Informants, *Barn Burning*, and the Public Interest: 
Loyalty in Law, Literature, and Manly Endeavors

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I. Introduction

In easy cases, when law is just and efficient, or simply when a government can be expected to do more good than harm, private information reduces social costs and is often especially valued where it is otherwise expensive to gather. Thus, we hope that citizens will inform suitable authorities when crimes are in progress, when children are abused, when polluters are out of control, and when buildings are on fire. But informants can generate costs not only because they might err, but also because their enthusiasm in collecting information might conflict with others’ desire for privacy, and might therefore generate defensive, as well as direct, costs. Legal rules reflect some concern for the privacy issues, but for the most part law encourages the transmission of information with respect to specified matters, by requiring disclosure, by paying for it — in which case the production of new information is encouraged along with its conveyance, or by supporting private schemes that enable informants. In contrast, American literature, as well as popular culture, rarely encourages or glorifies “whistleblowing,” but rather scorns “ratting” and “snitching” as disloyal.

I will argue that our literature generally avoids a question on which we could use moral guidance, how to manage personal relationships when they conflict with the larger community’s interests in information. For the most part, American literature engages with easy cases. Law is then on its own — or forced to work against the pull of the surrounding culture — when it comes to encouraging private information in the public interest, and especially so when the informant must favor the public interest over the informant’s own friends, kin, or employer. Popular culture and literature play a substantial role in developing norms of loyalty and cooperation, but little attention is paid to the conflicting need for socially useful information. Loyalty is treasured, and informants are depicted as rats rather than whistleblowers. A few important literary works do grapple with the limits of loyalty where disloyal disclosures might be socially useful. While ratting is general considered “unmanly,” and protecting a friend or kin is usually regarded as heroic, there are a few subtle works that advance the idea that informing can be manly. Part II considers one such work, William Faulkner’s *Barn Burning*, and it serves as a vehicle for considering the legal, cultural, and moral issues associated with informants. The discussion refers to other works in which the difficult

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I suggest in passing that American culture may generally avoid the tradeoff between personal loyalties and whistleblowing because it is disinclined to accept the easy starting point, that law will be just and efficient. A traditional concern of our culture and its literature is the threat of excessive and tyrannical government. Such a government will want too much information and, in its shadow, a culture permitted to flourish will denigrate snitching and extol loyalty to nongovernmental institutions, except for the core activities, such as national defense, where the culture favors strong government. Part III offers some observations about loyalty and the public interest in war, as well as in male-dominated, warlike athletics. Part IV concludes.

II. The Informant’s Decision

A. Barn Burning

Faulkner’s coming-of-age story revolves around two of the numerous barn burnings carried out by Abner Snopes, the father of young Colonel Sartorius (“Sarty”) Snopes. The senior Snopes is an angry pyromaniac, who habitually creates conflicts with his more affluent neighbors and then burns their barns before moving on with his family to another location. The story opens in the midst of a trial regarding one such arson. Sarty is called to testify, but the outraged victim declines to have the boy cross-examined, perhaps assuming that the son will protect the father, and the latter is then driven out of town with the encouragement of the presiding judge. Snopes next works on the land of a Major de Spain, and his misanthropy, not to mention scorn for authority, continues. He visits the manor house and willfully soils a rug, and then ruins it when directed to clean it. Major de Spain plans to deduct the damages from Abner Snopes’s in-kind wages, or sharecropping revenue, though a Justice of the Peace halves the damages. Abner prepares to set fire to the de Spain barn. His normal pattern is to send word in advance of his burnings, apparently and sensibly in order to eliminate the chance of accidentally killing someone with his fires, but this time he does not provide a warning.

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1 I pass over another starting point, which is the value of loyalty in the first place. George P. Fletcher, *Loyalty: An Essay on the Morality of Relationships* (New York: Oxford University Press 1993) has already covered this ground, and my focus can be understood as on the competition between “higher and lower loyalties,” see Fletcher, at __, but also as driven by utilitarian considerations.


