

War

By David Chandler

When I was in college I registered as a conscientious objector. A conscientious objector, or pacifist, is one who refuses to participate in war for moral or religious reasons. As it turned out I also had draft deferments with no end in sight and, most significantly, I drew a high lottery number, so I was well covered. Still, I went through a period of deep thinking about the muddled ethics of war and came out with a personal decision not to participate. This may seem like a dead issue to you, but wars have not ceased. Every generation of Americans has had a war to fight. Unless this trend reverses, you too may have a decision to make.

I did not always have this attitude about war. I grew up thinking that being in the army was an automatic part of life like going to school. When I didn't make my bed neatly my grandmother would say that when I got into the army I would have to make my bed just so, and have inspections and so forth. My father was in World War II. He always told with pride how he was in charge of fueling the planes that went out from his air base on D-day and how none of them failed to return for lack of fuel. We would watch the old newsreel documentaries together and he would try to pick out which planes came from his base.

When I was in High School the Vietnam War was building up. I wrote term papers supporting of the domino theory, the idea that we had to stop the communists somewhere, why not here. I remember reading articles by Bertrand Russell and other prominent anti-war activists decrying the use of napalm and bombing villages, but I couldn't understand their point. After all, that's what happens in war, isn't it?

A turning point for me came with the Tet Offensive in 1968. Time, Life, and Newsweek had big spreads with very graphic scenes of the war. There were truckloads of bodies. There was a picture of two men taking the ankles of a dead man and dragging him face down to one of the trucks. One sequence in particular haunted me. It showed several Vietnamese men alive and well, and several frames later the same men were lined up on the ground in a mutilated bloody mess. This was supposedly a job well done because they were the enemy, but it didn't hit me that way. I identified with them as men like you and me with families that loved them; they were simply born in a different part of the world. For the first time the human reality of the fighting hit me, and I saw the war as terrifying insanity. The whole thing brought on a deep emotional revulsion in me. For many others the same emotional revulsion to the reality of war came only when they got there and found themselves immersed in a similar scene.

This was my emotional conversion to pacifism, but for me this wasn't sufficient grounds for opting out. I had to come to terms with the more rational issues. This experience did, however, lead me to work through my philosophical position less glibly.

To many people war is black and white. On the one hand you have: "Thou shalt not kill. War is a violation of this commandment in the extreme. No good that comes of war can possibly justify the evil that war brings."

On the other hand you have: "War is a fact of life. Whether you like it or not you must be willing to defend your country or live in subjugation. To refuse your responsibility is dishonorable. After all, who but a coward or a fool would refuse to defend his family against the attack of a maniac? And isn't defense of one's country a simple extension of the same logic?"

If the issue is black and white, which side is white? For me it is not black and white; yet I have come to lean toward the former; enough so to take a stand on that position.

What about the maniac attacking my family? I don't know what I would do. I might end up killing someone in such a situation. I certainly would not simply stand by, but killing would not be my instinct. But no, the logic doesn't carry over in any simple way. When you decimate whole villages because guerrillas may be hiding there, who is the maniac? War is madness.

The whole thing about "Defense" seems to me to be a euphemism, or cover-up. We call ugly things by pretty names in an attempt to hide their ugliness. "The Marine Corps Builds Men" is a saying that tends to obscure the fact that its primary function is to kill men. We used to have a War Dept. But someone decided "War" sounded ugly, so we now have a Department of Defense. "Defending U.S. Interests" is just another way of saying getting our own way, even if it means taking over the oil fields of another country or setting up a puppet government. According to the Hollywood version, we even "defended" ourselves against the Indians as we took over their land and committed massive genocide against them.

Joining the United States Armed Forces does not automatically put you on the side of truth and justice. The fact is once you are in the army you kill whomever they tell you to. You have submitted yourself to a war machine--a mechanism by which nations try to get their own way by force. You are generally not even in touch with the real reasons you are fighting, any more than are the men set up to fight against you. The whole training process is geared to strip you of the will to think for yourself. One phrase in Tennyson's Charge of the Light Brigade says it all: "Theirs not to reason why, theirs but to do and die...." That may sound heroic, but the logic doesn't strike me as morally compelling. Rather, it speaks of moral capitulation. For me the war machine, the whole institution of war, is the real enemy of humanity.

Pacifism did not start with Vietnam. People have been opting out of wars for religious or moral reasons throughout history, whether or not there has been a legal way to do so. Some have been executed, other have been imprisoned or persecuted. There are members of the local Church of the Brethren who spent World War I in prison at San Quentin for refusing military service as conscientious objectors. The laws we have today acknowledge certain forms of conscientious objection, but they cannot define the limits of conscience. If you ever come to the point of having to go outside the law as a matter of conscience, you stand in a rich tradition.

A key component of pacifism over the generations has been the simple, naive faith that God will somehow preserve and bless those who trust in Him. This sounds childish and unrealistic in the face of modern realities. But faith has always dealt in outrageously childish notions. As Jesus said, "of such is the kingdom of heaven."

And yet, as I contemplate the prospect of a nuclear holocaust, the mass slaughter of chemical and biological warfare, and the balance of terror strategies for avoiding them, I am led to wonder, what is so childish about childlike faith?