

Thinking About Noncooperation with the Draft

Based on an August 1969 discussion
at Peacemakers Orientation in Nonviolence, Bryson City, N. C.

● I'd like to discuss the draft, starting where I am.

● And where is that?

● Well, I'm a student and have a II-S. But I consider myself a conscientious objector. I applied for the CO status two months ago. A good many guys in this room are going to be resisting the draft when they leave here. But I keep wondering, why resist? It seems a fantastic sacrifice of creative energy that you could be using for other projects.

● I was in a similar situation a couple of years ago. When I was considering applying for CO status, I consulted the Handbook on such matters, put out by the Central Committee for Conscientious Objectors. Whereas the information in this booklet is helpful, I was amazed to see the striking similarity it bore to the material put out by some groups on how to pass high on the college entrance, or graduate record, exams. The Handbook specifies, in a very similar way, just what question CO applicants should watch out for—the "tricky question," you know. It tells you precisely how to approach this question. I began to wonder if filling out this application for CO status wasn't playing a game with the draft board. This bothered me. It bothered me also that I had to prove myself as pretty much the articulate kid, nice, good, and kind, not only opposed to war, but opposed in the "acceptable" way—with the correct religious approach. This just doesn't seem consistent with the honesty and directness which are the basis of personal freedom and good social relationships.

● You said it. The CO classification is a discriminatory one. Anyone applying for and getting it needs to realize that someone in the system is going to be inducted in his place. So if 10,000 men are called up, and 100 of them have I-O classifications, 100 other guys are going to get induction notices. This is the way the system works. One who severs ties with this system has at least put himself one step away from this process. He has left the system and has quit cooperating with it. In addition to being an objector to war, he is an objector to draft. Of course,

the nonregistration position is best among the non-cooperator positions.

● An applicant for CO status is saying, in effect, "Don't put me in your army," and the draft refuser is saying, "Don't put anyone in your army."

● That's the way I see it. If I take a I-O and get into alternative service, I'm striking a bargain with the military, willing to be a hospital slave if only they won't make me a gun-toting slave. If I resist both kinds of slavery, I keep my independence. And I think that in prison I can feel more like a free man than my brother who does hospital work under orders to do it—orders from a military draft system.

● Well, to me the draft raises several basic questions—all having to do with the freedom of human beings. Does anybody or anything have the right to decide how I am to spend one minute of my life—let alone several years? It is one thing for me to try to persuade you to come to my point of view on something. It is quite another thing for me to decide how you're going to live for the next several months or more; or for you to decide how I'm going to live.

● As I see it, the fighting forces are not the only makers of casualties. I've seen hundreds of casualties made by the draft system itself. A lot of men, besides those inducted, are having their lives run for them. Selective Service has made bold to state that it controls and intends to control lives of great blocks of civilians. They call it "channeling." Lots of fellows with II-S may find something they like about college. But if you ask them candidly whether or not they would remain in school if the draft suddenly ended, there would be a surprising number answering "no." We know what forced labor is called. What is forced study to be called? And what is acceptance of this to be called?

● Well, the reason I gave up my chance for a CO status, after I'd made application, was I recalled that by being among CO draftees I'd be as much a part of the draft system as if I were among the GI draftees in Vietnam. Perhaps I'd be a little farther removed from the war, but no farther removed from the draft.

● Yes. Being told by Selective Service that I have its permission to be an objector, or a student, doesn't set very well with me, or my view of freedom. The fact that SS tells me I don't have to take up a gun and bayonet ought, perhaps, to lull me into being grateful enough to forget that I'm being shoved around. But it isn't. I keep thinking how involved I really am in the system, if I hold onto the II-S or I-O; and how much of a help I am to it.

● But what if everyone would ask for a CO status? Wouldn't this put the military out of business?

● But the government, in making possible such a classification as I-O, is not indicating it respects those who are conscientiously opposed to war. What do you think would happen if everyone asked for CO status? How many would get it? Very few. Would the army want us, though—we who are strongly opposed? Of course not. So the government is in this case smart. It finds a place for us in the system. It buys us off.

● Doesn't the government do this same sort of thing with ministers? I think they get an automatic exemption.

● Yes. The government, knowing some ministers won't put the state first, doesn't want to get entangled with the clergy and the church. But it can't afford to let ministers off entirely. It must honor them enough to keep them from making a public blast against the draft system. So the government gets a minister to remain a

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full member of the system in exchange for a guarantee that the system will leave him alone. And so we see ministers whose religions and ethics stand opposed to violence and coercion, acquiescing and playing the role the government has designed for them.

- There's not only a deal involved here, but also discrimination.

- Yes. There wouldn't be any sense in setting up a draft in which everyone had equal right to exemptions, so the draft has to be discriminatory. This bothers me.