3 The moniker is deployed late in the story, for the young Snopes is usually identified as “the boy,” a handle that emphasizes the coming-of-age element. He is called Sarty soon after his father chastises, and even cajoles, him, telling the son “You’re getting to be a man.”(29)

4 It is interesting that the messenger seems, with regularity, to be a Black man, described by a racist epithet, apparently understood by Faulkner and his readers (at the time) to be unbelievable as a witness who might establish Snopes’s intentions and involvement.
Moreover, he involves Sarty in preparations for the crime and then tells his wife to restrain the boy, thus carefully implicating her as well, lest Sarty interfere with the criminal plan. The boy escapes and races ahead to warn Major de Spain of his father's intentions and then, after hearing some gunshots, he headed to the “dark woods” to set out on his own, and “did not look back.”(110)

Faulkner plays brilliantly with the images and quandaries of informing. The protagonist, a son and younger brother, is named after a Confederate general with whom his father once rode, and the first Justice of the Peace notes that the Southern code of honor will surely be reflected in the testimony of the eponymous youth. Sarty is introduced in the story’s second sentence with “The boy, crouched on his nail keg at the back of the crowded room, knew he smelled cheese, and more.”(1) And then, when fingered by the accuser as the witness who might make his case, he is described by the narrator as “crouching, small for his age, small and wiry like his father, in patched and faded jeans even too small for him, with straight, uncombed, brown hair and eyes gray and wild as storm scud.”(7) Once we come to know the plot, we can look back and see that the portrayal of Sarty, and the fact that the court “smelled of cheese,”(1) suggests a rat. The descriptive words and metaphor introduce the subject of ratting,5 while the plot communicates the social convention against it. The norm against informing is sufficiently strong that the complainant in the first trial decides not to test it, or simply regards it as too powerful to fight, and Sarty is not pushed to snitch on his father.

The remedy, or penalty, of banishment for Snopes’s unproven crime of arson does not strike the reader as excessive, but of course it will deepen the family’s isolation, and its sense that the clan must stick together in a hostile world. Sarty already thinks of the legal system as his “Enemy! Enemy!”(10) and the family’s experiences and wanderings make it unlikely that he will develop meaningful or competing ties with neighbors or the larger community. When the family camps for the night, en route to the de Spain property, Snopes draws Sarty away from the familiar, small fire which was “his father’s

5 The disapproving terms and concepts of ratting, snitching, and tattle-taling had entered the language long before this story first appeared, and readers could be expected to be sensitive to hints of a rat. Entries in the Oxford English Dictionary suggest that snitching (first encountered in 1801) has continued to be a disapproving reference to one who revealed information, but ratting (1810) first referred to one who deserted a political party or otherwise reneged on a commitment and then, later (1925), it suggested the particular disloyalty of betraying, of acting the informer, or snitching. Tattling first meant gossiping (1734, and possibly much earlier) and then spread to tell-tale and tattle-tale in the 1800s. Faulkner himself deployed tattle-tale in William Faulkner, The Sound and the Fury 91 (1929). In contrast, whistleblowing, which seems to have no precise synonym, is a modern, Nader-era, American creation. Moreover, whistleblowing usually refers to the process of providing information to the state, while the other terms include information provided to an interested private party. I will ignore this distinction and think of whistleblowing and ratting as substitutes, except that one word expressed approval and the other disapproval.

