

THE GOOD WAR

and those who

Refused

TO FIGHT IT

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COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS PROJECT



THE GOOD WAR and those who *Refused* TO FIGHT IT

“WAR WILL EXIST until that
distant day when the
CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTOR
enjoys the same
REPUTATION AND PRESTIGE
that the warrior does today.”

John F. Kennedy

Filmmakers' Statements

Judith Ehrlich

In 1989 I met a woman whose husband was a World War II conscientious objector and had spent the war years in a Civilian Public Service (CPS) camp. At that time, I thought I knew a lot about the subject of conscientious objection, having just finished an educational film on the draft for the American Friends Service Committee. I was stunned I had never heard of CPS camps, and I figured that if I was unaware of this story, I certainly was not alone. I became committed to documenting the history of conscientious objection in the United States. In 1992 I finished a three part public radio series, *Against the Tide: Those Who Refused to Fight*, which documented conscientious objection from the Revolutionary War to the Gulf War. When Rick Tejada-Flores and I began collaborating on this project, we focused on the “Good War” as the most dramatic and challenging period for pacifists. We quickly learned that the impact of World War II conscientious objectors went far beyond their acts of conscience during wartime.

Rick Tejada-Flores

I was a conscientious objector during the Vietnam War, a war that was much easier to oppose than World War II for many reasons. We were the generation that was changing the world, and when we built a mass movement against the war, we were doing something that had never been done before. My draft counselor had been a Quaker CO from WW II, but somehow what that meant didn't even register. I thought of Dave Dellinger as one of the Chicago Seven, not as one of the first people to go to jail for refusing to cooperate with the draft in World War II. When I finally began to explore the quiet heroism of the World War II conscientious objectors, I was amazed at how much these men had accomplished and at how the story had been suppressed for so many years. The men who opposed World War II were treated very harshly by their country, but they never wavered in their principles. Their story makes us examine our own values, and helps me understand how what my generation accomplished was built on their efforts.

Conscientious Objectors to World War II

For as long as there have been wars, there have been individuals who refused to participate. Those who are personally opposed to participating in warfare are called conscientious objectors. Conscientious objectors fall into many camps. Some are opposed to fighting in all wars, others oppose specific wars and a smaller number reject violence in all forms.

The vast majority of Americans agreed then and continue to believe that World War II had to be fought against a Fascist threat to Western democracy. Over the years, it has come to be known as the "Good War," a term that refers to the rare sense of unity that characterized America during the war years. But even in that extreme case of "good" versus "evil," there were men whose religious, ethical and political principles did not allow them to participate in killing other human beings. These conscientious objectors included both religious and secular objectors. Most religious pacifists were members of the traditional peace churches, Quakers, Mennonites and Brethren, whose basic tenets include a peace testimony. Many Muslims, Catholics, Jews and others interpreted "Thou shalt not kill" to apply even in times of war. A large number of imprisoned draft resisters were Jehovah's Witnesses who, while not pacifists, rejected the right of the nation to conscript them to fight in a secular army. Secular objectors acted from various political, philosophical, ethical and humanitarian principles. Like combat soldiers, many conscientious objectors were willing to sacrifice themselves for their country. However, they were simply unwilling to kill for it. They volunteered for tasks that few others were willing to perform, serving as medical guinea pigs, smoke jumpers and attendants in mental institutions. After World War II, conscientious objectors

used tactics of nonviolent resistance to help transform the American social and political landscape. Now in their eighties, many of those men continue to put into practice the principles of nonviolence that inspired them to refuse to fight the "Good War."

The commitment of World War II conscientious objectors to the principles of nonviolence in the face of overwhelming opposition offers important lessons for America today in a nation once again united against an enemy. Pacifism has always been a minority position in the nation and the world. This philosophy is considered by some to be elitist, utopian, cowardly or insupportable when the country's interests are threatened. Yet the voices of conscientious objectors have been an important part of the national dialogue since the founding of our nation. They raise important questions for a democracy, and considering them can provide a starting point for wide-ranging discussions on issues of conscience and the potential of nonviolence to solve problems.

