

## Of Wolves and Men: Reflections on Plato's Guardians and Aaron Sorkin's "A Few Good Men"

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**Abstract:** The 1992 movie *A Few Good Men* essentially confronts one of the key problems also brought to light in *The Republic of Plato*. Namely, how does one control the guardians of the city and prevent them from becoming like wolves that might prey on those they are meant to protect? For Plato, the answer to this problem lay in the guardians' education and in the cultivation of a philosophic and well-ordered soul. In a *Few Good Men* such a solution is hinted at but not fully developed.

### A Few Good Men

"I want the truth!" shouts Lt. Dan Kaffee played by Tom Cruz. "You can't handle the truth!" thunders and irate Col. Nathan Jessup played by Jack Nicholson in the climax of the 1992 film *A Few Good Men*. After Jessup's rage settles into a startling silence in the courtroom a barely composed Jessup continues:

*Son, we live in a world that has walls. And those walls have to be guarded by men with guns. Who's gonna do it? You?...I have a greater responsibility than you can possibly fathom. You weep for Santiago and you curse the marines. You have that luxury. You have the luxury of not knowing what I know: That Santiago's death, while tragic, probably saved lives. And my existence, while grotesque and incomprehensible to you, saves lives. We use words like honor, code, loyalty...we use these words as the backbone to a life spent defending something. You use 'em as a punchline. You don't want the truth. Because deep down, in places you don't talk about at parties, you want me on that wall. You need me on that wall! ...I have neither the time nor the inclination to explain myself to a man who rises and sleeps under the blanket of the very freedom I provide, then questions the manner in which I provide it. I'd prefer you just said thank*

*you and went on your way. Otherwise, I suggest you pick up a weapon and stand a post. Either way, I don't give a damn what you think you're entitled to.*<sup>1</sup>

In this exchange, Jack Nicholson explodes off the screen, in a fiery defense of his role as a guardian of the country. Yet mixed with his cogent articulation of the need for walls and defenses of walls, his response also reveals an arrogant superiority and a disdain for anyone who questions him or his methods. Surely someone does need to guard that wall, but does that entitle the one guarding it to treat those he protects with utter contempt? Jessup's authoritarian posture raises the question of a divide between the guardian and those he is protecting, a divide that seems in tension with America's democratic spirit. *A Few Good Men* raises the specter of a commander who is willing to target the weak in order to protect the country, a means that seem at odds with America's democratic ethos and its dedication to political equality. This issue of a guardian class out of step with those they are sworn to protect is the same dilemma raised in Plato's *Republic*. If the guardians are powerful enough to defend the city, are then not powerful enough to prey on it as well? If they are to be sheepdogs protecting the sheep, who does the city ensure the sheepdogs do not turn into wolves?

*A Few Good Men* was directed by Rob Reiner based on a stage play and screenplay written by Aaron Sorkin. The film includes an all-star cast from Jack Nicholson, Tom Cruz, Demi More, Keiffer Sutherland, Kevin Bacon, Kevin Pollack, and the late J.T. Walsh. Even minor characters feature the appearances have the likes of Cuba Gooding Jr., Christopher Guest, and Noah Wyle (of ER fame). It was the 5<sup>th</sup> highest grossing film of 1992 at \$141 million following the likes of Alladdin, Home Alone 2, Batman Returns, and Lethal Weapon 3. It was nominated for 22 awards including Best picture, Best Actor in a Supporting Role (Jack

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<sup>1</sup> Aaron Sorkin, *A Few Good Men*, Directed by Rob Reiner (1992; United States, Columbia Pictures), DVD.

Nicholson) and it won 9 awards in all including Best Picture in both the MTV awards and the People's Choice Awards. While nominated for Best Picture by the Academy it did not win, losing out to *Unforgiven* by Clint Eastwood.

The opening credits display an iconic scene of a Marine Corp Drill Team showing the impressive discipline and precision that Americans admire about their military. In Gallup polls of United States citizens, the American military consistently ranks as the most trusted institution in the country.<sup>2</sup> The American military is, and always has been, under firm civilian control and has never posed a serious threat to its own citizens. Respect for members of the military is a common sentiment among the American public. The American military's devotion to the United States and its service to the ideals of the nation it protects is unquestioned by the vast majority of Americans. In essence the problem raised in the movie has not been a serious issue for the United States through its storied history.<sup>3</sup> It is in the midst of this widespread public support for the American military—a military that has performed nobly and ably for over two hundred years—that space opens up for *A Few Good Men* to explore a timeless political question of how to maintain a military that is both lethal to enemies and yet gentle to its own people.