Note that the older words were gendered. All the early uses of ratting and snitching that I can find involve men, while tattling is deployed with, or in place of, gossiping, a word long used (in most literature, but not in the Bible) in descriptions of a woman’s conduct or in association with feminized adjectives.
habit” and which was “an element [that apparently] spoke to some deep mainspring of his father’s being . . . as the one weapon for the preservation of integrity . . . to be regarded with respect and used with discretion,”(27) in order to confront him with the observation, or fact, that the father was aware of the son’s intention to testify against him earlier in the day. Sarty’s father strikes him and speaks of the importance of family loyalty.6 Indeed, when next tested, Sarty will attempt to defend his father at the trial following the incident with the rug at de Spain’s home,7 but by then his father takes no chances and orders him away from the court. The precaution was doubly unnecessary because the judge seems confused about the extent of Snopes’s wrongdoing.(74)

Faulkner emphasizes Sarty’s coming of age in the penultimate passage where Sarty pauses to contemplate the transpired events as well as his own future and “did not know it was midnight and . . . did not know how far he had come.”(109) Sarty is depicted not as completely rejecting his father, but as cherishing the myth of his father’s own manliness or, perhaps, as mourning the tragedy of his father’s life. “My father, he thought. ‘He was brave!’ . . . He was! He was in the war! He was in Colonel Sartoris’ cav’ry!’ not knowing that his father had gone to that war . . . wearing no uniform, admitting the authority of and giving fidelity to no man or army or flag, going to war . . . for booty — it meant nothing and less than nothing to him if it were enemy booty or his own.”(109) Going to war for a cause or to defend one’s people is the height of loyalty and manliness. It involves sacrifice for others, and the risk of the ultimate sacrifice, and it requires teamwork among men. At the very least, Sarty identifies the contradiction in his father’s conduct; the same man who was brave and loyal enough to go to war, indeed that war of Southern honor, and who followed an authority figure in that setting where leadership and obedience to it are most needed, is now revealed as scornful, rebellious, and antisocial, focused on his own clan, and on his ability to order its members about in furthering his own obsessions. In contrast to other authors, Faulkner does not avoid the hard choice between loyalty to family and the public interest; Sarty must be disloyal, and then be separated from the only life he knows, in order to ensure that his father’s fire does not recklessly endanger others’ lives. The author is eager to preserve the idealized distinction between honorable and dishonorable men. The story would retain its power if Abner Snopes had in fact been an honorable warrior in the past, but by painting him as consistently antisocial and self-absorbed, Faulkner is able to communicate the idea that

6 The importance of kin is emphasized with numerous references to blood, beginning with the father telling the son “You got to learn to stick to your own blood or you ain’t going to have any blood to stick to you.”(29) This point, as well the choice between “will” and blood and the theme of Southern kinship, is developed in Jane Hiles, Kinship and Heredity in Faulkner’s ‘Barn Burning,’ Mississippi Quarterly, 38:3 (1985: Summer) 329-37.

7 Phyllis Franklin, Sarty Snopes and ‘Barn Burning,’ Mississippi Quarterly, 21:3 (1968: Summer) 189-93, perceives Sarty as more in tune with his father after being struck and lectured and, then, as further inclined to loyalty after observing Major de Spain flaws.
honor, and of course dishonor, runs deep.  

*Barn Burning* is unusual in its development of a character who must choose between loyalty to kin and the public interest. Sarty is forced by circumstances and by paternal conduct to develop intense identification with his own marginalized family, and he learns to be loyal to the clan. Even the judge is an enemy who threatens the family’s well being. Sarty overlooks hints of thievery and evidence of vandalism in order to support the family unit. But then he faces a more difficult choice because Abner takes his anger and misbehavior to a higher level. He plans to burn the de Spain barn without sending an advance warning. The implication is that the fire might generate collateral damage and take human life. With these stakes, Sarty chooses human life over fidelity to family, and he breaks from his family’s grip, literally and figuratively, in order to warn de Spain that immediate precautions are required. Sarty’s difficult (but presumably correct) choice, told in a way that is sad, redemptive, and satisfying, brings about his own independence and marks his transition to manhood.

