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Would You “Support the Troops” in Bolivia?

by Jacob G. Hornberger

Soldiers who join the military voluntarily sign a very unusual contract with the federal government. It is a contract that effectively obligates the soldier to go anywhere in the world on orders of the president and kill people as part of an invasion force against other countries. It doesn't matter whether the intended victims deserve to die or not. That issue is irrelevant as far as the soldier is concerned. His job is not to question why people he is ordered to kill should be killed; his job is simply to invade and carry out the killing, no questions asked.

For example, let's say that President Bush orders U.S. troops to invade and occupy Bolivia. The order would reach the Pentagon, which then would pass the order downward to generals, colonels, majors, captains, sergeants, and privates in America's standing army. With perhaps one or two exceptions, no soldier would challenge the president's decision to invade Bolivia, because that's not part of the employment contract he has signed with the military. The soldier's duty would simply be to carry out the president's order to invade Bolivia.

Suppose a soldier says, “Mr. President, I can't carry out this order because it would involve killing innocent people wrongfully, including the people who are going to defend their nation from this attack. You have no moral right to order an invasion of Bolivia because neither the Bolivian people nor their government has attacked the United States. Moreover, the invasion would be illegal under our form of government because you haven't secured the constitutionally required congressional declaration of war. My conscience will not permit me to kill any Bolivians as part of this operation, including Bolivian soldiers defending their nation from this attack. Therefore, I simply cannot participate in this invasion. ”

That soldier would be taken aside by a few superior officers for a very candid and direct conversation. His superiors would explain to him that it is not within his job description to second-guess the president's decision to attack Bolivia. The soldier's job, he would have carefully explained to him, is to trust that his commander in chief is making the right decision and to carry out his order. The soldier's superiors would also explain to him that if he persists in his refusal to participate in the operation, he will be court-martialed and severely punished.

What about conscientious-objector status? Wouldn't that relieve the soldier from participating in the attack on Bolivia?

No, because under military rules conscientious-objector status applies only if a soldier objects on moral or religious grounds to *all* war. A soldier is not permitted to gain conscientious-objector status if he happens to object to a particular war as being illegal, unjust, or immoral.

Back to our Bolivia example. To make it easy on U.S. soldiers who might feel a bit squeamish about killing Bolivians, the president could announce that they were invading Bolivia in order to oust the recently elected socialist president, a man who has close ties to Venezuela's president, Hugo Chavez, who is another socialist and who has close ties to Fidel Castro, who is both a socialist and a communist and who had close ties to the communist Soviet Union, which had once promised to bury America.

Thus, by invading Bolivia, the president would argue, the troops would be helping bring freedom and stability to Latin America and also be protecting the United States from the threat of communism. Moreover, U.S. troops occupying Bolivia would be serving as a magnet for attracting Latin American communists and terrorists that U.S. troops could then exterminate. Finally, the president could provide another rationale for the invasion: that by invading Bolivia, U.S. troops would actually be defending the United States from an invasion by undocumented Bolivian immigrants.

It would be all the troops would need to go forward with a clear conscience. Undoubtedly, 99 percent of U.S. troops would obey the orders of the president to invade Bolivia, even if they felt a bit uneasy about killing people in the process. They would faithfully fulfill the terms of their employment contract.

How do we know that this is true — that U.S. troops would faithfully do their duty by carrying out the orders of their commander in chief to invade Bolivia? Easy — because we know that they followed the president's order to invade Iraq, a country that never attacked the United States or even threatened to do so. And on invasion day, they would dutifully drop 500-pound bombs on Bolivia, fire missiles into cars and buildings, and shoot Bolivian soldiers who resisted the invasion. Women and children who would be killed as part of the operation would be considered the unfortunate collateral damage of war. And the more the Bolivian military resisted the invasion, the more it would be held morally responsible for Bolivian casualties.

Throughout the operation, the troops would be reporting back on how they're killing the "bad guys." American reporters, donning military helmets and embedding themselves with the troops, would dutifully attend Pentagon briefings, after which the U.S. press would breathlessly exalt the heroic exploits of the troops. Bronze and silver stars would be awarded soldiers who fought courageously against Bolivian soldiers and insurgents.

No one would keep count of how many Bolivians were killed in the operation because no one would want to know and no one would care. Only the deaths of American soldiers would count and be counted.

The American people would be infected with war fever. Dissidents would be challenged with “Now is not the time to debate whether we should have gone to war against Bolivia. The fact is that we are at war and so we’ve got to support the troops.” The FBI would monitor anti-war protests for threats to national security from socialists, communists, and terrorists. The country would be rife with anti-immigrant hysteria, and there would be raids, round-ups, and deportations of Hispanic immigrants.

Protestant ministers and Catholic priests would exhort their parishioners to support the troops in harm’s way. Those ministers and priests serving in military reserve units as chaplains would accompany the troops to Bolivia and explain to them that war is in the Old Testament, that as soldiers they could trust the judgment of the president, and that they could kill Bolivians with clear consciences. Church newspapers and bulletins would wax eloquent on how this was a “just” war, especially given that it would be protecting the national security of the United States from communism and also liberating the Bolivian people from the horrors of socialism and the threat of communism. The American flag would be displayed proudly in church altars, especially during Sunday service or mass (except, of course, in churches in Bolivia, where Protestant ministers and Catholic priests would be proudly displaying the Bolivian flag.)

People who came to the assistance of the Bolivians from Colombia, Ecuador, and other Latin American countries would be considered “terrorists” or “bad guys.” Those who came from Cuba would be called “communist terrorists.” And U.S. troops would kill them all, especially if they were trying to kill U.S. troops.

But what about the morality of the entire operation? Where is the morality of killing people who have never attacked the United States and who have done nothing worse than try to defend their country from a wrongful invader? Where is the morality in killing in “self-defense” when you don’t have a right to be there killing people in the first place? Does a burglar who has entered someone’s home in the middle of the night have the moral (or legal) right to claim self-defense if he kills the homeowner who shot at him while he was burglarizing the homeowner’s home in the middle of the night?

Indeed, where is the morality in signing a contract that obligates a person to go kill people who haven’t attacked his country?

“But we signed the employment contract thinking that we were defending America,” soldiers say. “We’re just trying to be patriots.”

But everyone knows that presidents don’t use their standing army to defend America. They use it to attack countries that haven’t attacked the United States. After all, how many times has

America been invaded by a foreign army in the last 50 years? (Answer: None!) What country in the world today has the military capability of invading the United States? (Answer: None!)

By signing a contract that obligates the soldier to kill people in the process of obeying the president's order to invade other nations, the soldier effectively agrees to surrender his conscience to the will of the president. After killing people pursuant to that contract, he effectively says to himself and to God, "I'm not responsible for killing that person I just shot or bombed because I signed a contract with my employer that obligates me to kill people on his command and that relieves me of having to decide whether my employer's order was right or wrong."

But the troops aren't the only ones who surrender their consciences. As soon as the troops are committed to battle, many citizens also surrender their consciences, rallying to support the troops and cheering them to victory, praying that God bring an end to the violence and the "terrorism" in the country that the troops have invaded, without heed to whether the troops have the moral right to be in the invaded nation killing people.

How wise is the surrender of conscience, both among the troops and the citizenry, in both the short term and long term, especially in a country that prides itself on Judeo-Christian principles?

In my opinion, not wise at all.

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