- It bothers me, too. I met some fellows in Oklahoma last fall who were doing alternative service. They're Mennonites; and in the area where they come from—Kansas—they register and tell the draft board they're Mennonites. They don't even file a CO form. Yet they soon get in the mail a CO classification. Quakers in some areas simply say, "Give me a CO classification." And they get it. Then take my friend at the Catholic Worker house in Boston. He goes in, and what do they say? First, they tell him the two priests with him can't come in. Then a good, upstanding member of the draft board says, "A Catholic can't be a CO." And that ends it. They ask the fellow who runs the Catholic house of hospitality, "Who pays for it? Was your wife pregnant when you got married? So you live down in the south end with the niggers and gooks." And that was the end of the interview.

- The downtrodden are always shoved to the rear of any line where privilege is being handed out. And at a draft board you have to be able to talk, and talk pretty. You have to be able to write out that good answer, and you have to appear just so at the interview.

- That's not necessarily true. A draft counsellor told me the other day about a very plain, unsophisticated guy who was given CO status just because he was so simple, so sincere.

- There must always be exceptions in anything. And the government can well afford some exceptions here. But if you want to know the truth about draft, all you have to do is look at the end product. You can, for instance, argue this way or that way about draft and color discrimination. But you look at the front lines—and then you have to say to yourself, "I may not know all the processes in between, but I certainly know who's dying."

- Why spend so much time and energy on draft resistance? Wasn't that the question which started this discussion off?

- Yes. I didn't put it just that way, however. I was just thinking about one small point—all that time in prison, and what you could be doing if you weren't in prison.

- This raises the question, What are you going to do outside? If you stay in the draft system, availing yourself of its exemptions, what can you honestly do or say? What are you going to tell people?

- Well, I think you could do counselling. That's what I was thinking of doing. In my particular case, although I could be faking myself out, it just doesn't seem as if the government is imposing itself on me that much. I've been able to make my own college program and I've been working on my own social work project, a totally original idea. And I don't see why I can't get this approved by the draft board as alternative service.

- But what about the guy who can't get alternative service on his terms? Or can't get alternative service on any terms?

- That's true.

- Well, I think a more basic thing than all those already raised is that you don't go along with this system, for the simple reason that you don't want any part of conscription—a very repugnant thing. Do you want to play with this thing? Do you want to try to find a cubby hole in it somewhere for yourself—innocuous and safe? Do you want to reform the thing, make it work more efficiently? Do you want to try to make it more palatable, appear less dangerous than it really is? Man, this is slavery you're dealing with. Period.

- Yes. This is what I've been feeling. Being a girl, I've no way of knowing how difficult the choices are. And that's very nice. But you can see that the draft causes so much distress, even these hours of agonizing talk we're engaged in here. It seems to me that I wouldn't want any connection with something that causes so much distress as the draft does.

- What I'm wondering is how it's ever going to be possible to get rid of conscription if people, even those who say they don't like it, go along with it? People seem to be able to find all sorts of reasons why they, in their particular situation, should go along with it. They accommodate themselves to it, get used to it, forget they originally were opposed.

- I'm disturbed by the mentality of this—the thought process, or lack of it. I hear students and those who've gotten I-O status say they don't feel confronted by the draft. Why not? They're in it. It should confront them every day. The fact they don't feel confronted is important. It indicates something.

- Someone said a while ago that the nonregistrant position is the best of the noncooperator positions. Why? A nonregistrant doesn't even have a draft card to burn. The draft system may not even know he exists. How can he fight the draft?

- I'd like to say that at 18 I registered, it never occurring to me to do anything else. I didn't even have to go to a draft board, because they had a very convenient place at the high school to register. How many kids at 17 have figured out that on their next birthday they won't register like all the other guys? Not many. At 19, however, I was sorry, and would like to have been able to unregister.

- I was just thinking, Why register? Anyhow, why register until you decide you want to? It's always possible to register. It's never possible to un-register. Who's sure at 18 he wants to? Very few. If they waited, they'd know, or know a lot more. Some day, in a few months, a guy may be sure he wants to register. So he goes down.

- Should a man be forced to make such a basic freedom-and-life decision before he's ready—should he ever be forced to make such a decision?

- To go back to the matter that a nonregistrant doesn't even have a draft card to burn. Isn't it better not to hold any membership card at all in the conscription organization? Actually, a nonregistrant makes the earliest protest of all.

- After hearing all these ideas, I wish I hadn't gone along with the draft all this time. I know there's no such thing as unregistering. So what can I do?

- First, you get rid of your membership card. Then you do everything you can to show you've resigned. The conscription system will say it does not honor your resignation. But what does that matter? There are plenty of ways to prove you've quit.

This leaflet is produced by Peacemakers, a movement which began in the spring of 1948 when a peacetime draft act was up for vote in Congress and likely to become law. Peacemakers not only took a stand unequivocally opposed to conscription, but prepared immediately to defy this act if and when it became law. The act was passed—the same thing we have today with only minor changes. Peacemakers publicly urged nonregistration as the way to deal with one of the most serious infringements on human freedom one can possibly imagine. The position of Peacemakers regarding conscription continues to be one of complete noncooperation with Selective Service. Another movement, begun in 1967 and called The Resistance, has also urged noncooperation with the draft.