

A VIRTUE BETRAYED

Loyalty: The Vexing Virtue

by Eric Felten (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011)

Since loyalty has in recent decades lost something of its luster, Eric Felten invites us to “consider how much we loathe its antithesis,” *betrayal*. The sting of betrayal—disloyalty—reminds us that loyalty really is a virtue. Reading a tell-all memoir makes betrayal momentarily sexy, but we never laugh at betrayals of ourselves. Accused of disloyalty, we would probably appeal to higher loyalties. Yet “loyal” itself has faded as a term of praise. To speak of a “loyal wife” or a “loyal friend” has a faintly antique ring, even though marriage and friendship assume loyalty today, as always. Felten aims to give loyalty the refurbishing it needs for an audience outside the academy but attuned to the doubts of intellectuals. Loyalty is “the vexing virtue.” The other virtues vex, too, but loyalty’s vexations make us doubt it’s really a virtue.

In one respect Felten’s view is straightforward. “I’m inclined,” he writes, “to make loyalty the default setting that requires a preponderance of damaging evidence before it can be overridden.” To many, the frequent blindness of political loyalty is evidence damaging enough. But political loyalty is loyalty in just one circumstance, and everything turns on the circumstance. Felten’s nine chapters show loyalty from every angle, and the book as a whole inclines one to speak

of loyalty only in the plural: the loyalties—occasionally aligned but often conflicting—of love, war, family, friendship, politics, religion, near and far, abstract and concrete, doomed and graced. To show that loyalty has always been difficult, Felten uses stories from Aeschylus and Job to Mark Twain and Graham Greene, with no shortage of his own stories added in. His storytelling shows how loyalties come to light in each domain of human life and discourages the inclination to submit “loyalty” to an up-or-down vote as an unvexed virtue or unvexed vice.

To look at loyalty properly, it must be seen in all its circumstances, each of them partisan and involving one’s own. “What makes my family an object of loyal commitment,” says Felten, “is that it is *my* family.” It is strange that we live in an age honoring choice and preference—that is, *my* choice and *my* preference—while inclining toward a cosmopolitanism that considers loyalty dangerous. Loyalty conflicts with the prerogative of changing our preferences, since from the standpoint of loyalty, changing preferences is a sign of inconstancy. Blaming betrayal without praising loyalty, we want to be free from loyalty without suffering from

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its absence. Instead we find ourselves caught by loyalty unintentionally, as in a romance born of passion but quickly dependent on loyalty and trust; or in war, suddenly needing our comrades' devotion. "We don't need anything quite so newfangled as neurobiology or evolutionary psychology," says Felten, to explain the benefits of loyalty in love and friendship. Rather than viewing loyalty as oxytocin's revenge, binding us by a tie we never intended, Felten recommends loyalty as the only path to the "runner's high" of lasting love, the only solace in many a bad situation. Felten wants to make us realize that we have never stopped expecting loyalty as a part of love and friendship. And although many loyalties are not of our own choosing, we will exercise more discretion in the choice of spouse, of friends, and of career if we know what loyalty will soon demand of us.

Part of the problem with loyalty is verbal, because we use the same word for the virtue and its various instances. We have loyalty and loyalties, just as we have love and loves, but we do not have fairness and fairnesses, or justice and justices. Friendship is like loyalty in this respect, but speaking of bad friendships (or Facebook friendships) causes no difficulty with our praise of friendship. We praise friendship knowing that it can go awry, that it includes difficult moments, and that it is somehow part of the human good. But the memory of bad loyalties makes us uneasy. We want to keep loyalty pure, and when we find that too difficult, we cast it aside.

The flexible meaning of loyalty doesn't make this any easier. The loyal deeds of a loyal father are quite different from his expressions of civic loyalty. Although we call the one "being a good father" and the other "being a good citizen," we rightly think of loyalty as an element of both. Loyalty wants to break out of its circumstances and be praised like any other virtue. But since fatherhood and citizenship often collide,

just as patriotism and religion can, those who praise loyalty usually have some specific loyalty in mind. Even in the best case, the praiser of loyalty is suspiciously partisan. But since tyrants' praise of loyalty has so often brought loyalty into disrepute, political loyalty looks especially suspect. Cosmopolitan political theorists may dismiss loyalty's irrationality, but one doubts that the wives and girlfriends of cosmopolitan thinkers are quite so eager to hear their love called irrational. Yet since loyalty, like love, is always exclusive, we expect too much of loyalty when we desire its nonpartisan praise. Felten defends loyalty as a partisan virtue by showing that loyalty can make virtuous use of partisanship.

Though Felten wants loyalty alongside the other virtues, he also tries to show its murkiness even when considered a virtue. Loyalty does not provide its own answer to the problem of conflicting loyalties, and Felten doesn't presume to resolve the question for us. He admires but rejects the Burkean attempt to build human loyalties in ascending, noncontradictory circles. Burke the Irishman knew loyalty's vexations, but he still thought loyalties would fit together in a good regime without requiring, like Plato did, the abolition of the little platoons. Rather than tell us the principle that would rank our loyalties for us, Felten attacks the Kantian tendency to let phantasms like "loyalty to humanity" trump everyday loyalties. The mafia would be an extreme instance of vicious particular loyalties, but when universal principles cancel the ordinary human loyalties, the result can be arrogant and dismissive vice. Here, too, loyalty goes astray when it makes itself absolute, either to the exclusion of human ties or to the exclusion of the other virtues.