These questions have never had easy answers. As World War II conscientious objector Steve Cary said, "In a certain real degree in 1941, you were a conscientious objector knowing that you didn't have another answer." THE GOOD WAR AND THOSE WHO REFUSED TO FIGHT IT provides a unique opportunity for viewers currently considering their own beliefs about war and peace to consider unexamined beliefs about World War II and about war itself. It is particularly relevant for young men who are facing mandatory registration for the draft at age 18, and for men and women who enlisted in the military when it was primarily a peacekeeping force and now find themselves facing combat.



The Tradition of Conscientious Objection

Today many Americans believe that refusing to join the Army and fight began during the Vietnam War. But the tradition of pacifism is older than our country. Pacifism likely began prior to recorded history, but the earliest Christian pacifists were in Roman times. Recognition of conscientious objection by the state began in Europe prior to the 15th century. Buddhist pacifists also predate our nation, but conscientious objection has a unique place in United States history.

Among our founders were pacifists fleeing oppression for their beliefs in Europe. Several of the original colonies, including Pennsylvania, Delaware and New Jersey were founded by the Quaker pacifist William Penn. The framers of the U.S. Constitution considered including an exemption from military service for conscientious objectors in the Second Amendment. This clause was omitted because they did not envision the need for creating a standing army. At a critical moment in the Revolutionary War, as the new capitol was threatened with destruction, George Washington issued a call to "all young men of suitable age to be drafted, except those with conscientious scruples against war."

During the American Civil War, the conscription law of the North provided the opportunity for religious objectors and others to buy their way out of the draft. Those who would not or could not afford that option were treated harshly under military law. World War I ushered in the first draft since the Civil War, and policies that were even less tolerant of conscientious objectors. Seventeen draft resisters died of mistreatment in Alcatraz Prison during World War I.

In World War II, a total of nearly 43,000 Americans refused to fight for reasons of conscience: 12,000 served in Civilian Public Service, 6,000 went to prison and 25,000 served in the military as noncombatants. During the Vietnam War more than 170,000 men were officially recognized as conscientious objectors. Thousands of other young men resisted by burning their draft cards, serving jail sentences or leaving the country.

The draft has been suspended for more than 25 years now, but registration was re-instituted in 1980 and is still a legal requirement for all male U.S. residents at age 18. Although registration violators have not been prosecuted since the early '80s, registration is required for college loans and government employment and, more recently, driver's licenses in some states.

Though the military is currently an all-volunteer organization, when the Gulf War broke out in 1991, 2,500 men and women in the Armed Forces refused to serve in Saudi Arabia on the basis of conscience. While draft opposition is an individual decision made by a minority in all U.S. wars, public opposition to wars such as the War of 1812, the Mexican War, World War I and the Vietnam War sparked mass movements that reached far beyond men of draft age. Although conscientious objection has never enjoyed widespread support because war unites most citizens, as long as war exists, we can expect that opposition to war will exist as well.

Discussion Questions

Before viewing the program:

- > World War II is often referred to as the "Good War." Why do you think that this phrase was used to describe the war? What does it mean to you?
- > A conscientious objector, or CO, is a legal term for a person who is opposed to participating in war. Did you know that there were conscientious objectors to World War II? What does the word "conscience" mean? What would it mean to "follow your conscience"?
- > What do you think you would have done if you had been drafted in World War II?
- > Have you ever known anyone who identified as a pacifist or a person who refused to fight in a war?
- > Do you know any veterans of any war or are you a veteran? What do you know firsthand about war?
- > Do you think pacifists have a right to refuse to fight when our nation is at war? Has the attack against the United States within its borders changed your opinion?