The ethics and economics of informing may be difficult in practice, but the abstract problem is easily perceived. The family unit serves many useful purposes, and costs are saved and principal-agent problems solved to the extent that one can count on family members to care for one another, to act selflessly (at least to a point), and to work for a common purpose. A well-functioning family can do without contracts and their enforcement, it need not deploy tort law to prevent inefficient and selfish behavior within the group, and it economizes on costly job training, insurance, health care, and retirement arrangements. It has evolved from some prehistoric socio-biological development, a useful means of advancing the chances of perpetuating each participant’s genetic material, to become a more complex arrangement, and it is one that normally benefits rather than threatens most governments and societies. We “allow” family members to favor one another, to discriminate against outsiders, to dissemble and otherwise protect one another, to share resources in ways that escape general taxation, and so forth, because in return we gain stability, education, health care, and much more. It is, for example, not puzzling that law exempts a person from testifying against his or her child or spouse; the loss in valuable information (or the reduction in deterrence of some underlying antisocial behavior) is widely understood as more than offset by the value of family ties. Much the same argument can be developed about other personal ties, including the employer-employee relationship and the bonds of friendship. There is a social benefit in these personal relationships, so that there is a societal interest in not weakening these

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8 Sarty’s choice is more difficult than the reader’s because the former is misinformed about the father’s past. Contrary to the son’s beliefs, the father had not demonstrated fidelity or other honorable behavior in the past, but had simply been an opportunistic joiner. The reader thus regards Abner as something of a sociopath, while Sarty puzzles over the inconsistent character, and has reason to hope that the future will be bright. He might even warn de Spain in order to save his father from a serious criminal charge.
relationships by calling for disloyalty every time there is a conflicting public interest. I will not belabor the point here, for it is sufficient to see that the optimal law, or norm, will find a balance between personal and public, which is to say local and communal, loyalties.

B. Avoiding the Hard Decision

Faulkner’s story can seem formulaic. A character absorbs knowledge, or more specifically a shared value, and then the limits of that knowledge and value are tested through some conflict with another value. When put in this abstract way, the formula describes the driving force behind many familiar plots. The great classics do not shy from tragic choices, but it is interesting how often works of American literature avoid difficult tests, especially with respect to the relationship between the private and public sphere, and make life easy for the protagonist — at least as seen through the reader’s eyes. The topic is a large one, but I limit my claim here to difficult conflicts between loyalty and socially useful information.

Consider, for example, Mark Twain’s classic river tale, in which Huck Finn refuses to snitch on Jim, an escaped slave, with whom he is developing a friendship. The topic is certainly the conflict between a local loyalty and the government’s need for information, as in Barn Burning, but here the reader is expected to regard the asserted public interest as a false one. If slavery is a scourge, then a law requiring informants to assist in recapturing escaped slaves is a law better violated than upheld. There is, therefore, an easily resolved conflict, at least from the reader’s perspective. There are many such examples of literature extolling loyalty, but in a setting where loyalty causes someone to perceive the injustice of a law, so that the conflict between the personal relationship and the larger group disappears. The fictional character struggles, but the reader knows what must be done, and is encouraged to think that laws are often unjust while loyalty to kin and friends is heroic. The author may aim to draw attention to the illegitimacy of prevailing legal rules, but by aligning social justice with loyalty, and an anti-snitching norm, the reader need not examine the tradeoff between loyalty to clan and socially useful information.

Barn Burning may also make things easy for the reader, in which case it stands alongside Huckleberry Finn, and not alone. But Faulkner may have drawn Sarty as a mere ten-year old (32) in order to make the boy’s decision and the reader’s judgment more remarkable. Moreover, a decision in favor of loyalty to kin in Barn Burning could have been explained as compelled by the father’s violence toward his son, and as tolerable given that there was merely a modest risk of the arson leading to a fatality — while Twain’s Jim would have been doomed if Huck had followed the law and informed. Either way, Barn Burning advances the idea that personal loyalty, or perhaps simply

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9 Mark Twain, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884).
loyalty to undeserving kin, goes too far if it risks human life. Alternatively, it makes the point that a real man is one who has struggled with the tradeoff between loyalty based on personal relationship and loyalty to the larger society. Sarty and Huck had difficult choices to make, but the reader has more information than they, and regards Sarty’s choice as the more difficult one.

