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The Weight of Command

Controversial Leadership in *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine's "In the Pale Moonlight"*

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Stardate 46388.2: A young Starfleet commander assumes command of the *Deep Space Nine* space station and has a meeting with Captain Jean-Luc Picard in the observation lounge of the *USS Enterprise-D*. This commander is Benjamin Sisko, a person of color from New Orleans who originally aspired to a career in engineering and served as first officer on the *USS Saratoga* during the battle against the Borg at Wolf 359 ("Emissary"; Piller et al., 1993).

The meeting between Picard and Sisko is characterized by a peculiar chill. Sisko, whose wife was killed in the battle against the Borg, is visibly hostile towards the captain, holding him responsible for his wife's death as Locutus of Borg. Picard elucidates that Sisko's mission aboard *Deep Space Nine* is to take all measures not in conflict with the Prime Directive to ensure the planet Bajor's acceptance into the Federation. Bajor had been occupied by the Cardassians for fifty years, and *Deep Space Nine* was originally a Cardassian space station orbiting the planet. Picard discerns that Sisko has reservations about undertaking the mission. Indeed, Sisko informs Picard that he is the sole caretaker of his son and that a damaged space station on the periphery of Federation territory is not an optimal setting. Sisko shares that he is even considering resigning from Starfleet to return to Earth and take up civilian service. As Kaufman and Peterson (2023) pointed out, "Sisko was the only captain in *Star Trek* canon to portray the balancing of family responsibilities" (p. 129). Nonetheless, until this decision is reached, he will fulfill his duties to the best of his abilities with composure and detachment.

Thus ends the handover of command between two leaders who could not be more different in their leadership styles. "The framing of the end of the scene is quite telling: Sisko stands and looks down at Picard while delivering his statements in a manner filled with anger" (Alexander, 2016, p. 153). On the one hand, we have the rational, humanistic European with a French name and British accent, who is highly respected in Starfleet. However, since his forced transformation into Locutus, he is burdened by a past that he is unable to leave behind. On the other side is a young Black man whose family happiness was destroyed by this very battle and who is now tasked with the responsibility of building up a space station in the periphery with a skeleton crew and Bajoran liaison officers. The theme of war and loss is conveyed from a different perspective. Picard is not the only victim, having been assimilated by the Borg against his will. Sisko also suffers, as he "is well aware that

Picard did not willingly help the Borg; however, that is little consolation to Benjamin and Jake Sisko or the other family members of those who perished" (Alexander, 2016, p. 153).

In this chapter, I aim to examine a particular episode "In the Pale Moonlight" (1998), which exemplifies Sisko's approach to leadership in wartime and has been the subject of controversy within *Star Trek* fandom. Despite this controversy, the narrative of the episode has been widely praised (Erdmann & Block, 2000, p. 476).

Sisko as a Leader

The character of Benjamin Sisko undergoes a noteworthy transformation in *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (1993-1998). At the outset of the series, Sisko was the sole commander on his inaugural command. Despite his initial reservations about the assignment, he demonstrated unwavering loyalty to Starfleet and subsequently emerged as a prominent figure in the post-occupation era of Bajor. In this capacity, he also served as a pivotal mediator between the Bajorans and the Cardassians, striving to maintain constructive and productive communication with both parties. For Sisko, the space station served as a site of intercultural encounter during this period, offering a secure haven and a transit point on the periphery of the Federation. The stable wormhole to the Gamma Quadrant provided a gateway to a previously unexplored region of the Galaxy. In this regard, Sisko, like Picard, exemplified the role of a diplomat in the service of Starfleet.

In contrast to the typical *Star Trek* narrative, Sisko is also assigned a religious leadership role from the outset. The Bajorans identify him as the long-awaited Emissary to the Prophets, a role he initially rejects due to his skepticism of the religious office. However, after establishing contact with the Prophets, a non-linear life form native to the wormhole, he is compelled to accept the role.

Sisko's role as a mediator and arbiter reaches its limits for the first time in the course of *Deep Space Nine* (1993-1998) when he is confronted by the Maquis. The Maquis are a separatist organization that emerged on the fringes of the Federation in the wake of the Federation-Cardassian Treaty. The treaty was part of a new peace order between the Cardassians and the Federation and included changes in the border demarcation between the two governments. Some Federation colonists were reluctant to accept these changes and subsequently founded the Maquis (Stoppe, 2022, p. 107–108).

