The morality of military leadership

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"I was brought up in the Classics, and first discovered the sensation of literary pleasure in Homer."[1]

"This is War. This is what Homer wrote about."[2]

J.R.R. Tolkien was 'caught in youth by 1914' and served in France during the Battle of the Somme[3]. He signed up for a programme that allowed him to complete his BA at Oxford while taking officer's training, and when he graduated in 1915 he was assigned to the Lancashire Fusiliers as a second lieutenant. He was trained in signalling and appointed battalion signalling officer. Tolkien was posted to France in June 1916, and survived a number of engagements, though all but one of his closest friends died. In October 1917 he came down with trench fever and was shipped home to England. He spent the rest of the war shuttling between hospitals and training camps.

Because Tolkien had been an officer in wartime, he was able to invest his depictions of military leadership in Middle-earth with the authenticity of personal experience. His literary criticism and letters show that he thought long and deeply about heroism and leadership as depicted in the Greek and Roman classics and in the Northern literature that became his specialty. As George Clark points out, "[h]is fantasy fiction rewrites heroic literature and the hero; so do his critical studies"[4]. In his criticism, particularly of *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Maldon*, Tolkien considered how such early literary conceptions of heroism and leadership could be reconciled with Christianity and his real-life experiences and observations of war. In his fiction he depicted different leadership styles, and offered his own judgments about their moral worth.

One of the clearest conclusions we can draw from Tolkien's fictional examples of military leadership is that he felt the proper place for a leader was in the forefront of his troops, sharing their danger in battle and setting an example of courage and character for them to follow. As John Keegan suggests in *The Mask of Command*, '[I]n front - always, sometimes, never? - is [...] the question which must lie at the heart of any commander's examination of conscience'[5]. In the way Tolkien clearly divided his war leaders into front-line warriors and 'chateau generals,' and in his depiction of King Théoden reborn and leading his cavalry into battle, we can see Tolkien's preferred answer to this question. Modern, technology-reliant methods of war make it increasingly difficult for a leader to do a good job of managing the flow of information and directing the action without being at some distance from his front-line troops. It follows logically that Tolkien's preference for on-the-spot leadership is closely tied to his distaste for the modern 'war of the machines' and preference for ancient models of heroism and methods of warfare.

Leadership in the forefront of battle is a moral duty for generals and other leaders in Middle-earth. Leaders who are at the head of their own troops in battle are legitimised by the risks they share with their men, as seen in the examples of Aragorn, Eomer, Théoden, and Faramir, and even Sam, Merry, and Pippin at The Battle of Bywater. Matthew B. Ridgway asked which leader is most likely to be followed:

> Is it the one who has failed to share the rough going with his troops, who is rarely seen in the zone of aimed fire, and who expects much and gives little? Or is it the one whose every thought is for the welfare of his men, consistent with the accomplishment of his mission; who does not ask them to do what he has not already done and stands ready to do again when necessary; who with his men has shared short rations, the physical discomforts and rigors of campaign, and will be found at the crises of action where the issues are to be decided?[6]

It is not just the risk to himself that a commander must be willing to face in the field - he must also have sufficient faith in his purpose and firmness of will to ask others to face death with him - to take on the dreadful burden of feeling responsible in his soul for what happens to them, yet still push forward to his goal. Consider General George B. McClellan during the American Civil War - he was 'so solicitous' of his troops that he 'refused to risk their lives in battle, an apparently ironic fault which soldiers are quicker to perceive as such than members of less dangerous professions'[7]. A leader has to inspire his followers 'to risk their lives for some greater end,' and more importantly, he has to 'have himself the courage to demand that they do so. It is of course in this particular that military leadership differs from other kinds'[8].