Leaving aside conflicting loyalties, Felten shows the moral dangers to which each particular loyalty exposes us. Consider friend-



A virtue's murkiness

ship. Aristotle's advice, which Felten seconds, was to stick by friends till they show an "excess of wickedness": in other words, be willing to tolerate a little wrongdoing. "When we commit to friendship," Felten says, "there's no escaping the possibility that we will be roped into wrongs, big or small." Friendship involves loyalty by definition, and Felten wants to defend it from the accusations of intellectuals who complain that loyalty requires "bad epistemic conduct" in looking past our friends' mistakes. Sometimes we cannot even see our friends' flaws, and when their faults glare, we look past them for the sake of friendship. We tolerate their minor lapses, and then lie to defend them before others.

Felten accepts this criticism but praises loyalty anyway. Still, the criticism is overstated. In tolerating our friends' small mistakes while not condoning them, we exercise prudence. No one would become better by a tyrannically intolerant friend. To praise our friends publicly would be flattery if we praised their wrongs or hoped for our own gain, but we can speak charitably in prais-

ing our friends for the sake of consoling and encouraging them. It is only through friendship that we could know a man well enough to understand his faults, but in doing so we also learn his virtues and can remember them in our speech. If we had no loyalties, we would never practice those virtues.

Perseverance is a chief aspect of loyalty in Felten's presentation, and perseverance assumes adversity. Adversity is in fact so necessary to his picture of loyalty that he scorns one spurious sort of loyalty that breaks down in even the mildest adversity: the shallow phenomenon of "customer loyalty," one of loyalty's last bastions in everyday speech. It is not that customers should have no loyalty but that "customer loyalty" is a product of its own—manufactured, sold, and traded, a marketing slogan born in the 1980s. Loyalty programs draw on our pride in being loyal customers and encourage the consumer to define himself "in part by the products to which he is loyal." But whereas the loyalty of spouses, friends, and citizens shines in adverse situations, adversity doesn't cause customer loyalty to burn all the brighter. In fact, some marketers try to use customer loyalty for every possible advantage, hoping that loyalty to a brand will outlast an adulterated product.

For all this talk of loyalty, what the market rewards more than anything else is the threat of betrayal. A consumer can easily secure a better credit card rate by threatening to switch to the competition, Felten notes, just like a hotshot salesman can raise his commission by threatening to jump ship. Better to let business run on contracts rather than on the impossible basis of customer loyalty. Why then does business pay homage to a virtue that has faded everywhere else? Marketing slogans are where the virtues go to die. But in a backhanded way, customer loyalty expresses what human beings wish they could find in business transactions.

Businesses know this: all customers become preferred, and a first-time shopper can receive a badge of loyalty. More piquant still is the fact that we allow customer loyalty to express our freedom while viewing the truer loyalties with at least a raised eyebrow.

Felten stops short of saying whether loyalty is uniquely endangered in our time. He inclines to the view that loyalty has always been under pressure. He mentions a tendency within Christianity and especially Islam to discount political loyalty, but he does not contrast that tendency with the political religions of the ancient world, and he doesn't find Christian otherworldliness to be a current danger. He looks to Kant for an attack on particular loyalties, to Tolstoy and Shaw for an attack on the irrationality of patriotism; for inspiration he loyally recalls his teacher Judith Shklar. Though he writes his book to revive loyalty in our liberal, technological society, Felten doesn't bring out just how modern politics has made the old loyalties especially difficult.

Loyalty's political context has changed in modern times. Citizens of new, democratic countries have a particular sort of political loyalty. Tocqueville called it reflective patriotism to distinguish it from the instinctive patriotism or filial piety common in long-settled nations. Reflective patriotism forms around the common exercise of political rights, and the "rightly understood" self-interest shared among democratic citizens.

The shared benefits of material prosperity are the jewel in our own country's crown, arising from our desire for a better life. But our success at acquiring material goods has made them—and not our country, still less its politics—our *objets d'amour*. The goal of modern politics is to satisfy human desires outside politics, in the private world. With that move, our patriotism is less instinctive, and our loyalties are tied to *our own* accomplishments. "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

The logic of consumption has now spread far beyond the market in material goods. Today even spouses bargain and trade up, religions advertise, and statesmen become salesmen. Consumer society is not confined but everywhere, and so too is consumer society's understanding of the virtues: customer loyalty is now the model of all loyalty. Breakable without prompting shame, customer loyalty aims to dissolve all of loyalty's vexations in the direction of autonomy. The fact that real loyalty nevertheless continues to vex us indicates that we find ourselves in situations where customer loyalty isn't enough. Our glib theoretical model runs up against a wall. What Eric Felten shows is that loyalty is a symptom of human nature caught in imperfection—a human nature not changed but obscured. In accepting loyalty's vexations, we accept the reality of human nature and its limitations.