

A Rationale for Counter-Recruitment

By David Chandler

When there was a draft in the Vietnam era, and young people were being rounded up to serve as cannon fodder against their wills, I think most of us had a pretty clear vision of what we were protesting. But there currently is no draft. We have an all-volunteer military. What, then, should motivate our activism against military recruitment efforts? I personally had a sufficient gut-level feeling that we should be present to challenge the Porterville recruiting fair (or "War Faire" as Bill Warner so aptly put it), that I have been spending a significant chunk of my Spring Break with a table full of fliers on a Wal-Mart parking lot. But when challenged by a group of 11-somethings to explain why we opposed other people signing up for the Navy, I found I had trouble articulating it in simple terms. This motivated me to think the matter through more carefully for myself.

The term "voluntary" is really problematic. In the medical arena a patient must give consent before treatment. The legal standard for consent is that it must be a free and informed adult decision. Furthermore consent must be continuous: it may be withdrawn at any time. Anything less is not true consent. For enlistment to be considered truly voluntary it should meet the same criteria, but clearly it does not.

True consent must be fully informed. Recruiters talk about educational benefits, they talk about job skills, they talk about travel, adventure, and becoming "all that you can be." The most glaring omission in recruitment is anything to do with killing or being killed. What other employer has such a large system of hospitals and cemeteries as a job benefit? Killing, for whatever reason, tramples on sacred ground; taking the life of another violates one's own humanity. Perhaps that is why no other form of employment induces such a high rate of suicide? (Among Vietnam era veterans there have been more suicides than there were combat deaths.)

What about really coming to terms with the morality of war? In a draft a conscientious objector must think through the tangled ethical and moral issues and be able to articulate his beliefs to the satisfaction of a skeptical Selective Service board. (The draft has always been gender-specific.) A volunteer in the military is never asked to think deeply about anything. A case can be argued among philosophers and theologians for the morality of some wars, but a potential recruit is never required or even encouraged to think these issues through. Anyone who is not a conscientious objector should be a "conscientious participant," but when deep reflection is absent and actively discouraged, conscience is ignored. Passively and mindlessly stepping across the line is all that is required.

Any case for the morality of a "just war" requires that a participant make moral decisions on a case-by-case basis, yet selective objection is explicitly ruled out by law. If you would fight to defend your homeland against a direct attack, you would be denied legal recognition as a conscientious objector. You would then be denied the right to raise a moral objection when you are put in the position of being the attacker in another person's homeland. Of course, any action by the U.S. military is wrapped in the flag and described as defending freedom. Any opinions to the contrary are labeled "political" and beyond the purview of a soldier. If you give up the right to make moral or "political" choices you allow yourself to potentially become an agent of evil. The freedom to follow one's conscience is never absolutely blocked, but the consequences of obeying one's conscience instead of obeying an order can be severe indeed.

True consent must be continuous, but enlistment is a trap door. Once you enlist there are very high legal hurdles, for withdrawing "consent." Many people become conscientious objectors (or even think about the morality of war) only after experiencing combat or seeing first hand the realities of war. There is a provision for discharge as a conscientious objector, but the grounds are more restrictive than for civilian conscientious objectors refusing conscription, and in neither case do the legal grounds allow for moral selectivity.

True consent must be freely given. Joining the military, however, even without the draft, involves a major coercive element: economics. The vast majority of current recruits in the all-volunteer military do so for economic reasons. The volunteer army has been called the poverty draft. The military provides food, shelter, clothing, medical care, insurance, and the promise of job training and educational benefits. With high unemployment in the ghettos and the social safety net in tatters, the military provides one of the few apparent options for the children of the poor. But volunteering for the military because of a lack of options is not a free choice. The fact that some of the promises may be illusory only compounds the issue.

Enlisting in the military may be a voluntary act, but by that act you are entering involuntary servitude. Whether or not you made a fully informed choice at the outset, once you have crossed the threshold and see what you have chosen firsthand, you are not free to reconsider, so your continuing service cannot properly be described as voluntary. You are the "property" of the U.S. government, which in a very explicit sense makes you a slave. (The Supreme Court has ruled that military service is an exception to the 13th amendment, but if anything that underlines the involuntary nature of "voluntary" service.)

Finally, consent must be a decision made by an adult. True, there are age restrictions in volunteering for the military, but the sales pitch in teen magazines, high school Jr. ROTC, and Disneyland-style flight simulators in Wal-Mart parking lots are clearly pitches to children and immature tendencies in teens. These practices are as odious as using Joe Camel, a cartoon figure, to sell cigarettes, and should be similarly banned.