In *The Lord of the Rings*, all leaders who direct from behind the lines are either on the side of the enemy or under his influence. Sauron broods in Barad-dur and sends the Witch-king out to direct his battles; Angmar in turn rules them with fear, 'driving his slaves in madness on before'[9]. Saruman empties Orthanc of his troops, watching his 'splendid army' march out, but remains behind himself in what he thinks is a safe stronghold. The Steward of Gondor, in the high tower of Minas Tirith, strives with Sauron through the palantir and believes he sees the course of battle clearly, all the time falling under the enemy's influence of despair. Denethor offers pragmatic justifications for leading from behind, comparing himself to Sauron: 'He uses others as his weapons. So do all great lords, if they are wise [...]. Or why should I sit here in my tower and think, and watch, and wait, spending even my sons?'[10]. Denethor may be on the side of the allies against Sauron, but his adoption of the enemy's method of leadership leads to fatal misjudgments. Even Lotho 'Pimple' Sackville-Baggins holes up in Bag End, leaving the running of his little socialist empire

to his ruffians until he is made their prisoner, and Sharkey (who also stays in Bag End and is never seen in public) takes over. And in *The Hobbit,* the Mayor of Laketown cravenly flees the stricken city in his 'great gilded boat'[11] and leaves its defence to others.

Leading from behind is morally suspect in Middle-earth, and tactically flawed as well, for a lack of first-hand knowledge of conditions in the field leads to blunders like leaving the Ents out of one's calculations or not noticing two weary hobbits crawling across Mordor. Such a leader rules by fear rather than example. If the actions of Sauron and Saruman inspire anyone, it is only those who see easy profit in dominating the weak and powerless. Under the influence of Wormtongue, Théoden is persuaded of the folly of trying to lead his own men in battle and sits bent with age on his throne; the purpose of his healing by Gandalf is a spiritual redemption that will make him fit to command again. Gandalf tries to heal Denethor's spirit as well; when the Steward of Gondor threatens self-immolation in the Tombs, Gandalf reminds him: "Your part is to go out to the battle of your City, where maybe death awaits you. This you know in your heart"[12]. But Denethor is too deep in prideful despair to listen.

Can a leader hold power legitimately in wartime if he is unwilling to lead his troops in battle? As Keegan puts it, ' ... [t]hose who are led ask "Where is our leader? Is he to be seen? What does he say to us? Does he share our risks?"'[13]. Keegan points out that in a theocratic society a ruler is under no obligation to prove himself fit to command, since his authority is direct from the gods and therefore not to be questioned. However, leaders in secular societies can offer no such 'moral exemption'. They have a fine line to walk - "They must therefore either go in person or else find the means of delegating the obligation without thereby invalidating their right to exercise authority outside the battlefield and in times of peace"[14].

Ancient models of leadership

In spite of Middle-earth's underlying theology and Tolkien's own religious preferences, the societies encountered in *The Lord of the Rings* are strictly secular. Sauron's enslavement of orcs and men may verge on the theocratic (since he is a Maia, an angelic power in Tolkien's mythology), but otherwise even the High Elven societies of Lorien and Rivendell have no priestly class or divinely anointed rulers. Aragorn may have the advantage of his Numenorean ancestry in advancing his right to the throne, but this in itself is not strong enough to support his claim - he must also prove his worth through word and deed. The wizards or Istari could have claimed to rule through theocratically supported right, since they were sent to Middle-earth by the Valar (the gods) after the end of the Second Age[15], and in fact Saruman is hubristic enough to try to play the 'high and ancient order' card with the unco-operative Gandalf[16]. However, in the contrasting characters of Gandalf and Saruman we see that even a claim at this level must be legitimised by moral action and earned authority.

