

An ethical question that arose with special force during the Gulf War in 1991 concerned the duties of ordinary civilians who were not called for military service. Many of these citizens had opposed the war before it began. Opinion polls just before the war showed the United States about evenly split between people who favored going to war and those who opposed it. Those who opposed the war were faced with the problem of what to do when the shooting started. There seemed to be three options for such people. They could offer visible support for the war. They could remain silent. Or they could publicly dissent from the war policy.

What would have been the ethically appropriate option?

**Answer:** The appropriate option is to continue voicing opposition. If people believe that a war would be gravely wrong an official decision to go to war should not override this judgment for them. Some argue that a person should support what is good for one's country, and during time of war victory is such a good. Therefore, according to this argument, one should always support the victory of one's country in war. This argument, however, is mistaken. First, even if one agrees that victory is one's country's interest, one may also regard victory as impossible, or not worth the attendant moral, economic, and political costs. Second, one cannot always equate the good of one's country with victory in war. Someone might believe that her country would be better off by ending the war. Third, even if success in a war promises benefits for one's country there are moral limits to what a country may do to pursue its benefits. Someone might believe that a particular war goes beyond these limits. In such a case he would be morally justified in opposing the war.

Case from the 1994 Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl.

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