Another means of avoiding the critical question is to minimize the social consequences of loyal nondisclosure. In *The Great Gatsby*, Gatsby does not inform on Daisy, and thus opens himself, rather than her, to a charge of vehicular homicide. The idea may be that a gentleman does not inform on a love interest, even where the law or public interest favors disclosure, but the tough question is sidestepped because the public interest is rather limited. Daisy’s one accident does not make her much of a threat to others, and Gatsby’s taking the blame may provide just as strong a deterrent. Moreover, Gatsby’s chivalrous lie is contrasted with Tom’s self-serving or vindictive snitch on Gatsby as the owner of the car involved in the death of another. Gatsby engaged in self-sacrifice while Tom implicated a competitor for Daisy’s affections. The contrast makes the choices seem easy, and avoids the question of when one ought to inform despite a close, personal relationship.

The same strategy for avoiding the loyalty-public interest tension is found in *The Scarlet Letter*. Hester does not reveal the identity of the person who impregnated her, but it is plausible that she would have suffered the social consequences of an out-of-wedlock pregnancy whether or not she revealed this information. The preacher’s silence may be cowardly and unmanly, much as Gatsby’s informing would have been so regarded, but these unmanly steps do not implicate serious social consequences.

Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* offers a more direct comparison to *Barn Burning*. Mayella squirms but lies to protect her father. Here, the character’s loyalty to kin has grave social costs, for the falsely accused Tom will be put to death. It is tempting to point to the gender factor in comparing Mayella to Sarty, but I prefer to note that Mayella’s weakness, or loyalty, serves to highlight the larger social problem of racial discrimination. Faulkner could not make a similar, larger point by having Sarty decline to inform when human life was at stake.

In sum, Faulkner’s story addresses the location of the cost-benefit line when considering the value of personal loyalty, in the form of loyalty to father or clan, alongside the social costs that can be imposed when information is kept private. It is an unusual story in this respect. While many works of literature deal with private information and with the value of personal relationships, (somewhat surprisingly) most avoid the question of what an individual ought to do when such a relationship must be

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violated to advance a larger social good.

C. Literature, Information, and Resisting Big Government

My claim is hardly that all literature avoids examining difficult moral choices. Readers might share the intuition — though it is one that must go unexamined in the present paper — that American literature is exceptional in this regard, at least with respect to the conflict between personal and communal loyalties. Why might this be so? An abiding topic in American culture is the threat of the state. Among the many aspects to this preoccupation is nostalgia for the frontier and for the rugged individualism of the pre-state society. And then, looking forward, there is the fear of totalitarianism, that the civilizing effect of government will be too seductive, or will mask early and irreversible steps towards too much government.

One tool or requirement of totalitarianism is information about citizens. In turn, one aim of a culture concerned with the threat posed by big government will be to glorify the private sphere, and to hold in high regard citizens who resist excessive reaching by the state into private domains. In the realm of information, this culture will denigrate snitching rather than extol whistleblowing. It will produce dystopian works like *Fahrenheit 451*\(^{13}\) to warn of book, rather than barn, burning, and to describe a future world in which law aims to have citizens rat on one another so that the state can stamp out pockets of resistance and privately held information. The resistance movement is, of course, heroic and presented as at least somewhat successful. Another predictable cultural product is *The Minority Report*\(^{14}\) (a science fiction story made into a Steven Spielberg film (2002) with a more optimistic ending) in which there is excessive faith in the government’s collecting information for the public good. The moral and practical questions would be harder if a film or novel described a great famine or epidemic that might be expected because the government had insufficient information about privately held food or drugs, and these were withheld because of a collective action problem.