After viewing the program:

- > How do you feel about the men in the film and the positions they took?
- > Did you particularly identify with anyone in the film? Why or why not?
- > What new information about World War II did you learn from this film?
- > Did your feelings about World War II itself, or about fighting in wars in general, change after viewing this film? Why or why not?
- > If you had an impression of pacifism or nonviolence before viewing the film, did it change?
- > How does an ordinary person justify killing once war is declared, when they would thoroughly abhor it under other circumstances? Should the religious injunction "Thou shalt not kill" be scrapped in wartime?



Discussion Points

1. The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001 shocked and united our nation against a common enemy. After the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, conscientious objector Ammon Hennesey said, "Being a pacifist between wars is like being a vegetarian between meals."

What do you think he meant by this statement? Do you think it is more difficult to hold the beliefs of a conscientious objector during times of war? Is there a difference in being a pacifist when the war is being fought abroad than when the war is waged at home and against civilians? Do dissenters have an obligation to keep quiet when our nation is in crisis, or does dissent have a particularly important role to play in this period?

2. *Time* Magazine called A.J. Muste "America's Number One Pacifist." For decades, Muste was a leading spokesperson for using nonviolent resistance as a strategy for social change. Confronted by a reporter in the 1940s during an antiwar vigil at the White House, he was asked, "Do you really think you are going to change the policies of this country by standing out here alone at night in front of the White House with a candle?" He replied, "Oh, I don't do this to change the country. I do this so the country won't change me."

Do you know what is deeply important to you? Is there anything you would never allow your nation, religion, teachers, family or friends to change? How far would you go to live by your principles?

3. When Dave Dellinger and George Houser refused to register for the draft in 1940, Dr. Evan Thomas, a leader of the antiwar movement who had been imprisoned as a CO in World War I, wrote to Houser, "To go to prison and know that the overwhelming majority of your fellows cannot understand it is perhaps the loneliest task of all. But you will be blazing a trail through the thickest and blackest part of the wilderness, and the light must come from within you and through great faith."

Quaker pacifists believe that one's conscience and faith is an inner light, similar to what Thomas describes. What do you think that means? Can you imagine doing something that everyone around you thinks is foolish, unpatriotic and downright unacceptable? Have you ever done anything that took that kind of faith or courage? If you did, what would it be? Have you ever met anyone who believes that deeply in a principle?

4. "We felt that if violence and killing were a way to solve the problem, that those of us who were African-Americans or Black, as we called ourselves then, would go to Mississippi and fight or we would go to Alabama or Georgia to fight because our experience of fear and humiliation and totalitarianism and hatred was in this country. But we felt that there must be another way to come to a society where everybody could live with dignity." —*Bill Sutherland*

What are the connections Sutherland makes between pacifism and antiracist action? Do you agree or disagree with him? Can you think of any connections between nonviolence and other issues besides war and peace, such as environmentalism or global economic justice?

5. News anchor Tom Brokaw titled his best-selling book on the men and women who fought World War II *The Greatest Generation*.

If the men and women who fought in World War II are considered national heroes, does that make a person who refused to fight unpatriotic? Do you think someone can be both a pacifist and a patriot at the same time? What is your definition of a hero? Could any of these conscientious objectors be considered heroes, or are they heretics?

6. Individual conscientious objectors did not stop World War II or any war we know of, but nonviolent resistance in the tradition of Ghandi and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. has been remarkably successful. "The greatest misconception about conflict in our century is that violence is always the ultimate form of power," says Peter Ackerman, series editor of *A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict*. "But Indians, Danes, Poles, South Africans, Chileans, African Americans, and many others have proven that to be wrong. The ability to produce enormous change without violence shouldn't come as a surprise; we see nonviolent change occurring every day—through political diplomacy, popular culture, and advertising."

Do you believe nonviolence can be effective, or is it a utopian dream?