The plot of the film centers around a courtroom trial of two marines implicated in the death of one Private William T. Santiago, a U.S. Marine stationed at Guantonamo Bay Naval Base in Cuba ("Gitmo" for short). Santiago was allegedly killed during a "code red" disciplinary action at the hands of two fellow marines, Harold Dawson and Loudon Downey. Dawson's purported motive was to silence Santiago in response to Santiago's reporting of Dawson's illegal

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<sup>2</sup> Gallup Poll, June 2-7, 2015, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions.aspx>. The military ranked the highest with 72% saying they have a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the military.

<sup>3</sup> Thus, it is all the more startling for the American viewer when, *A Few Good Men* raises the issue of a military commander who has cultivated a spirit in his troops that seems hostile to civilians or even other members of the military that do not adequately adhere to his unwritten code. In a sense, Col. Jessup seems to have cultivated and encourage his men to strength, aggression, and loyalty to him and their unit over their commitment to those weaker than them.

firing of his weapon at his Cuban counterpart while he was on guard duty. “Code reds” as such are against Marine regulations and against the law and as a result both Dawson and Downy are to stand trial by a Military Court. Lt. Commander JoAnne “Jo” Galloway (Demi Moore) suspects that there is more to this case and seeks to uncover a suspected conspiracy, but her efforts are seemingly thwarted when the case is assigned by the Navy to Lt. Dan Kaffee (Tom Cruise) with an assist by Lt. Sam Weinberg (Kevin Pollak). Jo resents the Navy for assigning Kaffee to the case because he isn’t likely to investigate the case in any detail, since has never seen a plea bargain he doesn’t like:

*SAM  
Commander, Lt. Kaffee's generally  
considered the best litigator in our  
office. He's successfully plea bargained  
44 cases in nine months.*

*KAFFEE  
One more, and I got a set of steak knives.*

*JO  
Have you ever been in a courtroom?*

*KAFFEE  
I once had my drivers license suspended.*

Furthermore, Kaffee seems to prefer playing softball to doing the hard work of a JAG attorney, as exemplified by Kaffee’s exchange with the prosecutor Captain Jack Ross (Kevin Bacon):

*ROSS  
Dan Kaffee.*

*KAFFEE  
Sailin' Jack Ross.*

*ROSS  
Welcome to the big time.*

*KAFFEE  
You think so?*

*ROSS*

*I hope for Dawson and Downey's sake you practice law better than you play softball.*

*KAFFEE*

*Unfortunately for Dawson and Downey, I don't do anything better than I play softball. What are we lookin' at?*

*ROSS*

*They plead guilty to manslaughter, I'll drop the conspiracy and the conduct unbecoming. 20 years, they'll be home in half that time.*

*KAFFEE*

*I want twelve.*

*ROSS*

*Can't do it.*

*KAFFEE*

*They called the ambulance, Jack.*

*ROSS*

*I don't care if they called the Avon Lady, they killed a marine.*

While Kaffee is working to plea bargain the case, Galloway, who has already told Kaffee that she doesn't think he is fit to handle the case, maneuvers herself into being Downey's attorney, thus allowing her to join Kaffee and Weinberg at the trial. At the incessant behest of Jo Galloway, and despite Kaffee's reluctance, the three begin to peel back the full context of the crime and a possible conspiracy and cover up.

The movie continually contrasts the lax demeanor and dress of Kaffee with the discipline and "spit and polish" of Dawson, Downey, Jessup and Lt. Jonathon Kendrick (Keifer Sutherland). For the marines at Gitmo there is a tight code to be followed at all costs. You follow orders or people die. This intense and uncompromising posture creates some friction between Kaffee and his clients:

*KAFFEE*

*Yeah, yeah, alright. Harold, did you assault Santiago with the intent of killing him?*

*DAWSON*

*No sir.*

*KAFFEE*

*What was your intent?*

*DAWSON*

*To train him, sir.*

*KAFFEE*

*Train him to do what?*

*DAWSON*

*Train him to think of his unit before himself. To respect the code.*

*SAM*

*What's the code?*

*DAWSON*

*Unit Corps God Country.*

*SAM*

*I beg your pardon?*

*DAWSON*

*Unit Corps God Country, sir.*

*KAFFEE*

*The Government of the United States wants to charge you two with murder. You want me to go to the prosecutor with unit, corps, god, country?*