In the context of *Deep Space Nine* (1993-1998), the subject of intercultural conflict is regularly addressed (Kwan, 2007, p. 63). Indeed,

It becomes clear that the conflict, introduced in *TNG* [*Star Trek: The Next Generation*], is now not only affecting the civilian population of the Federation living near the border but also that Starfleet officers are increasingly defecting to the Maquis. (Stoppe, 2022, 110).

Thus, Sisko is already confronted with a challenge to his leadership abilities. Despite demonstrating understanding for the concerns of the separatists, he continues to adhere to his ethical and moral

principles as a Starfleet officer. This is a critical discussion about the utopian, peaceful future that Roddenberry once envisioned for *Star Trek* (Stoppe, 2022, p. 112). Nonetheless, despite his commitment to the Federation, Sisko already demonstrates "his willingness to flex the strictures of ethics" (Kaufman & Peterson 2023, 129).

In *Deep Space Nine* (1993-1999), however, Sisko's diplomatic skills not only have to prove themselves in ongoing conflicts with the Cardassians but also to fulfill the role of "gatekeeper" to the Gamma Quadrant due to its recent history. Immediately following the Federation's assumption of control over the space station, the stable wormhole leading to the Gamma Quadrant was identified, rendering the region strategically significant for both Bajor and the Federation. It was thus resolved to situate the space station at the wormhole's entrance. Consequently, the Bajorans, along with the Federation and the Klingons, commenced exploration of the Gamma Quadrant (Stoppe, 2022, p. 112). However, the drive to explore new worlds soon encountered significant challenges when Sisko and the Federation came into conflict with the Dominion, an empire that had established control over vast territories within the Gamma Quadrant. The Dominion is led by the Founders, a group of the Changelings species, to which Constable Odo, the security chief of *Deep Space Nine*, also belongs. The Federation first came into contact with the Dominion in 2370, when the Jem'Hadar (the Dominion's defense species) destroyed the *USS Odyssey* ("The Jem'Hadar"; Behr & Friedman, 1994; & "The Search"; Behr et al., 1994). The Founders perceive humans and other "solid" species as a threat due to their metamorphic form (Neumann, 2001, p. 615), leading to hostile actions, while prompting Starfleet to rearm in response (Stoppe, 2022, p. 114).

The conflict is gradually intensified throughout the series of *Deep Space Nine* (1993-1999). At one point, the Romulans and Cardassians endeavored to launch a joint preemptive strike against the Dominion, but effort proved unsuccessful and resulted in a political weakening of both species (Stoppe, 2022, p. 114). Concurrently, the Dominion seeks to expand its influence within the Federation and among the Klingons, replacing "influential politicians and military personnel in the Alpha Quadrant with identical-looking members of their species" (Stoppe, 2022, p. 115). In contrast to the Federation, the Dominion sees no benefit in diplomacy. "The Founders see the rest of the world as something it is up to them to order in their own image, something to bring under direct imperial control" (Neumann, 2001, p. 616).

The conflict between the Klingons and the Cardassians intensifies as the former occupy Cardassia, suspecting an infiltration of the Dominion. The Federation narrowly evades a coup d'état. Once the Cardassians had formed an open alliance with the Dominion with the intention of liberating themselves from the Klingon occupation, the Dominion had achieved its objective. In this context, Sisko endeavors to assume an active role on behalf of the Federation. As the commanding officer of a space station which occupies a pivotal strategic position in this conflict, this role is unexpectedly

thrust upon him. It thus propels Sisko from a diplomatic mediator into a combatant on the front lines.