7. *THE GOOD WAR AND THOSE WHO REFUSED TO FIGHT IT* closes with this statement from conscientious objector William Roberts: "Was our protest and our witness of any benefit to society? Perhaps the answer to that lies in the findings of the new science of chaos and complexity, which has discovered that something as apparently insignificant as the fluttering of a butterfly's wings can trigger a cascade of events that, in due time, drastically affect the weather halfway around the globe. We flapped our butterfly wings in prison. Who can know their effect in our interconnected world?"

Did the COs' protest of World War II and their willingness to sacrifice for their beliefs have an effect on the world? Do you think one person's action can have a larger ripple effect? Do you think individuals should have the right to challenge the majority opinion? What do you think about the slogan common during the Vietnam era, "America: Love It or Leave It"? What was the meaning of that slogan and whom was it directed to? Should conscientious objectors be allowed to enjoy the benefits of this country if they won't fight? Even if they are willing to serve in other ways?

What do I believe about war?

The world faces difficult questions about war and peace. Each of us probably asks at least once in our life, "What do I believe about war?" The purpose of this section of the Viewer's Guide is to invite people to explore their personal beliefs about participating in war and to become acquainted with the specific legal definition of conscientious objection.

Begin by writing a paragraph about your current beliefs about war and how you would respond to being drafted into military service.

What is conscientious objection?

Generally, conscientious objection is a sincere conviction, motivated by conscience, that forbids someone from taking part in state-sponsored killing. This objection may apply to all forms or to particular aspects of war.

The Military Selective Service Act and government regulations recognize two types of conscientious objectors:

- 1. Conscientious objectors** These are persons who, by reason of religious, ethical, or moral belief, are "conscientiously opposed to participation in war in any form." In the event of a draft, they are exempt from military service and may perform alternative service as civilians. If while serving in the Armed Forces an individual forms such a belief, he or she may apply for a discharge as a conscientious objector.
- 2. Noncombatant conscientious objectors** These are persons who, by reason of religious, ethical or moral belief, are "conscientiously opposed to killing in war in any form but who do not object to performing noncombatant service in the armed forces." In the event of a draft, they are trained without weapons and assigned to noncombatant service. If they are already serving in the military, these men or women are reassigned to noncombatant duties (such as medics, for example.)

A Non-cooperator with the draft is a person whose conscience forbids him to cooperate with draft law requirements. Current law stipulates that young men who fail to register within 30 days of their 18th birthday are subject to possible criminal penalties of up to five years in prison and a fine of up to \$250,000. Although men who do not register for the draft have not been criminally prosecuted since the early 1980s, registration is required for federal financial aid for higher education and job training as well as employment in the federal government. Some states require men to register for the draft to receive driver's licenses and enroll in state colleges and universities.

Am I a conscientious objector?

This question is not as simple to answer as it may seem, so it is important to give it serious thought. You may want to consult your relatives, friends, teachers or religious advisors. It may take some time to come to a conclusion. The important thing is to start thinking about this now and write down your beliefs. Also gather letters of support written by people who know you well and will attest to your sincere beliefs.



Why is it important to think about this now?

While no draft is in effect at this moment, the mechanism is very much in place. When a war is declared, the draft can begin immediately. Drafts during peacetime or compulsory national service could even be enacted. A plan to register and conscript health care professionals has been prepared and probably would be implemented in a war emergency before other conscription measures are put into place. Under current regulations, conscientious objectors have a very limited time following an induction order to document their claim for an exemption from military service. Since time would be short, as few as nine days, conscientious objectors should think through the basis of their claim now. In peacetime or war, early documentation of beliefs is evidence of sincerity.

Neither active duty personnel nor reservists can enter the military as conscientious objectors. When military personnel begin to question their tasks, responsibilities and mission, they should take a careful look at their beliefs about war. Military procedure asks questions about when conscientious objector beliefs crystallized in the military person's life and the limits the service man or woman would put on the use of force.

What about women?