*DAWSON stares at KAFFEE.*

*DAWSON*

*That's our code, sir.*

Kaffe simply cannot relate to the world Dawson and Downey live in, he cannot conceive of adhering to such a code, nor being so committed to something larger than perfecting his softball swing. Dawson and Downey have found a community and a sense of purpose. They are willing to sacrifice for their comrades. Kaffee just can't fathom such commitment. Kaffe also encounters this intense spirit down at "Gitmo" when talking to Dawson and Downey's immediate superior, Lt. Kendrick:

*KAFFEE*

*Lt. Kendrick--can I call you Jon?*

*KENDRICK*

*No, you may not.*

*KAFFEE*

*Have I done something to offend you?*

*KENDRICK*

*No, I like all you Navy boys. Every time we've gotta go someplace and fight, you fellas always give us a ride.*

*JO*

*Lt. Kendrick, do you think Santiago was murdered?*

*KENDRICK*

*Commander, I believe in God, and in his son Jesus Christ, and because I do, I can say this: Private Santiago is dead and that's a tragedy. But he's dead because he had no code. He's dead because he had no honor. And God was watching.*

Kaffee does not understand that, for the marines at Guantanamo, military training and discipline are a matter of life and death and that the marines there have a level of commitment that he neither feels nor desires. Kaffee is simply a privileged, Harvard trained, JAG lawyer and the son of a former Attorney General of the United States who is plea-bargaining his way through his service commitment. Marines like Kendrick and Dawson however, have a deep and abiding

commitment to something larger than themselves embodied by the Marine Corp and their country.

The central question of the trial turns on whether or not Dawson and Downey committed the crime on their own out of retribution or whether they were following the orders of their superiors, Lt. Jonathan Kendrick and ultimately the commander of the base, Col. Nathan R. Jessup. Kendrick and Jessup maintain that the accused were specifically ordered not to touch the deceased Private Santiago, while Dawson and Downey argue that they were simply following orders.

It is Galloway's constant questioning that slowly draws Kaffee into seeing the case as something more than simple plea-bargain fodder. One clue for Kaffee, that something may be amiss, occurs during the legal team's visit to Gitmo. At the start of the visit Col. Jessup plays the consummate host but by the end of their visit, when faced with some basic questions, Col. Jessup shifts and becomes very defensive and demeaning to his guests. He makes blatantly sexist remarks towards Galloway with the intent of intimidating her, but she doesn't seem phased. Likewise Jessup's response to the team's routine questions revealed a deep arrogance and dark disdain for the attorneys:

*JESSEP  
...I run my  
base how I run my base. You want to  
investigate me, roll the dice and take  
your chances. I eat breakfast 80 yards  
away from 4000 Cubans who are trained to  
kill me. So don't for one second think  
you're gonna come down here, flash a  
badge, and make me nervous.*

A few moments later, Kaffee simply asks for a copy of a transfer order and Jessep again responds with conceit and contempt:



*JESSEP*

*But you have to ask me nicely.*

*KAFFEE stops. Turns around. Sam and JO stop and turn.*

*KAFFEE*

*I beg your pardon?*

*JESSEP*

*You have to ask me nicely. You see, Danny, I can deal with the bullets and the bombs and the blood. I can deal with the heat and the stress and the fear. I don't want money and I don't want medals. What I want is for you to stand there in that faggoty white uniform, and with your Harvard mouth, extend me some f\_\_in' courtesy. You gotta ask me nicely.*

Rather than treating the legal investigators with the mutual respect due to fellow members of the military. Jessup is clearly marking his territory and setting himself apart from them as someone whose strength and aggression deserves a level of servile deference on their part. The three are stunned by Jessup's Jeckle and Hyde performance. The question they are left with is whether Jessup's aggressive and intimidating performance is an attempt to cover something, or whether it is simply deeply engrained in his character, or both. It is in these brief scenes that the audience is introduced to the idea that there is a darkness at Gitmo and Jessup may be the heart of that darkness.

