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Walking away, heads bowed

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AVON HILLS SALON

Thoughts from the Avon Hills

Tony Cunningham on Walking Away, Heads Bowed

OCTOBER 16, 2019



By all accounts, American Special Forces troops have worked well with the Syrian Democratic Forces (S.D.F.), forging deep bonds of trust, respect, and loyalty in their fight against ISIS over the last four years in northern Syria. Turkey's military foray into Syria against Kurdish Y.P.G. forces, who together with their Arab allies comprise the S.D.F., presented the Trump administration with a hard moment of truth in recent days. Would America abandon the Kurds? Yes, and nobody knows the grave import of this decision better than the American Special Forces left feeling ashamed for abandoning their brothers-in-arms under orders. Then again, the Kurds know it just as well, for they will pay the price in blood of what they can only experience as betrayal.

By nature, war and diplomacy are chaotic and complex. Allies desperately need to believe that they always have each other's backs, but sober-minded realists understand that circumstances can force difficult choices on leaders, sometimes leaving them with little choice but to let down friends. I've never been to war, and I've never brokered deals between warring nations and

factions, but I fully understand the idea of not being able to attend adequately to people you care about. All it takes in everyday life is one of those all-too-human situations where you cannot be all things to all people. Thus, someone needs you badly, but so does someone else, and there just isn't enough of you to go around to give both people what they need. Or perhaps you must take sides between people who mean something to you, thereby alienating somebody you care about in the process. In such cases, decent people cannot escape the dispiriting sense that they have let loved ones down, even if they couldn't help it. Surely the American soldiers who have fought alongside their Kurdish counterparts suffer badly for abandoning them, just as the Kurds suffer so badly for being abandoned. Soldiers who ordinarily refuse to leave their wounded comrades behind as a point of honor can only feel thoroughly dishonored by what is happening in northern Syria.

War can foist excruciating choices on leaders. Abraham Lincoln felt the acute burden of sending brother against brother in the Civil War. One has only to look at photos of Lincoln to see how those years aged him. The men and boys dying at places like Gettysburg, Chancellorsville, Cold Harbor, Antietam, and The Wilderness were not just numbers to Lincoln, pieces in some game of war with the wayward Confederate states. They were flesh-and-blood Americans—on both sides—and he experienced the immense responsibility of having the ultimate say in prosecuting the war. I dare say that the American Special Forces standing aside and leaving Syria likewise feel an immense weight of involuntary complicity in the undeserved fate of the Kurds. Never mind that the choice didn't belong to them since their job is to follow orders, not give them. From their point of view, they are turned their backs on the very men they fought beside. How could they possibly avoid feeling like they have betrayed their friends?

My guess is that all this means less than nothing to someone like Trump and his minions. Dishonorable people can do dishonorable things shamelessly. Should his actions come back to haunt him politically—a virtual inevitability as Assad, Putin, and Iran profit from America's withdrawal in the region—Trump will feel the sting of criticism. When military figures, statesmen, politicians, the press, and the public revile his rash moves on Syria, he will fume. But the basic thought that he played a pivotal part in American forces letting the Kurds down will carry no weight at all with him because at heart, Trump is a shameless man, and such men can do shameful things and sleep soundly at night. Hopefully, his days of falsely honoring himself will soon be at an end. In the meantime, may the Kurds endure a fate they do not deserve.

Tony Cunningham

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