War Emerges

Subsequently, open armed conflict breaks out. The Dominion declares war against the Federation and the Klingons. "In the Pale Moonlight" (Fields & Lobl, 1998) is set in the year 2374, five years after the Federation's takeover of *Deep Space Nine* and one year after the declaration of war. The Federation had been forced to withdraw from *Deep Space Nine*. By 2374, the Federation and its alliance with allies was on the brink of defeat. In this context, Sisko proceeded with the plan to recapture the space station due to its strategic importance. Despite the success of the plan and the subsequent retreat of the Dominion into Cardassian space ("Sacrifice of Angels"; Behr et al., 1997), this had little impact on the balance of power between the warring parties. Conversely, the Dominion amassed additional troops and initiated further assaults on the Federation Alliance. These included the destruction of Federation vessels such as the *USS Honshu* ("Waltz"; Moore & Auberjonois, 1997) and the attempted integration of the Orion Syndicate into the Dominion coalition ("Honor Among Thieves"; Kim & Eastman, 1998). This marks the beginning of the events depicted in "In the Pale Moonlight."

The Dominion War is a turning point in entire the *Star Trek* franchise, interrogating the effects of such conflicts on the utopian future of *Star Trek* (Spychala, 2022, p. 325). It is noteworthy for its comprehensive and compelling portrayal of warfare, a quality that distinguishes it from previous series in the franchise. Even in *Star Trek: The Original Series* (1966-1969), where the Federation was engaged in conflict with the Klingons, war was regularly, but only briefly, addressed, and its portrayal was largely confined to narrative discourse rather than detailed and prolonging depiction of the everyday realities of open warfare (Spychala, 2022, p. 322).

In any case, the war has a profound impact on Sisko in his role as commanding officer, who clearly "struggle[s] with the war's fallout" (Spychala, 2022, p. 326). As he states at the beginning of the episode ("In the Pale Moonlight"; Fields & Lobl, 1998), he finds the ritual of informing his crew about the war casualties challenging: "Every Friday morning, for the past three months, I have posted the official list of Starfleet personnel killed, wounded or missing in the war. It has become something of a grim ritual around here." He adds, "I have grown to hate Fridays," which only further expresses his negative attitude towards the war. However, something changes in his views one Friday. When Commander Jadzia Dax discovers that a longtime friend is missing from the *USS Cairo*, a discussion about Romulan policy towards the Dominion ensues. The Romulans are not a warring party, as they have a non-aggression pact with the Dominion, but nevertheless allow the

Dominion to pass through their territory. This was the only way the attack on *Cairo* could be carried out while it was patrolling the Neutral Zone between Romulan territory and the Federation.

Sisko comes to understand that the Romulans must be brought into the Alliance for the long-term survival of the Federation. However, this would entail not only the renouncement of the non-aggression pact but also a pact with the Federation and the Klingons, which would be an unlikely scenario. Nevertheless, Sisko reaches the conclusion that he "was going to bring the Romulans into the war", a comment that sets the premise for the entire episodic narrative.

In terms of narrative technique, "In the Pale Moonlight" (Fields & Lobl, 1998) is notable for its use of a retrospective, purely Sisko-centric perspective. Sisko recounts the events, which at this point are around two weeks in the past, "sitting alone in his quarters [...] as a kind of autodiegetic narrator" (Büttner, 2016, p. 81, translated by author) in his personal log. In the staging, it appears to the audience as if Sisko is addressing them directly. He makes direct eye contact with the audience, effectively breaking the fourth wall. Practically, we *are* the log. In this "moral court," the audience serves as the jury, whereby "the judge is Sisko himself in a way that is consistent with a this-worldly and self-responsible perspective" (Büttner, 2016, p. 81, translated by author), because "I [Sisko] have to justify what has happened, what I have done, at least to myself". It is precisely this staging technique that renders the episode invaluable for a more detailed examination of Sisko's leadership persona, as it repeatedly situates him as the focal point of the narrative frame (Büttner, 2016, p. 82).

As previously stated, Sisko was originally conceived as a mediator and diplomat for Starfleet, serving as a moderating force between the Bajorans and Cardassians. This role aligns him with other leaders in *Star Trek* who adhere to a deontological ethic, one based on duty. The Federation has established a moral framework, particularly through its Prime Directive, which must be upheld and which prohibits what it deems to be dishonest behavior. And Sisko himself has proven himself of being "a morally righteous bulwark in previous episodes [...], where he prevented a military coup by high-ranking Starfleet officers" (Spychala, 2022, p. 326).