### **Plato's Republic: Guardians or Wolves?**

The dilemma of a military guardian class whose aggression is not under control, is also raised in *The Republic of Plato* where in Book II Socrates and his interlocutors, including Glaucon and Ademantus, have raised the need for a class of warriors or guardians to protect the city and to

fight wars.<sup>4</sup> Upon discussing the nature of the persons who would be fit for this role the group decides that the guardians would need “sharp senses, speed to catch what they perceive”, strength, courage, and most of all “spirit”.<sup>5</sup> The greek word for spirit here is “thymos” and it is a vital concept for the Greeks as well as Plato. Thymos is the seat of anger or rage that gives warriors heart and underwrites their courage on the battlefield and a desire to defend their own and to defend justice.<sup>6</sup> Without this spirit warriors will be ineffective and complacent, but with it, they will be motivated, aggressive, and deadly. Socrates points out that in the natural world, courage depends upon spirit, “Haven’t you noticed how irresistible and unbeatable spirit is so that its presence makes every soul fearless and invincible in the face of everything?”<sup>7</sup>

Yet just as the group embraces this need for a natural spirit in their guardians, Socrates quickly raises a problem, “Glaucon...with such matters, how will...[the guardians] not be savage to one another and the rest of the citizens?”<sup>8</sup> Glaucon agrees this is a problem since the guardians “must be gentle to their own and cruel to enemies. If not they’ll not wait for others to destroy them, but they’ll do it themselves beforehand.”<sup>9</sup> Later on, in Book III, the issue arises again, “Surely the most terrible and shameful thing of all is for shepherds to rear dogs as auxiliaries for the flocks in such a way that due to licentiousness, hunger or some other bad habit, they themselves undertake to do harm to the sheep and instead of dogs become like wolves.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, how do you have warriors spirited enough to defend their city with aggression and rage but not so much that the aggression is turned inward on each other or their own citizens? What if the spirited men become like ravenous wolves?

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<sup>4</sup> Allan Bloom, trans., *The Republic* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 51-52.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> See Bloom’s discussion in his interpretive essay, *Ibid.* 348.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 52.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 52.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 95

In a sense, this is the problem that is ultimately confronted in *A Few Good Men*. To be sure, the issue of the military turning on citizens directly is not raised, but the film does confront the problem of the strong preying on the weak. Surely a military that allows the strong to prey on the weak amongst its own ranks is but one step away from preying on the weak outside their ranks.

Lance Corporal Dawson is the perfect picture of a Marine: tall, strong, disciplined, powerful, and a natural leader, he seems to be full of “thymos”. Downey on the other hand, while a solid marine and perhaps possessing “thymos”, seems not to have the leadership qualities of Dawson, he is a follower and he emulates all that Dawson does. The film cultivates ambivalence towards Dawson and Downey, portraying them as sympathetic figures but also suggesting that they may have crossed a line. “Why do you hate them so much?” asks Jo Galloway. Sam responds, “They beat up on a weakling, and that’s all they did. The rest is just smoke-filled coffee-house crap. They tortured and tormented a weaker kid. They didn’t like him. And they killed him. And why? Because he couldn’t run very fast.”

Sam asks in return, “Why do you like them so much?” Jo responds, “‘Cause they stand on a wall. And they say „nothing’s gonna hurt you tonight. Not on my watch.”

So are Dawson and Downey simply bullies who live by the code of Thracymachus, who argues that justice is the advantage of the stronger in Book I of *The Republic*? Or are they proud protectors of the nation who were simply striving to improve the military readiness, and thus the security, of the whole country? The movie invites us to wrestle with this question and in doing so opens up the issue of how to have a formidable guardian class that can serve the polity and not prey upon it.

As we have seen, Plato wrestles with this issue in *The Republic*. Indeed, once the problem of the guardians becoming like wolves is raised in the dialogue, Socrates looks for examples in nature that might prove whether a guardian class that is gentle to its own is even possible, “Then...is it possible, after all; and what we’re seeking for in the guardian isn’t against nature...In your opinion, then, does the man who will be a fit guardian need, in addition to spiritedness, also to be a philosopher in his nature?”<sup>11</sup> Socrates analogizes the guardians with dogs who protect their own and the sheep, but they are aggressive towards wolves and predators. He does this to show that nature herself provides examples of creatures who know how to be gentle with their own but hostile to threatening others. In referring to this phenomenon of dogs who are gentle yet aggressive, Socrates remarks, “And so, how can it [the dog] be anything other than a lover of learning since it defines what’s its own and what’s alien by knowledge and ignorance?...Well...but aren’t love of learning and love of wisdom the same?...So shall we be bold and assert that a human being too, if he is going to be gentle to his own and those known to him, must by nature be a philosopher and a lover of learning?” Later on he remarks again, “Mustn’t we in every way guard against the auxiliaries doing anything like that to the citizens, since they are stronger than they, becoming like savage masters instead of well-meaning allies?...it is fit to be sure about what we were saying a while ago, that they must get the right education, whatever it is, if they’re going to have what’s most important for being tame with each other and those who are guarded by them.”<sup>12</sup>

So it is education that will help control the guardians of the city, but education in what form? It is at this point in *The Republic* Socrates begins to lay out his sweeping plan for the

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 53. (375d)

<sup>12</sup> Plato, 416a, in Bloom, *The Republic*, 95.

education of the guardians. They will be educated in music, gymnastics, mathematics, but most of all philosophy. They will gain wisdom and their souls will be shaped by their education.