Of course, popular culture and serious literature, along with legal scholars, need not choose between these margins. The task of encouraging the conveyance of private information for the public interest is made more interesting and more difficult by the danger that too much will be elicited and misused. And the value of loyalty where there are close ties is hardly minimized by the suggestion that a successful society is more than the sum of its subgroups, and that there is occasional need for preferring the larger group over the smaller and more intimate one. Literature could enrich both topics. My intuition, however, is that American culture is devoted to the danger of too much government and excessive information gathering, and that this explains the generally hostile depiction of informants.

\(^{13}\) Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451* (1953).

III. From War to Manly Sports

The American skepticism regarding big government does not extend to a universal embracing of pacifism. There are skeptical and anti-war hits, like *MASH* (1972 film) and *Catch-22*, but there is no shortage of works that encourage enlistment, heroic warfare, self-sacrifice, and even manifest destiny. These include *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and *Winds of War*, but the list could be extended to include such popular creations as *PT 109* (1963 film) and *Star Wars* (series of six films, 1977-2005).

Moreover, anti-war literature is just that, with very little in the way of the argument that individuals must resist big government because the size of the state is a predictor of its likelihood to make war. Put in broader terms, all societies and their authors must confront the Hobbesian Dilemma and then the requirements and tragedies of war. War does generate questions about information production, and literature has something to say about treason, spies, and local loyalties, but I limit the discussion here to the observation that the tension between loyalty to kin and the public interest arises, or perhaps must necessarily be reshaped, where national security is at stake. The same code of honor that discourages informing on one’s friends and family encourages the honorable individual to abandon his family (or return to it, as in *Cold Mountain* once the war seems exhausted and wrong), if necessary, in order to preserve the republic. It is apparent that war might require individuals to sacrifice the short term needs of their families in order to promote what one hopes is the family and community’s long-run interest. One family might prefer that its breadwinner run no risks, and that other families fight an enemy, but of course the solution to this collective action problem requires individual as well as family sacrifice. When there is an external threat to an entire nation, we can expect

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16 If violence is truly in long term decline, and war is becoming unthinkable, then we might expect honor of this sort to play less of a role in literature. It is interesting to observe the United States Marine Corps refashioning its code so that the model soldier is a “protector” rather than a “killer.” We might experience a similar transformation in literature.
17 Ernest Hemingway, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940).
20 I hesitate to make a claim about American literature with a book that borrows so much from Homer, but *Cold Mountain* sold millions of copies in the United States and became a very successful film, so that it seems fair to think of it as sufficiently American.

The protagonist’s desertion from the Confederate cause in *Cold Mountain* can be seen as reflecting the question of “optimal courage.” Cultures instill courage, in order to overcome the collective action problem in war for example, but there is presumably some point at which retreat and even defection is wise. In military settings the decision to retreat is in the hands of a commanding officer, but we might expect more “courage” and loyalty when the odds of victory are greater. See William Ian Miller, *The Mystery of Courage* 105 (Harvard University Press 2000) (noting that at the beginning of the Civil War, officers who showed courage and exposed themselves to enemy fire on horseback were reportedly spared from enemy fire because their courage was admired, but as the war dragged on the “deference to gallantry” exhausted itself and, in turn, “officers became less willing to strike such poses.”)
cultural materials like film and literature to glorify loyalty to community rather than to family. At both levels honor is about solidarity with the group.

War is often seen as the stage on which to exhibit one’s manliness. The idea need not be that war-making is honorable and manly, for it is often represented as anything but that, but rather that the warrior’s skills are manly. It is honorable to be prepared to fight for one’s country, even though we can expect a great deal of literature to reflect the view that there is far too much war-making.