Nevertheless, even at the outset of the episode, it becomes evident that Sisko has undergone a significant transformation over the course of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (1993-1999) and as a consequence of the ongoing war. In lieu of an ethic of duty, particularly in regard to Sisko himself, a manifest utilitarianism emerges in which the perceived necessities of war potentially overshadow the duty's delineated by Starfleet. The image of the Starfleet officer as a paragon of integrity is fractured, and the humanistic ideal of the Federation is called into question with regard to its absoluteness (Büttner, 2006, p. 83). Starfleet officers are no longer "like Boy Scouts—trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent" (Erdmann & Block, 2000, p. 555).

However, Sisko is initially willing to achieve his goal by diplomatic means. This is illustrated in a role-playing game with Dax. As they explore, the status quo benefits the Romulans, as it diverts resources from the Federation and the Klingons, allowing the Romulans to expand their influence in the Alpha Quadrant over time. Dax, assuming the role of a Romulan state official, posits that the Romulan Senate requires irrefutable evidence that the Dominion would also assail the Romulans following the demise of the Federation. "Let's say I am the Romulan Proconsul. From where I am sitting, the Dominion is not a threat to me. I have a non-aggression pact with them, they are my allies" (Fields & Lobl, 1998). Without this evidence, the Romulans have no reason to make this assumption, since the Dominion has kept its part of the non-aggression pact and the Romulans would not risk a conflict "that will kill millions of loyal Romulan citizens".

Sisko recognizes that he will not achieve success through diplomatic negotiations. Consequently, he endeavors to procure confidential information through Garak, knowing that the Cardassian tailor and spy still has an extensive network of contacts from his previous work as an agent. Although this brings him to the limits of legitimacy, at this point Sisko remains a leader of integrity who behaves in accordance with Federation values.

The Fall of Betazed

The narrative of "In the Pale Moonlight" (Fields & Lobl, 1998) then takes an unexpected turn with the occupation of Betazed by the Dominion, occurring shortly after Sisko commissions Garak. This strategic gain in position only strengthens Sisko's resolve. However, contrary to his expectations, Garak is unable to procure sensitive information from Cardassian intelligence. Instead, there have been inexplicable deaths among those with whom Garak has established contact, which he perceives as a merciless efficiency on the part of the Cardassian and Dominion security apparatus. In view of the circumstances, Garak offers Sisko a suggestion that would be considered unusual by Starfleet standards. "If you want to guarantee that we obtain evidence of a Dominion plot to attack the Romulans, I suggest that we manufacture that evidence ourselves". Sisko agrees to the proposal, provided that Starfleet Command has no objections. Nevertheless, Sisko later reveals slight doubts in the log (and towards the audience): "Maybe I should have put a stop to it right there. [...] But I did not. Because in my heart, I knew what he was saying made sense".

From this point on, Sisko is no longer a Starfleet officer with the integrity to be a leader. Instead, through his character *Star Trek* abandons its ideals. Indeed, "with interstellar war being the main focus not only of Starfleet, but of the Federation as well, such idealistic rules were bound to be bent, if not broken" (Erdmann & Block, 2000, p. 555). Even the fact that Starfleet explicitly agrees to the plan does not change the fact that *Star Trek* is taking a new, dangerous path here. "The approach

shows parallels to the Tonkin incident, which led to the entry of the United States into the Vietnam War" (Stoppe, 2022, p. 117).

The episode employs the character of Sisko as a point of reference to debate the potential efficacy and legitimacy of strategies aimed at expediting the conclusion of hostilities. The fact that the Romulans would enter a war on the side of the Federation does not automatically imply that this would put an end to the bloodshed. On the contrary, as Dax expressed earlier, the Romulans themselves risk heavy losses. Consequently, Sisko sees himself—at least in the direct context—as thoroughly legitimized.