Gymnastics and music will shape the body and the soul of the guardians. Music will shape the soul of the student to love the “fine things” and gymnastics will help train the body to be strong and shape the spirit of the guardian to be spirited and courageous.<sup>13</sup> The two must be in balance for excessive gymnastics not balanced by music will result in “savageness and hardness” where as an excess of music will result in “softness and tameness”, but if they are in balance the, “soul of the man thus harmonized is moderate and courageous.”<sup>14</sup> For the guardian who indulges too much in music it “charms his spirit” and it “begins to melt and liquefy his spirit” in the end making him a “feeble warrior”. In contrast, too much gymnastic without requisite music or philosophy dampens any love of learning that nature might have bequeathed to the guardian. As a result the guardian becomes a “misologist”, a hater of reason, he no longer makes any use of persuasion, “but goes about everything with force and savageness, like a wild beast and he lives ignorantly and awkwardly without rhythm or grace.”<sup>15</sup>

Through philosophy, they will study “the idea of the good” and cultivate a healthy soul. Knowledge of the “idea of the good” is, “Greater than justice...the idea of the good is the greatest study and that it’s by availing oneself of it along with just things and the rest that they become useful and beneficial.”<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, “just and fair things, when it isn’t known in what way they are good, won’t have gotten themselves a guardian who’s worth very much in the man who doesn’t know this.”<sup>17</sup> So philosophy and knowledge of “the idea of the good” will shape the

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<sup>13</sup> For music see *Ibid.*, 80. (401e) for gymnastics see *Ibid.*, 89 (410d)

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 89 (410c)

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 90 (411a-e)

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 184. (504e)

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 184. (506a)

guardians soul so that it will be in tune with “the good” and he will learn that it is good to serve and protect the city.

The late great Alan Bloom, argued that the guardian’s spiritedness will be ultimately controlled and directed by another class of philosophers. He seems to doubt that the warrior class themselves will become philosophers but he does mention that education is the primary means of training them to harm enemies and not friends.<sup>18</sup> Of course this still means that the education of the guardians will contain training in discerning the “good” rather than simple obedience to orders from the philosopher class. According to Alan Bloom, “The true science...is the study of the good...The good is the transcendent principle of the whole, the cause of the being of things and of the apprehension of being, uniting knower and known, the lover of the good and the good things. As experienced by man, the good is an overpowering combination of pleasure and knowledge.”<sup>19</sup> The guardians, through their education will experience the deep pleasure of knowing the good and it will shape their souls in a deep and abiding way.

For Plato then, the guardians can be trusted with power, and can be trusted to be guardians of the city, because they have had the proper philosophic education. They have been trained in the knowledge of the good. Their soul has been shaped into a healthy soul where their reason is in control of both their will and their passions. Guardians who abuse their power and act like wolves have not received a proper education or have allowed their soul to be corrupted by their passions; they have developed a disordered and tyrannical soul. One of Plato’s main themes in *The Republic* is that order in the soul leads to order in the republic, thus a guardian class of well ordered souls will pursue the moral good of their city and help sustain a moral order

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<sup>18</sup> See Bloom’s essay in ...

<sup>19</sup> Alan Bloom, interpretive essay, 401-402.

in their land.<sup>20</sup> By contrast, a tyrant has a disordered soul in that he is driven by his desires, indeed he is a slave to his desires and his tyrannical souls sows discord in his city.<sup>21</sup> In Plato's imagery of the soul—which he depicts as a chariot whose driver is “reason” and the two horses are “will” and “desire”—the tyrannical soul is being dragged by its passions; its desire for money, power, or pleasure. For Plato the healthy soul is one where reason rules, the one who is “king of himself” is the happiest, and the safest for society.

Thus, the guardians, through their education, are meant to be shaped into kingly souls who can rule their passions and serve the city by understanding that their happiness and the health of their soul will be found in serving the city rather than preying on it. That defending the weak (rather than preying on them) partakes in the good and justice. So if Plato's solution to the “guardians as wolves” dilemma is to be found in education, philosophy, and the study of the good, how does the film *A Few Good Men* address the problem? In short, it doesn't, at least not directly and even then only by inference at best. But it does suggest a bit more than it might at first appear.