Despite the fact that women are not yet required to register for the draft, Congress has the power to include women in a draft. Plans for a draft of health care professionals include women, and women already make up 10 percent of the U.S. military. Therefore, it is important that women, as well as men, consider what they believe about war.

What obligations would I have as a conscientious objector?

As a result of being classified a conscientious objector, you would be required to give two years of alternative service in some civilian agency or noncombatant service in the Army, if you are drafted.

Resources

American Friends Service Committee

A Quaker organization committed to social justice, peace and humanitarian service. (215) 241-7000 • www.afsc.org

American Friends Service Committee National Youth and Militarism Program

Providing youth with alternatives to war. • www.afsc.org/youthmil.htm

The Central Committee for Conscientious Objectors (CCCO)

An agency for military and draft counseling (888) 231-2226 • CCCO coordinates the Military Out of Our Schools campaign (800-NO JROTC; 800-665-7682). • www.objector.org

Center on Conscience and War

Formerly National Interreligious Board for Conscientious Objectors
Defends and extends the rights of conscientious objectors to war and violence. • (800) 379-2679 • www.nisbco.org

Church of the Brethren

The Witness office coordinates Church of the Brethren efforts in the areas of peace, justice and conscientious objection. • (800) 323-8039 • www.brethren.org

Consortium on Peace Research, Education and Development (COPRED)/Peace Studies Association (PSA)

A community of educators, activists and researchers working on alternatives to violence and war. • (360) 867-6196 • www.evergreen.edu/user/copred/

The Fellowship of Reconciliation

The largest, oldest interfaith peace organization in the nation. (845) 358-4601 • www.forusa.org/

The Hague Appeal for Peace

The Global Campaign for Peace Education
Global network of education associations and regional, national and local task forces of citizens and educators. They provide extensive resources and peace education lesson plans. • (212) 687-2623 • www.haguepeace.org

Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change

Established in 1968 by Coretta Scott King as a living memorial dedicated to the preservation and advancement of the work of Martin Luther King Jr. (404) 526-8900 • www.thekingcenter.com

National Campaign For A Peace Tax Fund

Advocates for US federal legislation enabling conscientious objectors to war to have their federal income taxes directed to a special fund that could be used for nonmilitary purposes only. • (888) 732-2382 (PEACETAX) • www.peacetax.com

Pax Christi

National Catholic peace movement with 14,000 members and 230 local and regional groups. Youth/Young Adult Forum • (814) 453-4955 ext. 239 • www.paxchristiusa.org

Peace Action

The largest network for peace and justice in the U.S., with 100,000 members working for policy change. • (202) 862-9740 • www.webcom.com/peaceact/

Peace and Justice Committee of the Mennonite Church General Board

Works to fulfill the church's peacemaking mission. • (330) 683-6844
www.mennolink.org/peace/staff.html

Student Peace Action Network (SPAN)

A national coalition of student peace activists working for peace and social change. (202) 862-9740 ext. 3051 • www.gospan.org/

Veterans For Peace

Veterans working together for peace and justice through nonviolence. (314) 725-6005 • www.veteransforpeace.org

War Resisters League (WRL)

WRL believes that war is a crime against humanity and uses nonviolence to put conscience into action. • (212) 228-0450 • www.warresisters.org

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For a more extensive bibliography, please visit the Center on Conscience and War website: www.nisbco.org/Biblio_A-H.htm

The Nonviolence Web: www.nonviolence.org

Viewer Guide

www.pbs.org/thegoodwar



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About ITVS

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About the Community Connections Project (CCP)

For over ten years, ITVS has fulfilled its mission of bringing powerful new voices to public television through its independent productions and national outreach efforts. In 1996, ITVS launched the Community Connections Project to maximize the use of media as a tool for civic engagement and community development. The CCP collaborates with local field organizers, national and community-based organizations and public television stations to foster dialogue, develop lasting partnerships and implement positive action.

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