From this perspective, it is sensible that honor is so often linked not only to loyalty to kin (often at the expense of strangers) but also to war, and especially where the enemy is seen as the aggressor. And it is unsurprising that *Barn Burning* inserts information about Abner’s military service into Sarty’s thinking, or puzzlement, about his father’s dishonorable behavior.(109) The boy is puzzled because he believes his father served bravely in the war. As noted, the reader learns that in fact the father was opportunistic and not heroic. I suggested that Sarty first absorbed the manly value of loyalty to kin, but then saw on his own that one might need to sacrifice for the higher calling of a true social interest. The tension between family and nation is part of the tragedy of war. A family may suffer losses well beyond its fair share, and an individual may struggle when his survival instinct is pitted against the needs of the group. Sarty’s decision to turn informant isolates him and places him at risk, in the manner of a citizen who leaves the protection of home to fight for his country.

Societies develop many tools to teach lessons about war. Manliness becomes synonymous with brave service in the armed forces, and literature is hardly the only tool put to work. The playing field is an important training ground for physical skills but also for the emotional ones relating to teamwork and sacrifice. Athletics are as much a part of the culture as are its books. A fencer, archer, wrestler, pugilist, javelin thrower, runner, or marksman may practice the skills of war, but these individual sports do not get at the need to teach personal sacrifice for the public good. Team sports often reflect this skill and necessity, and not only because they encourage loyalty to comrades. It is not surprising that American football is a favorite of the military academies and, more generally, of citizens of our Southern states where military service is exalted and most widespread. Tackle football is a sport in which young men are taught from the start, and in methodical fashion, to sacrifice for the group and for victory. Linemen and tacklers are taught to put their bodies in front of an oncoming ball carrier or blocker in order to slow down the enemy and await help from teammates who will swarm in to make the tackle. The injury rate is significant, and injuries often befall the unheralded players who sacrifice the most for the team’s good. Other sports have their own opportunities for “taking one for the team,” but football is particularly male (and American).

Unnecessary sacrifices are especially interesting because they highlight the educational function of “manly” sports. Even when the game is hopelessly lost, players
are encouraged to play hard — to block and to tackle for example — risking personal safety for the honor of the team. But when the score is 50-6 in the fourth quarter, where is the common good worth injury on either side? Would it not make sense to instruct players to save themselves (and others) for future encounters by playing more carefully, or in less manly fashion, when the game is clearly lost or won? Our culture pays little attention to this, and one suspects it is because the real point of the game is to teach that most important skill of war; regular, even rote, sacrifice is much better training for war than is sacrifice following some individual assessment of context.

Somewhat similarly, but yet further afield, our culture seems to avoid the hard question of personal integrity versus athletic victory. Athletes dissemble in order to convince referees that they were fouled or remained in bounds, when the truth is otherwise. In some sports self-snitching is expected, but in most sports the athlete is encouraged to win, and fooling the referee or the opponent is fair game. One might think that the playing field would be used to promote integrity, a useful characteristic in transactions among strangers. If the battlefield requires self-sacrifice and communal loyalty, then the playing field should also promote the interests of the larger group over the individual. There are examples that conform to this expectation. Thus, the marathon has roots in war, and no honorable marathoner thinks it proper to fool the officials and gain advantage by cutting corners or taking the subway. We might say that the runner is being trained to go against pure self-interest and to develop communal loyalty, inasmuch as the thousands of participants, not to mention world records, depend on everyone following the rules. But this explanation is of limited value and, indeed, golf and other sports that encourage self-reporting seem especially far removed from the skills of war.

The anti-snitching norm in most sports is better comprehended if we think of the link between sports and war as consisting of skills training to be sure, but also training in loyalty to comrades with whom one will fight. It is the subgroup that matters. There is a very strong norm of not snitching on a fellow member of one’s military unit, and that norm helps develop bonding and mutual support in war. Correspondingly, no sport expects snitching on one’s teammates, and no truly team sport expects self-snitching (which would hurt the team’s cause). Again, loyalty to the team is what matters. In individual sports, it seems that self-reporting is more common where there is no referee