### **A Few Good Philosophers?**

The film is first and foremost a riveting courtroom drama whose main purpose is not to provide a comprehensive answer to the political dilemma that is raised. However, it does suggest a few things, if even tacitly, on how to address the problem. At the end of the film, Dawson and Downey are dishonorably discharged. When the verdict is read, Downey panics as he does not understand the ruling. Since they were simply following orders he believes that both of them should be exonerated, “What did we do wrong? We followed orders, what did we do wrong?”

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<sup>20</sup> Russell Kirk, *The Roots of the American Order*, (ISI Books, Wilmington, Delaware, 1974) 79.

<sup>21</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, 579e, in Bloom, 260.

By the end of the trial, Dawson finally understands what is at stake more fully, and as he turns to Downey and says, “We were supposed to fight for people who couldn’t fight for themselves, we were supposed to fight for Willy,” says Dawson.

In Dawson’s simple statement, volumes are communicated. Dawson’s statement reveals that he believes they both had a duty to a moral good that transcends any orders by Jessup or Kendrick and it suggests that the moral good should be shaping their actions at all times. Their training, their dedication to unit, Corp and Country, their physical strength, their weapons, their power, their deadly aggression, their “thymos” should all be in service of “the good”. Yes, it is to protect the man next to them, yes it is to serve their unit and the Corp, yes it is to serve and protect their nation, but in the end it is to serve “the good”.

One might point out also, that in serving the nation of the United States one is not merely defending one’s own tribe but for many Americans and American observers, the United States as a nation was founded to give life to “the good” at least the political goods articulated in the Declaration of Independence. To put it another way, what makes people American is not a common ethnic heritage or common language but a commitment to a set of philosophical principles found in the Declaration of Independence and the political structure found in the U.S. Constitution.

For example, Abraham Lincoln argued that what held Americans together and connected them with their ancestors, was not some blood connection, but one of moral principle.

According to Lincoln, recent immigrants:

*If they look back through this history to trace their connection with those days by blood, they find they have none, they cannot carry themselves back into that glorious epoch and make themselves feel that they are part of us, but when they look through that old Declaration of Independence they find that those old men say that “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,” and then they feel that that moral sentiment taught in that day evidences their relation to those men, that it is the father of*



*all moral principle in them, and that they have a right to claim it as though they were blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that Declaration, (loud and long continued applause) and so they are.*<sup>22</sup>

For Lincoln, “all men are created equal” is the philosophical and moral principle that links all Americans for all times, “That is the electric cord in that Declaration that links the hearts of patriotic and liberty-loving men together, that will link those patriotic hearts as long as the love of freedom exists in the minds of men throughout the world.”<sup>23</sup>

According to Harry Jaffa, Lincoln saw the principles of the Declaration of Independence as the “central idea from which all minor thoughts radiate, of the public opinion upon which the nation was founded,” and that such principles, Lincoln believed, were, “no less metaphysical than moral and political.”<sup>24</sup>

Robert Kagan argues that founding a nation upon a moral principle gave America a unique character. He put it this way, “The idea of natural rights was not new. But founding a government and society based on the principle of natural rights *was* new...The Americans were the first to attempt to vindicate their natural rights in the real world and to erect a nation with universal rights as the foundation. The Declaration of Independence was at once an assertion of this radical principle, a justification for rebellion, and the founding document of American nationhood.”<sup>25</sup>

According to Lincoln then, America was founded on the principle of the moral and political equality instilled in all men by “nature and nature’s God”. The good was further realized in the “unalienable rights” that were embedded in the very nature of man; rights to “life,

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<sup>22</sup> Abraham Lincoln, *On the Meaning of the Declaration of Independence*, speech given on July 4, 1858.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Harry Jaffa, *A New Birth of Freedom: Abraham Lincoln and the Coming of the Civil War*. (Rowman and Littlefield, Landham, MD, 2000) xiii.

<sup>25</sup> Robert Kagan, *Dangerous Nation*, (Knopf, New York, 2006)

liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” The Marine Corp and likewise Dawson and Downey’s unit were created with the “telos” or purpose to serve the nation and by extension “the good” articulated in the Declaration. Thus, it follows that, as marines, Dawson and Downey’s ultimate purpose was to uphold the dignity of the human person and the moral and political equality of each individual for those are at the core of the very nation they serve.