But does Tolkien really prefer the ancient models when it comes to leadership and heroism? His criticisms of Beowulf and Beorhtnoth show that he did not fully accept their values, and in some ways his war leaders and their leadership styles are anachronistic and far more modern that their settings. For example, compared with his sources in the heroic literature of the ancient and medieval world and with his earlier writings, like 'The Fall of Gondolin', Tolkien devotes little time in *The Lord of the Rings* to describing the arms and armour of his war leaders. For the most part, leaders are distinguished only by carrying a banner or having it carried near them by a standard-bearer. As Keegan points out, those who lead "in the precise sense of the word," that is, in front of their troops, "needed to be seen and to be recognised instantaneously'[17]. Those leaders who maintained an "unostentatious appearance" on the battlefield, like Wellington or Grant, had a managerial rather than heroic leadership style and generally stayed further back from the front line of battle. Leaders like Alexander the Great, however, made sure they could be seen by their troops and by the enemy at all times by wearing conspicuous armour or riding a distinctive horse. Even in the early days of World War I, British officers in the field wore uniforms with an extravagant silhouette consisting of 'melodramatically cut riding breeches [and] flare-skirted tunics with Sam Browne belts'[18]. However, they soon discovered that their jodhpurs and flashy trim made them easy targets for enemy snipers. They quickly adopted a uniform style more like that of the Other Ranks, using shoulder tabs to indicate rank instead of sleeve bands, for example. Modern field uniforms now generally follow this pattern of camouflage and subtle (to a civilian) rank distinctions.

What then do we make of Aragorn? At the Battle of the Pelennor Fields he is distinguished only by the Star of Elendil on his brow and by the sword Anduril, but Elladan and Elrohir also wear similar circlets and might easily be mistaken for him, having the same dark hair and grey eyes. At Helm's Deep, too, there is nothing to distinguish him from others but his sword, and at the Black Gate he wears only the 'piece of elvish glass,' the eagle brooch given to him by Galadriel. Tolkien here depicts a king who wants to maintain solidarity with his followers by living and dressing like one of them. As his actions after the victory at Minas Tirith demonstrate, Aragorn's policy was always to refuse to claim more than he felt was his due. This is a far more modern attitude than one might expect in his place and time, a world that Tolkien implied was pre-Christian[19], but it demonstrates his humility or 'lowliness,' one of the 'king-becoming graces' Shakespeare listed in *Macbeth*[20]. Faramir too dresses exactly as his men do in the woods of Ithilien, and though he has a silver goblet, it is plain and he drinks the same wine as his troops. The Riders of Rohan, however, are as traditional in the dress of their leaders as they are in other matters: King Théoden bears a golden shield, Erkenbrand has a red one, and ...omer wears a horse-tail on the crest of his helmet that makes him visible from far off. The Rohirrim are described as less advanced than the men of Gondor, and these visual divisions between the leaders and the led stand in contrast to the behavior of the men who will lead Gondor into the Fourth Age.

The archetypal example of the value placed on personal and highly visible battlefront leadership in the Western world is the career of Alexander the Great. Tolkien was well aware that this kind of leadership requires the 'Alexander-touch,' but he felt that taking it too far 'orientalised' Alexander: 'The poor boob fancied (or liked people to fancy) he was the son of Dionysus, and died of drink'[21]. In his analysis of the Beorhtnoth incident from *The Battle of Maldon*, Tolkien shows his distrust of the kind of charismatic, over-reaching leadership that allows a man drunk with dreams of glory and fame to lead his men to probable slaughter. As Clark points out, what Tolkien rejected about Beorhtnoth was his 'decision that promised to enhance his personal glory rather than subordinating the quest for honour to [his] duty of defending the land against the Vikings'[22]. For Tolkien, heroism had to be

about something more than the quest for fame and glory; it needed to be about the fulfilment of a worthwhile duty through morally acceptable means.

Effects of Tolkien's own experience

What kinds of leadership did Tolkien witness and experience as a soldier during World War I? Unfortunately there is no evidence in his published letters of his assessments of his commanding officers, so we must rely on the analysis of historians for a general picture. But given Tolkien's emphatic identification of 'leading from behind' with the enemies of all that is good in Middle-earth, it is likely that he was well aware of the problems caused by the relatively recent pattern of generals establishing their command posts many miles behind the front lines. And as a signalling officer, he is sure to have been all too familiar with the difficulties of getting accurate and timely information to and from headquarters even with the most modern equipment available.

