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The Moon Is Down

BY JOHN STEINBECK

New York: Penguin Books, 1995

Originally published in 1942 during the first months of America's entry into World War II, *The Moon Is Down* has been described as "a work of literature that served as propaganda," intended both to warn the nation of the perils of war and to celebrate the resilience of the democratic spirit (Coers 1995, xxiv). Although not generally considered one of John Steinbeck's stronger works, the book is a compelling fictionalized case study of public service ethics and leadership, and the perseverance of free men.

The central story line focuses on the occupation of an unnamed northern European town by an unidentified invader. Although the explicit anonymity was designed to evoke the universality of the moral conundrums faced by the characters, the narrative contains many clues suggesting a Scandinavian town occupied by the German Nazis during the early part of World War II.

The invaders occupy the town in order to access the nearby coal mines. Although a collaborationist resident aids the initial invasion, the masses wage a deliberate resistance of psychological and material sabotage, marked by critical incidents of violence.

One of the notable, and most controversial, characteristics of the drama is the "humanness" of the occupiers, whose obedient, servile, and virulent role is coupled with their individual hopes, fears, loneliness, and compassion. Indeed, Steinbeck was criticized for portraying the occupiers in too positive a light. Looking back at these criticisms, Steinbeck explained, "I had written of Germans as men, not supermen, and this was considered a very weak attitude to take. I couldn't make much sense out of this, and it seems absurd now that we know the Germans were men, and thus fallible, even defeatable" (1953, 29). The humanistic

portrayal of both the protagonists and the antagonists heightens the utility of the book as a fictional case in the study of public administration.

The story of the occupation is told largely through the interactions of the democratically elected Mayor Orden and the commanding officer of the occupiers, Colonel Lanser. These two executives hold markedly different positions, and are expected to fulfill contrasting responsibilities. Reminiscent of Rosenbloom's managerial approach to public administration (1983), Mayor Orden literally represents not only the people of the town, but also the democratic ideal. Described by Steinbeck as the "Idea-Mayor" of the town (p. 7), Orden provides deviously restrained leadership to the resistance while insisting that he is but a public servant: "Some people accept appointed leaders and obey them. But my people have elected me. They made me and they can unmake me" (p. 16).

In contrast, Colonel Lanser exhibits a traditional, militaristic, and largely bureaucratic style of leadership (Rosenbloom 1983). Although Steinbeck's description of the character is a notable departure from the stereotypical Nazi commander, Lanser is nevertheless in charge of the occupying force and tempers his tolerance and diplomacy with stern fortitude. The contrast between the leadership styles and responsibilities of Mayor Orden and Colonel Lanser is most clear in the following exchange:

"I'm sorry," the colonel said. "No. These are the orders of my leader."

"The people will not like it," Orden said.

"Always the people! The people are unarmed. The people have no say."

Mayor Orden shook his head. "You do not know, sir." (p. 18)

With "its central conflict being one of ideas rather than of fully-drawn characters" (Ditsky 1989, 177), the pedagogical value of *The Moon Is Down* lies with the various ethical and moral themes imbedded in the story.¹ Indeed, the story line and dialogue are replete with examples of core aspects of public service ethics. The principles embodied in the ASPA Code of Ethics are apparent in the book—notably, serving the public interest, respecting the law, and demonstrating personal integrity. Other important themes include the importance of the use of discretion, organizational change/adaptation, steadfast leadership, objectivity, decision-making under pressure, and the mastership of the public in a democracy.

The dominant perspective of the work is the triumph of morality and virtuous character, particularly of the town's residents and the mayor in their resistance efforts. There is also a focus on virtue, however, in the humane description of the occupiers: "They were, under pressure, capable of cowardice or courage, as everyone is" (p. 22). Consequently, the empathetic characterizations of the occupied and the occupier lead to a sort of right-vs.-right dilemma, such as personal integrity vs. responsibility (Brousseau 1998).

Applying the triangle approach to public service ethics (Svara 1997), one also finds evidence of deontological and teleological ethics in the novel. Deontological, or rules-based, ethics suggests a concern for fairness and justice. Rules-based ethics can also be applied too rigidly, as in the overly strict enforcement of orders or laws (Bowman et al. 2004, 72). Such a corruption of due process occurs in the story when one of the occupiers is killed in a scuffle with a miner. A show trial is held in the mayor's house, and

the miner is sentenced and executed despite the mayor's insistence that a display of violent retribution will do little to affect the attitudes or actions of the residents. To this, Colonel Lanser replies: "You see, what I think, sir, I, a man of a certain age and certain memories, is of no importance. I might agree with you, but that would change nothing. The military, the political pattern I work in has certain tendencies and practices which are invariable" (p. 49). Similarly, in response to a challenge by Doctor Winter as to the inevitable failure of such orders, Lanser replies, "I will carry out my orders no matter what they are" (p. 111).

In contrast, teleological ethics is primarily focused on results, typically presented as the greatest good for the greatest number. A telling illustration of this occurs at the end of the novel with the impending execution of Mayor Orden and Doctor Winter, the mayor's confidant and adviser, for their role in the resistance. The mayor finds comfort in the words of Socrates: "a man who is good for anything ought not to calculate the chance of living or dying; he ought only to consider whether he is doing right or wrong" (p. 106).

Despite his explicit attempt at non-judgmental objectivity (Ditsky 1989, 179), Steinbeck's bias for individualism shows through in the book. By focusing on the reality of human behavior, rather than what it ought to be, Steinbeck's depictions of the occupiers and the residents are, on a superficial level, morally neutral. By the end of the novel, however, the moral superiority of the residents, as exemplified by Mayor Orden, is laid bare. In his last statement to Colonel Lanser, the mayor observes that "Free men cannot start a war, but once it is started, they can fight on in defeat. Herd men, followers of a leader, cannot do that, and so it is always herd

men who win battles and the free men who win wars" (p. 111).

The terms "herd men" and "free men" are obviously normative descriptions. Herd men are identified by their group and follow orders, surrendering their will and ethics to the dictates of a leader (Ditsky 1989, 189). Free men, conversely, are individuals guided by a "moral consciousness" when choosing leaders to speak for them and are inherently stronger and more worthy. In his introduction to the novel, Coers makes the point clear: "Steinbeck calmly reaffirmed . . . the bedrock principles of democracy: the worth of the individual, and the power deriving from free citizens sharing common commitments" (1995, xxiv).

Whatever consequences this explicit bias has for *The Moon Is Down* in terms of literary merit, experience using the novel in public administration seminars suggests that the pro-democracy message is an asset. Students can be challenged to recognize and appreciate the numerous ethical angles of the story without being distracted by a controversial ideological overtone. The issues are apparent and complex, but ultimately reaffirming, and "less concerned with the strict logic of a political scientist than in the hopeful thinking of people directed by a strong-hearted moral consciousness" (Lewis and Britch 1989, 174)

On a practical level, the novel works as a fictional case study because of its relative brevity, requiring only a handful of hours to complete, but providing ample material for discussion. Steinbeck presents a host of public service themes that appeal to undergraduates and graduate students of all ages and levels of professional experience. Students, and instructors, also benefit from the break from the standard slate of academic materials that reading a novel

provides. In sum, the moral and ethical challenges presented in *The Moon Is Down* remain vital and compelling, a full three generations removed from the geopolitics that inspired one of the giants of American literature.

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NOTE

1. Curiously, there is no substantive reference to *The Moon Is Down* in *The Moral Philosophy of John Steinbeck*, edited by Stephen K. George (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2005).

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