if we aren’t true to the obligation we choose, we undermine our personal integrity. To be morally praiseworthy, loyalty must be grounded in personal commitments to a cause we judge to be worthy. Canine loyalty is not moral; it is simply enthusiastic obedience. This means a person of integrity and loyalty must think for himself. Loyalty requires an independent mind, consistent character, as well as faithfulness.

McClellan’s personal moral failures as press secretary are part of his general criticism of the administration and the larger political culture: specifically, he points to a lack of honesty and candor, and the practice putting partisan patrician politics above the common good. In the closing chapter McClellan offers some additional reflections on public service, loyalty and

Washington culture. He writes: “In today’s partisan climate, we sometimes hear “loyalty” described as a paramount political virtue.” He goes on to say that, “Public servants... take an oath to the Constitution... Our first loyalty is to the nation and its people. When conflicts arise, loyalty to the nation must take precedence over party loyalty or personal loyalty.” Once again, we all have many loyalties, and one of our main moral challenges is to keep our priorities straight. According to McClellan, he got caught up into a Washington culture that has these loyalties out of order; it’s a culture that encourages people to place partisan loyalties above the common good. Of course, this has always happened, but McClellan argues that over the last sixteen years it is happening more and more. The character of public servants is ideally formed by a person’s commitment to serve the nation and its people, and this should be prioritized over party loyalties. McClellan criticizes the primacy of partisan loyalty as undermining the basic moral commitments of public servants.

The controversy surrounding McClellan’s book raises important issues about public service and the ethics of loyalty. Unfortunately, these themes might be overshadowed by McClellan’s account of events—who did what and when—along with his personal assessments of the character of key people in the current administration. In the end, the question of Scott McClellan, and his personal moral failures, asks us to wonder: Is the current political culture causing idealistic young public servants to put party loyalties above their commitments to public service? Is partisanship the main corrupting force in politics today?