John Keegan offers this cogent analysis of the strategic factors that led to this innovation:

> The trend of weapon development had for several centuries been acting to drive commanders away from the forward edge of the battlefield, but they had nevertheless resisted it. What occurred at the end of the nineteenth century was a sudden acceptance by the generals of all advanced armies that the trend could no longer be gainsaid and that they must abandon the post of honour to their followers.
> [...] Fifty years later, their descendants - French and German indiscriminately - were not to think of quitting their headquarters at any time. [...] It was from those secluded places that the great slaughter of the trenches would be directed, totally out of sight and, unless for a trick of the mind, also out of sound of all the headquarters responsible for it.[23]

At first glance, locating headquarters well out of the danger zone seems a sensible precaution and a reasonable "compromise between prudence and exposure"[24]. It was an 'understandable reaction' to the development of long-range weapons. However, 'its effect on the relationship between leaders and led was so deadening that even the most arrogantly insensitive of generals should have taken steps to ameliorate it"[25]. In any case, the French command settled in 'chateau comfort' at Chantilly, the Germans at the resort town of Spa in Belgium, and the British in the walled town of Montreuil.

But psychologically this was an unfortunate step. Mystification can be an important ingredient in the charisma of a commander, and a sense of distance, very carefully calculated, can lend him an aura of untouchable prestige and power. 'Distance lends enchantment,' as Juan Peron sings in the musical Evita[26]. But this same distance also prevents him from sharing his soldiers' danger and thus legitimising his right to command. Keegan strongly criticized the 'chateau generals,' pointing out that every commander needs to be able to

[C]onvey an impression of himself to his troops through words, to explain what he wants of them, to allay their fears, to arouse their hopes, and to bind their ambitions to his own. It is a mark of the depths to which the art of command fell in the era of chateau generalship that this need was served barely, if at all, by any of the generals of the First World War. Their armies were, by an ironic twist of social and constitutional development, the most literate and politically conscious mass forces ever to have taken the field. By an equally ironic twist, the Staff College culture which informed their leadership had, by a bogus scientism, so sanctified the importance of purely theoretical principles of warmaking, and consequently so depreciated the importance of human emotion, that the common soldiers were not thought worth the expenditure of their commanders' breath.[27]

Sauron and Saruman would never see any reason to address their troops personally; after all, they were only expendable orcs and enslaved men. (Saruman's speeches to his army in Peter Jackson's *The Two Towers* were inserted by the scriptwriters.) Denethor, and Théoden before his redemption, are depicted speaking only with their commanders and never directly to their troops.

There are other ways of creating and maintaining distance. The rigid class structure of Great Britain at that time is an example of them. Officers were mostly drawn from the upper classes, and were given special privileges like the services of batmen to look after their physical needs and reserved railway carriages while on leave in England. At the highest level of command there was an impression of lack of concern for the common soldier. W. A. Senior recounts General Douglas Haig's reaction to the carnage of the first day of the battle of the Somme, in which 58,000 British soldiers died: 'such losses would not be "sufficient to justify any anxiety as to our ability to continue the offensive."' Senior continues, 'It does not require a long leap from Haig's statement to the Witch King of Angmar, Lord of the Nazgul, driving his own troops to slaughter before the walls of Minas Tirith and trampling them as he approached'[28].

During World War I, the 'simulated absolute monarchy of chateau generalship'[29] was one of the contributing factors that provoked uprisings among all the armies that suffered from it. While at the start of the war, most European armies treated the soldier 'as an object rather than an agent,' by the end of 1916, commanders began to realize that '[m]odern mass armies [...] were found to be teeming with assertive individuals who resisted the prescribed roles for which they had been cast'[30]. Grievances about 'pay and allowances, clothing and comforts, shelter, warmth, and rest [...] leave and family income support'[31] were all exacerbated by the gulf between the leaders and the led. Parts of the French army revolted in May 1917; the Belgians in the summer of 1917; the Russians in October 1917; the Italians in November 1917; the Germans in September 1918; and even the British in September 1917 and March 1918[32].

