

As Bitter As It Is Illuminating

Co: Why did they pick you? Because you like to fight?

Rambo: I'm expendable.

Co: What mean expendable?

Rambo: It's like someone invites you to a party and you don't show up. It doesn't really matter.

—Rambo: First Blood, Part II

“Leave no man behind.” This slogan is the peak of military romanticism. No matter how much you suffer for the cause, you are never alone. You belong to an unbreakable brotherhood of blood.

“I’m expendable.” This admission is the peak of military realism. You’re not part of a loving “family”; you’re part of a callous system. If you die, you’ll be replaced by someone else. Before long, the men who sent you to your doom won’t even remember your name.

You could protest, “The truth is somewhere in between.” Indeed, but position on this continuum matters. And the position of actual militaries is at least 90% of the way to pure military realism. Probably more like 98%. Militaries *want to win*, and winners don’t let the human costs of winning distract them.

Sure, we can *disaggregate*. Romanticism dominates military *rhetoric*. On boot camp graduation day, your officers preach camaraderie with tears in their eyes. Realism, however, dominates military *action*. When officers decide how to deploy you, you’re just a number.

Still feeling a hint of romance? Then reflect on the adage that actions speak louder than words. And reflect further that the “expendable” lesson goes far beyond the military. Words say, “I want nothing more than to come to your birthday party.” Actions, however, say, “I’ve got something better to do.” Words say, “I’d do anything for you.” Actions, however, say, “Unless it’s inconvenient.” Words say, “I put God first.” Actions say, “Unless there’s a football game on.”

General lesson: The adage, “Actions speak louder than words” is as bitter as it is

illuminating. Once you take the adage to heart, you see human nature clearly. But many will wish they hadn't.

Some people, admittedly, have no trouble just accepting human weakness. Others find comfort in self-deception. But the only escape route that resonates with me is to divorce this society and build a beautiful Bubble.