The plan that Garak proposes to Sisko is as follows (Fields & Lobl, 1998): in the near future, the high-ranking Romulan Senator Vreenak will be in proximity to the space station and "could be persuaded to make a secret detour to *Deep Space Nine*" at Sisko's invitation. Vreenak is one of the key figures behind the non-aggression pact. If Sisko succeeds in convincing Vreenak of the threat to Romulus from the Dominion, the Romulan Senate would follow his vote. Together, they devise a plan to create a fictitious recording of a clandestine Dominion assembly, thereby disclosing the Dominion's intention to assail the Romulans at the earliest opportunity. A Cardassian data rod is to serve as the storage medium to make the holographic recording appear credible. However, acquiring this item illegally and paying for it with biomimetic gel, which Sisko procures from the station doctor Bashir (despite his explicit objection), represents a significant challenge.

In order to provide assistance, a convicted hologram forger named Tolar is transferred from a Klingon prison to *Deep Space Nine* at the request of Sisko, courtesy of the Klingon Chancellor Gowron. When Tolar drunkenly assaults Quark in his bar, Sisko is also forced to bribe Quark so that he will not press charges and it will not be recorded that Tolar is on the station.

Ultimately, Tolar fabricates a fictitious holographic recording of purported negotiations between the Dominion and the Cardassians, wherein they devise an invasion of Romulus. This allows Sisko to contact Vreenak, requesting his presence on *Deep Space Nine*. Sisko exhibits signs of anxiety, as he is the one "who had to look Senator Vreenak in the eye and convince him that a lie was the truth" (Fields & Lobl, 1998). Vreenak examines the fake recording, while Sisko realizes that the plan could also be turned against the Federation. And indeed, Vreenak finds out that the rod is a fake almost immediately. He blatantly threatens Sisko that "he would expose this 'vile deception' to the entire Alpha Quadrant", as Sisko himself recounts in retrospect.

Sisko's risky maneuver initially appeared to have failed. However, two days later, Worf informs him that Starfleet Intelligence had learned that the shuttle carrying the senator had exploded before reaching Romulus. Additionally, the Tal Shiar, the Romulan intelligence service, suspected that an act of sabotage by the Dominion was responsible for the incident.

Sisko appears momentarily astonished but swiftly deduces the situation and promptly locates Garak. As it transpires, the former Cardassian agent has utilized the senator's stopover on *Deep Space Nine* to surreptitiously deploy an explosive device on his shuttlecraft. Sisko charges Garak with the murder of Vreenak, a charge which Garak readily acknowledges. Notably, it becomes evident that Garak was also responsible for the death of the forger Tolar, as he was an accomplice in the conspiracy. Consequently, Sisko is implicated in not just one, but two murders. In response, Garak asserts that his actions were precisely what Sisko had intended. Garak was aware of the danger that a capable Romulan senator might not be fooled by an imperfect forgery. In this way, he explains to Sisko, there should be no doubt about the story that a Romulan senator is *en route* from a covert meeting with the Dominion when his shuttle is destroyed by an act of suspected sabotage. In the wreckage, the Romulan secret service discovers a damaged Cardassian data rod containing highly sensitive information. The possibility that the rod is malfunctioning is attributed to the explosion. The Romulans conclude that the senator was secretly leaking classified material and therefore is a threat that must be neutralized. And thus, Sisko finally achieves his goal of the Romulan Empire declaring war against the Dominion.

As the episode progresses ("In the Pale Moonlight"; Fields & Lobl, 1998), the inserts of Sisko's account illustrate a growing sense of despair. This is evident from the outset, as Sisko struggles to articulate the events in question in order to justify them to himself. He displays clear emotional distress, and as the episode unfolds, he removes more and more of his clothing, metaphorically revealing his innermost feelings. Ultimately, his performance is "characterized by a changing vocal intonation or the alternation of 'nervous' and calm movements, which may indicate a kind of 'inner struggle'" (Büttner, 2016, p. 83, translation by author). Obviously, Sisko is not entirely convinced of his utilitarian leadership, because "if Sisko were truly a utilitarian thinker, he ought to feel pretty good about the whole thing" (Barad & Robertson, 2001, p. 283). After all, the goal of drawing the Romulans into the war on the side of the Federation was definitely achieved. But "though he [Sisko] realizes that he may have saved the entire Alpha Quadrant, he also knows it was at the cost of a few lives—and his own self-respect" (Barad & Robertson, 2001, p. 284). Sisko can no longer be considered a leader of moral integrity, and he realizes this himself: "I lied. I cheated. I bribed men to cover the crimes of other men. I am an accessory to murder" (Fields & Lobl, 1998). As Barad and Robertson (2001) point out, "Though he appeals to the utilitarian argument that the end justifies the means, it's not clear whether he really believes this—or if he's simply using it as a means in order to cope with what he did" (p. 284). "In the Pale Moonlight" thus functions as a critical mirror that impressively warns against imperialist-utilitarian leadership (Seitz 2023, 66).