At the root of all these spiritual crises lay a psychological revolt by the fighting soldiers against the demands of unshared risk. [...] [O]rders had emanated from an unseen source that demanded heroism of ordinary men while itself displaying heroism in no whit whatsoever. Far from it: the chateau generals had led the lives of country gentlemen, riding well-groomed horses between well-appointed offices and residences, keeping regular hours and eating regular meals, sleeping between clean sheets every night [...]. Meanwhile those under their discipline, junior officers and soldiers alike, had circulated between draughty billets and dangerous trenches, clad in verminous clothes and fed on hard rations, burying their friends in field corners [...]. The implication of such disparities can be suppressed in the short term [...].
Yet [...] hierarchy and discipline cannot suppress the implications of risk disparities forever.[33]

Unlike Tolkien, and in spite of his criticism of the chateau generals, Keegan sees 'sometimes' as the correct answer to the question of when to lead from the front. Alexander's rashness put his mission and his whole army at risk every time he took the field. On the other hand, Hitler and his staff unwisely adopted the strategy of the chateau generals and chose never to lead from the front, putting their faith in the 'artificial vision' granted by the telegraph and telephone. But their reliance on intelligence at a remove from the actual situation led to fatal errors in their analyses of battlefield situations. Keegan points out that "[t]he 'sometimes' generals [...] achieved a notably more consistent record of success than the 'always' or 'nevers'"[34]. Two other generals Keegan examined in his book, Wellington and Grant, as well as other legendary leaders like Julius Caesar, used a pragmatic mixture of leadership styles:

Sometimes a commander's proper place will be in his headquarters and at his map table, where calm and seclusion accord him the opportunity to reflect on the information that intelligence brings him, to ponder possibilities and to order a range of responses in his mind. Other times, when crisis presents itself, his place is at the front where he can see for himself, make direct and immediate judgments, watch them taking effect and reconsider his options as events change under his hand.[35]

But Tolkien does not show any of his war leaders taking this middle path. For them, the choice is 'always' or 'never,' or perhaps 'when I was young and reckless, but not now in my age and despair' - but never 'sometimes.' For Tolkien, a leader must be legitimised by his position in the front lines on the battlefield.

Notes
1. Tolkien, Carpenter, & Tolkien, 2000, 172
2. Lewis, 1955, 196
3. Tolkien, 1965a, 7
4. Clark, 2000, 40
5. Keegan, 1988, 328
6. Ridgway, 2000, 7
7. Stokesbury, 2000, 147
8. Stokesbury, 2000, 152
9. Tolkien, 1965b, 92
10. Tolkien, 1965b, 92
11. Tolkien, 1966, 261
12. Tolkien, 1965b, 129
13. Keegan, 1988, 314
14. Keegan, 1988, 312
15. Tolkien, 1965b, 365
16. Tolkien, 1965c, 186
17. Keegan, 1988, 61
18. Fussell, 2000 (1975), 50
19. Tolkien et al, 2000, 237, 287
20. Shakespeare, 1993, IV:iii
21. Tolkien et al, 2000, 64
22. Clark, 2000, 50-51
23. Keegan, 1988, 331-333
24. Keegan, 1988, 332
25. Keegan, 1988, 331
26. Rice & Webber, 1979
27. Keegan, 1988, 319
28. Senior, 2000, 175
29. Keegan, 1988, 334
30. Englander, 1998, 93
31. Englander, 1998, 201
32. Englander, 1998, 196-7; Keegan, 1988, 334
33. Keegan, 1988, 335
34. Keegan, 1988, 328
35. Keegan, 1988, 328

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