

Conscientious Objection and the Military

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"On my knees I beg you to turn away from the paths of violence. . . .I say to you, with all the love I have for you, with all the trust I have in young people: do not listen to voices which speak the language of hatred, revenge, retaliation. Do not follow any leaders who train you in the way of inflicting death. . . .Give yourself to the service of life, not the work of death. Violence is the enemy of justice. Only peace can lead the way to true justice."

-Pope John Paul II, 1979

For as long as wars have been fought, some people have refused to participate in killing. Instead, they have actively worked for nonviolent resolution of conflict, giving themselves to the service of life, not the work of death. Those people who resist participating in militaries or wars for reasons of conscience are often called conscientious objectors.

CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION AND THE DRAFT?

What exactly is the draft?

The U.S. government has legal authority to draft people into the military. There is currently no draft, but all men, at age 18, are required to register for the draft. To reinstate the draft, Congress would have to pass a law.

Can I register as a conscientious objector?

No, you either register or you don't. Some people register but write "I am a conscientious objector" on the form. These messages are not legally significant, but they begin a record of objection. If you do this, keep a copy as these forms are processed and discarded.

If you register and are called up after a draft is reinstated, you can try to obtain a "deferment" (postponement of military service) or an "exemption" (release from military service). You will likely have only a brief time, however, from when you are drafted until you have to appear before a draft board and defend your conscientious objector (CO) claim.

You can also choose not to register. Some young men make this decision as they feel they cannot be a part of the military in any way or because the draft is coercive.

Consequences of not registering can include fines and prison time, although the government has not imposed these punishments since the mid-1980s. Instead, federal and state laws deny benefits such as job training and college financial aid to men who have not registered. Many states also link activities such as obtaining drivers' licenses to draft registration.

Questions to reflect on:

Are you willing to kill another human being? When is it right, if ever, to use military force? What do you think about war? Can you serve your community in ways other than the military? How can we build a world where everyone can live in peace and security?

If you decide you cannot in good conscience participate in war, talk over your decision with others. Pray about it. Read about other conscientious objectors. Answer the questions Selective Service will ask if you are drafted:

1. Why are you claiming CO status to combatant military training and service or to all military training and service? What

beliefs guide your life? How do they contradict war?

2. How and when did you acquire these beliefs? (Mention influential people, books, movies, classes, participation in vigils or demonstrations, a visit to a war-torn country, etc.)

3. Explain what most clearly shows that your beliefs are deeply held. Describe how your beliefs affect how you live, the work you do or plan to do, and your life goals.

Document your answers in a file. Include letters from Selective Service and letters from people who can verify your beliefs and other relevant materials. Send correspondence to the Selective Service certified mail, return receipt requested. Sign and date all materials.

CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION AND DELAYED ENTRY PROGRAM (DEP)

Most people join the military through the Delayed Entry Program, in which basic training is delayed up to a year while a person finishes school or attends to other business. If you change your mind, you may be told that once you have signed up for DEP, you are in the military. This is not true. You are not actually a member of the military until you take your second oath when you report for basic training. If you change your mind about joining the military you can be released without negative implications. For more information, visit: www.afsc.org/youthmil/choices/dep.htm.

CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION FOR THOSE IN THE MILITARY

Ads portray the military as adventure, money for college, job training, and personal fulfillment. Rarely mentioned are the moral dimensions of war and military training. Thus, people who join the military may find they are asked to do things that violate their conscience.

To be discharged or reassigned as a CO, you must submit an application to your

commanding officer describing your beliefs about participation in war, how they changed since you entered the military, when and why you felt you could no longer continue service, and how your life has changed due to your beliefs. Include letters of support. You will be interviewed by a psychiatrist, a military chaplain and an investigation officer. The military will then determine your status. Obtaining an early discharge is not easy; people who do not fit the stereotype of a CO (white, middle-class, some college education) may face even more difficulties. It is best to contact trained counselors, like those at the GI Rights Hotline.

During a war, separation from the military is more difficult. Time to prepare may be very limited as armed forces are allowed to deploy a person who has already filed a CO claim. It is important to demonstrate that beliefs against participation in war began before the current crisis or before applicants knew they would be personally involved in the current crisis. CO applicants should work closely with military counselors or lawyers.

CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTOR STATUS

Support around the world and within the U.N. has been growing to recognize conscientious objection as a human right. However, in the United States, conscientious objection is not a legal right and is not automatically granted. Two types of conscientious objectors are recognized by the U.S. military:

- Conscientious objectors to all forms of military service by reason of religious, ethical or moral belief. They are exempt from military service, although they may be required to perform alternative civilian service. If already in the military, they may be discharged.
- Noncombatant conscientious objectors by reason of religious, ethical or moral belief are opposed to killing in war in any form and to bearing arms, but do not object to performing noncombatant military duties. They can be

reassigned to noncombatant duties (even in a combat zone).

Selective conscientious objection means rejecting military participation in certain situations. Selective COs might believe it is immoral to serve in a capacity where they are responsible for possibly using nuclear weapons. Or they might decide a particular war is one in which they cannot participate such as a war that does not meet just war criteria or a war they consider racially or politically motivated.

While the Catholic Church recognizes and supports selective conscientious objection, the military does not. If unable to obtain official CO status from the military, some conscientious objectors have gone to jail rather than be part of a military system or war in which they did not believe.

RESOURCES

War, Conscience, and Faith:

Request the Conscientious Objection and Catholic Teaching brochure from Pax Christi USA for information and helpful resources.

On Resistance to War:

Blood Makes the Grass Grow: Conscientious Objectors and the Gulf War. Video. Available from AFSC's Youth and Militarism Program, www.afsc.org/youthmil.htm or 215/241-7176. \$25.00.

Schlissel, Lillian, ed. *Conscience in America: A Documentary History of Conscientious Objection in America, 1757-1967.* New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1968.

Zahn, Gordon. *In Solitary Witness: The Life and Death of Franz Jägerstätter.* Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1964. (A man who refused to join Hitler's military.)

Zuses, Rachel S. *Words of Conscience*, 11th ed. Washington, DC: Center on Conscience and War, 2001.

Draft:

General Board of Church and Society, United Methodist Church, with the Center on Conscience and War. "Conscientious Objectors and the Draft." Published 2002. Available by calling 202-483-2220 or 800-967-0800. \$2.00.

Yoder, John Howard. *What Would You Do?* Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1994. (Analysis and questions draft boards would likely ask.)

For Members of the Military:

Central Committee for Conscientious Objectors. "Advice For COs in the Armed Forces." \$3.00.

Organizations:

Center on Conscience and War. 1830 Connecticut Avenue NW; Washington, D.C. 20009. 202/483-2220 or 800/379-2670; nisbco@nisbco.org; www.nisbco.org.

Central Committee for Conscientious Objectors. 1515 Cherry Street; Philadelphia, PA 19102. 215/563-8787 or 630 20th Street; Oakland, CA 94612; 510/465-2459; info@objector.org; www.objector.org.

G.I. Rights Hotline. 800-FYI 95GI. www.girights.org. (Nongovernmental resource for service members encountering difficulties or wanting information about discharges.)



Pax Christi USA is the national Catholic Peace movement of 14,000 members who are committed to the gospel imperative of seeking peace through nonviolence. Pax Christi USA is a section of Pax Christi International.

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