And yet, Sisko's final words in this episode are: "Computer, erase that entire personal log" (Fields & Lobl, 1998). This concluding statement unequivocally indicates that he alone assumes responsibility

for this event. Ultimately, Sisko once again demonstrates his capacity for leadership, despite the ethical ambiguity surrounding his actions, but suggesting that Sisko is willing to accept personal responsibility for his decisions. It is true that Garak provides him with essential impulses for the construction of the entire forgery and "the casual viewer might see this as the Cardassian Garak's influence on Sisko" (Barba, 2010, p. 388). However, Barba also points out that Sisko makes his own decisions and Garak makes this clear once again in the episode when he addresses the rhetorical question to Sisko:

That is why you came to me, isn't it, Captain? Because you knew I could do those things that you were not capable of doing. Well, it worked. And you will get what you wanted: a war between the Romulans and the Dominion. (Fields & Lobl, 1998)

Conclusion

"In the Pale Moonlight" (Fields & Lobl, 1998) is one of the most controversial and profound episodes of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (1993-1999). It prompts reflection on the nature of leadership, morality, and ethics in extreme situations. Originally a diplomat and mediator, Benjamin Sisko is compelled by the hardships of the Dominion War to take drastic measures that test his moral integrity.

The episode illustrates how, over the course of the war, Sisko evolves into a commander willing to push the boundaries of Federation values in order to ensure the survival of the Federation. His decision to falsify evidence and ultimately allow the murder of a Romulan senator represents a pivotal moment that challenges the conventional distinction between good and evil. Sisko's monologues reveal his inner turmoil and the burden that lies on his shoulders. He is aware of the moral implications of his actions, but he sees no other way to save the Federation from imminent defeat.

The episode importantly raised the question of which methods and means may be permissible in order to potentially shorten a war or even bring it to a swift conclusion. The plan Garak proposes to Sisko serves as a case study of the ethical ambiguity that leaders must navigate during wartime. The decision to create a fake recording and authorize a murder to draw the Romulans into the war demonstrates the extent to which Sisko is willing to go to achieve the greater goal. This action is in stark contrast to the ideals of the Federation and represents a radical departure from the principles Sisko once espoused. Sisko himself reflects on the moral cost of his decisions and the impact on his own integrity. He ponders whether the end justifies the means and whether he is still the same man he was at the beginning of the war.

The journey of Benjamin Sisko in "In the Pale Moonlight" serves as a profound exploration of the ethical complexities and moral ambiguities inherent in leadership during times of crisis. Sisko's

transformation from a principled diplomat to a pragmatic *realpolitik* leader willing to engage in illegal activities highlights the tension between ethical ideals and utilitarian pragmatism. His decision to erase his personal log, thereby concealing his actions, raises critical questions about transparency and accountability in leadership. Moreover, the audience is left questioning the wider implication for the Federation and its utopian ideals, "and how those values come under pressure and are maybe even sacrificed in a time of war" (Spychala, 2022, p. 326). Is a guilty conscience really "a small price to pay for safety" (Fields & Lobl, 1998), as Sisko notes before deleting his log, especially in regard to today's real-world conflicts?

In today's world, leaders face similar challenges, whether in national security or international diplomacy, where the pressure to achieve strategic objectives can conflict with ethical standards. Sisko's story invites contemporary leaders to reflect on the balance between achieving immediate goals and maintaining moral integrity, emphasizing the importance of accountability and the potential costs of compromising core values with long-term ramifications for the individuals and institutions involved.

Ultimately, "In the Pale Moonlight" serves as a cautionary tale, urging leaders to navigate the complexities of their roles with a commitment to ethical principles, even in the most challenging circumstances.

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