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21 It is arguable that the coach does this as an intermediary, by removing star players when nothing important is at stake. But when the players let up, as when football players avoid fierce contact in the annual Pro-Bowl, fans jeer and the league recognizes that something is amiss. See Mike Tanier, N.F.L. Pro Bowl is Postseason Party Few Want to Attend, N.Y. Times, Feb. 10, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/11/sports/football/nfls-pro-bowl-is-postseason-party-few-want-to-attend.html?pagewanted=all (“defenders [were] hitting so gently that the game made youth flag football look like Antietam . . . [and] some players embarrassed themselves by not putting any effort into the game.”) The score was 59-41, so that any reduction in effort was likely on defense, where injuries might have affected future contract value. Note that players have a personal incentive to avoid injury and that the normal loyalty to teammates is absent.
and where there is less of a connection to war — perhaps because winning is almost everything in war\textsuperscript{22} — but the focus here ought to remain on informing, which is at many levels unlike self-reporting.

IV. Conclusion

One person’s snitching is another’s whistleblowing, even where the subject and informant have a personal relationship. Evidence of the tension is all about. Unsurprisingly, our cultural forces are more inclined to support informants, and to think of them as whistleblowers rather than rats, the greater the public interest to be served. Thus, when a much admired football coach does not inform the legal authorities about the misbehavior of an assistant coach who apparently fondled vulnerable boys entrusted to his care, the clan mourns for the loyal coach but, ultimately, the grave social interest in protecting children prevails, or is at least taken seriously.\textsuperscript{23} Fiction, rather than actual events, might have constructed closer cases for informing, but I have suggested that American fiction is rarely inclined to examine this tradeoff between loyalty to clan and the value of information to the larger community. For the most part, our literature and popular culture develop the sentiment against informing, and certainly against informing on close friends and family. The sentiment might be efficient because tight subgroups offer the society many benefits. Informing is more attractive, and even consistent with conceptions of manliness, as the public interest grows more serious. Even a culture that is skeptical of government, and therefore receptive to norms against sharing information...

\textsuperscript{22} Thus, no boxer ever informs on himself after a late or low hit, but tennis players occasionally make calls against self-interest even where a line umpire is present, and skiers are subject to a fine if they do not report when they have straddled a gate (in a context where a referee cannot possibly catch all high-speed violations) and ought to be disqualified from that slalom run. It is the boxer who is closer to the warrior. No swimmer self-reports and disqualifies after a false start or impermissible stroke, but golfers (even where television cameras and officials are omnipresent) are lauded for informing on themselves, and not criticized for informing on competitors. Golf is surely the most remote from war. The norms of different sports might also have something to do with the cultures in which the sports developed and presence of gambling (as it might raise the stakes of self-reporting), but the link between anti-snitching (on teammates) and war is most relevant here. I resist the opportunity to discuss the norms about snitching in the public interest where illegal but performance-enhancing drugs are concerned.

\textsuperscript{23} I refer of course to the end of Coach Joe Paterno’s reign at Pennsylvania State University. See __. The case is especially apt because it began with a graduate assistant who may have under-informed on the assistant coach, who was his superior. The clan, and outside observers, thus had a chance to react first to the tension between socially useful information and the value of the chain of command. When it later developed that information had gone partly up the chain, there was the choice between the apparent social interest and loyalty to staff, or the ability to judge the social interest on one’s own. As in Barn Burning, the social interest concerned the risk of a casualty; judgments were not confused by evidence that, ex post, whistleblowing would in fact have prevented a grave loss. It is possible that athletes and coaches will take pride in the decade-long silence at Penn State, and that the norm against snitching will be maintained. Similarly, the norm against ratting on one’s comrades in a military unit is not undone when an unreported atrocity is brought to light. My point is only that cultural materials do begin to reflect on the question of the optimal amount of personal loyalty, but they do so where war and very serious human casualties are at stake.
with the state, can be expected to glorify the public interest over the value of personal relationships where national survival is at stake.