“Unit, Corp, God, country” was Dawson and Downey’s motto and yet in their assault with Santiago, “unit” and “Corp” seemed to override God (the good) and country in this instance. Col. Jessup’s command seemed to promote unit, and Corp, in service of country, but in a manner inconsistent with “the good”. We know from the film that Dawson had a deep and abiding sense of “the good” as he had already disobeyed orders, that he thought were unjust, to bring one Marine some food while he was on house arrest. Dawson was summarily punished and his record marred because of this disobedience. Jessup and Kendrick were attempting to mold Dawson into one of “their” kind of Marines by punishing his disobedience. Dawson’s remark that he should have protected Willy, draws upon knowledge that was temporarily obscured by the Gitmo culture created by Jessup, the punishment handed down by Kendrick, and perhaps consciously ignored by Dawson himself in an attempt to conform to Jessup’s dark ethos. In his remark about protecting Willy, Dawson shows he has recovered a sense of justice that had likely been implanted in him from a very young age, either from his family, or from his community, or in his Marine Corp training. To be sure, notions of a commitment to a good that transcends commitments to unit, Corp, and Country did not likely come directly from philosophical training per se but perhaps simply moral principles that were part of Dawson’s rearing and training.

But if Dawson himself is not a philosopher how could he have come by this knowledge? For example, in Plato's *Republic*, the philosopher must struggle to leave the cave and to see the truth in the full light of day. Only an elite few capable of deep philosophy will ever know the true, the good, and the beautiful because only a few are capable of crawling their way out of the cave. However, the promise of the western tradition (in both Christianity and the enlightenment) are that the sun can be brought into the cave, to expose "the many" to the true, the good, and the beautiful. The many (as opposed to an elite few) can now know the truth without recourse to special levels of intelligence or training. Plato's "idea of the good" has revealed itself directly to human beings through religion or a democratized philosophy, and they are free to respond in kind. The "idea of the good" can be transmitted now through the culture itself. Similarly, the premise of the American experiment is that democracy can work because the many can know the good, broadly speaking, and therefore the good can inform their public duty. As Abraham Lincoln put it, the edifice of political liberty rests upon "general intelligence" a "sound morality" and a "reverence" for the Constitution and the laws.<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, the natural law tradition holds that there is "a law written on the heart" and that there are things that, one "can't not know".<sup>27</sup> This deep human knowledge can be obscured by culture or ideology for a time, but it is so ingrained in one's nature that it cannot be entirely blotted out. Dawson seems to have recovered the moral principle that was "written on his heart" in nature.

Thus, while Dawson and Downey may not have been trained as philosophers they have been raised in a culture that was grown out of the western moral tradition and they have been tutored by a civic culture that is infused with the philosophical grounds articulated in the

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<sup>26</sup> Abraham Lincoln, Lyceum Address.

<sup>27</sup> See J. Budziszewski, *What we Can't Not Know: A Guide.* (Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2003).

Declaration of Independence. Their civic education should have impressed upon them the moral and philosophical nature of America’s founding principles. Even if they could not fully articulate such principles, these sources have likely given them an intuitive sense of morality and justice to guide their actions. As an example of the kind of common culture they might have experienced, one is reminded of another scene in another recent military film *American Sniper* where Chris Kyle’s father is talking to his sons at the dinner table, and his remarks closely track the analogy of sheep and dogs in Plato’s dialogue:

*WAYNE KYLE*

*Some people prefer to believe that evil doesn’t exist in the world, and if it ever darkened their doorstep they wouldn’t know how to protect themselves... those are the sheep.*

*Then there are those blessed with the gift of aggression and an overpowering need to protect the flock.*

*These men are the rare breed that live to confront the wolf.*

*They are the sheepdog.*

*Now we’re not raising any sheep in this family and I will whoop your ass if you turn into a wolf—*

*But we take care of our own. And if someone picks a fight with you or bullies your brother, you have my permission to finish it.*

*Then you know who you are...*

This simple homespun common morality that teaches the strong to protect the weak represents an important strain of the American cultural tradition. Men like Dawson are likely taught to be “sheepdogs” by their family and community. It is this desire to be a “sheepdog” that might lead them to serve in the military. In a certain sense as Robert Kagan argues, many in America see their nation itself, in some sense, as the world’s sheepdog.<sup>28</sup> On top of this, American civic education (to the extent that it is still taught) teaches that American principles uphold the dignity and moral equality of the human person. Leon Kass in describing his reader on American civic education put it this way:

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<sup>28</sup> Robert Kagan, *Dangerous Nation*. Kagan does not use the term “sheepdog” but he argues that American’s have seen their nation having a special role in the world.

*The selections in What So Proudly We Hail explore both American individualism and our ethnic, racial, and religious diversity. They are both prominent elements of our national life. Yet despite our many enriching differences, there are also things that we have in common. A people that is informed by the "creed" of liberty, equality, and the pursuit of happiness and prosperity will differ from a people informed by different principles. And there are common goals that we seek to attain as a society, and common virtues that a robust citizenry will need. These goals and virtues are central themes of most of our selections.*

*It is important for everyone to understand the complexity of the American character, the virtues that active citizenship requires...<sup>29</sup>*

The civic education then, if done well, should instill in its pupils a moral character informed by the “creed of liberty, equality, and the pursuit of happiness” and a people informed by that creed will “differ from a people informed by different principles.” Now, to what extent were Dawson and Downey formed in such ways, the film does not reveal, but Dawson’s remark shows a moral compass that was formed, or at least awakened, somewhere by someone.

In addition to their familial upbringing and civic education, their training in the Marine Corp would build upon this foundation. In their training as marines they were directed to see the larger purpose of the nation they serve and thus their individual purpose as well. For example, the Marine Corp Hymn proclaims that Marines are the, “First to fight for right and freedom, And to keep [their] honor clean.” In addition, a key Marine Corp training guide lists the Marine code: “*Honor*...The bedrock of our character...to abide by an uncompromising concept of integrity; to respect human dignity; to have concern for each other...*Courage*...to do what is right in every situation, to adhere to a higher standard of personal conduct...*Commitment*...24-hour-a-day dedication to Corps and Country, pride, concern for others...”<sup>30</sup> In both of these examples the Marine Corp proclaims that its purpose is to fight for “right” and “freedom” and to uphold high

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<sup>29</sup> Leon Kass, *What so Proudly We Hail*, (ISI Books, Wilmington, Delaware, 2011)

<sup>30</sup> USMC document, “Leading Marines” MCWP 6-11

standards of personal conduct at all times that shows “concern” for others. Furthermore, this passage from research on military training sums up the overall thrust of military training:

*To properly fight the Global War on Terrorism, in which the rules are not always clearly defined, military leaders must reinforce and strengthen the morals and ideals of those trained as warriors to prevent their becoming like the terrorists they confront... [training] aims to develop self-discipline and self control to restrain oneself in the heat of the moment and to use force responsibly. These activities are designed to instill an ethical dimension that places individual achievement in the context of continuing an old, honorable, warrior tradition...Character development might be the most critical component in a Marine’s development.<sup>31</sup>*

This Marine Corp training is meant to reflect a particular human anthropology embedded in the national ethos that “all men are created equal” and that governments are instituted to secure those unalienable rights that flow from the essence of the human person. Perhaps Jessup and Kendrick’s influence on Dawson and Downey and the duo’s seemingly intense need to be a part of a close knit unit temporarily clouded such training or obscured these eternal truths. However, in the end, Dawson’s comment reveals that he understands the deeper philosophical commitment to human dignity and the subservient role that power must play in preserving that dignity. Power must ultimately be in service of some greater good. Power can never vindicate itself in the service of itself (in contrast to what Thrasymachus tries to argue in Book I, when he asserts that “justice is the advantage of the stronger”). By the end of the trial, Dawson seems to see things more fully and one gets the sense that he has rediscovered a larger purpose for his life. While honor and a sense of purpose can be found, perhaps more intimately and intensely in the military, Dawson in the end realizes that it can be found outside of military service as well. His “thymos” has come under the rule of “reason” and thus it has been redeemed and redirected to the good.

In the end, *A Few Good Men* asks the viewer to consider whether there are moral limits to training the guardians of a polity. In turn, it leads one to consider what means are necessary to

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<sup>31</sup> Jamison Yi, *MCMAP and the Marine Warrior Ethos*, Military Review, November-December, 2004

train guardians for America's defense and to what extent do those means need to be consistent with America's commitment to political and moral equality. Troops need not be philosophers but it seems they must intuitively serve and promote the good, at least as it is articulated in America's core founding document, promoted in a common civic culture, and reinforced in military training. The notion that all humans are morally and politically equal, that they have political rights which must be respected, and that these are grounded in "nature and nature's God", puts such notions of equality and natural rights as the *telos* of the American project and, therefore by extension, the ultimate purpose of the American military. As such these philosophical positions are put beyond the reach of any earthly power, even the intimidating and intense Col. Nathan R. Jessup.