

WAR IS GOOD BUSINESS, DONATE YOUR CHILDREN

By Ed O'Rourke

Until recently, I thought that conscientious objectors had an easy time of it when our country was at war. But when I read Mark Kurlansky's *Nonviolence: Twenty-Five Lessons from the History of a Dangerous Idea* (Modern Library, New York, 205 pages, 2006), with a forward by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, I found that conscientious objectors and pacifists have suffered ostracism, harassment, and jail since the early days of American history. Nonviolence—and its persecution—has had a long history in the United States and the world—think of Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Nelson Mandela. Even briefly considering war resistance efforts shows how continuously the United States has initiated or intervened in military activity and what is has done to those who resist.

In the early colonial days, Quakers (Friends) arguing and praying for negotiation not war, for the fair treatment of Native Americans, were sometimes imprisoned or executed. When the Revolutionary War started, rebel colonies issued draft laws that for conscientious objectors included fines and imprisonment.

Nevertheless, American society has experienced an evolving consciousness, if not acceptance of conscientious objectors. The Quakers (Friends) originated groups resisting war and service in it. Some 80,000 Americans belonged to nonviolent sects in the 1770s. Near the end of the War of 1812, the first nonsectarian peace organization, the New York Peace Society, started.

Both sides of the Civil War enacted national conscription laws to overrule state options. The Confederate Draft Law of 1862 that exempted Quakers, Mennonites, Brethren and Nazarenes, with the understanding that they provide a substitute or pay \$500. In March 1863, the

US Congress passed the National Conscription Act that exempted from military duty anyone who could pay \$300 for a waiver or could provide a substitute. In February 1864, the amended act recognized conscientious objectors who were members of religious denominations whose articles of faith prohibited armed service. Few conscientious objectors, however, could raise the waiver money or find substitutes and consequently, many war objectors found themselves in army camps under military officers cool or hostile to their beliefs. Some were assigned menial tasks; the “secret objectors” who shot over the enemies’ heads or did not fire their weapons were imprisoned or tortured. Some were fortunate enough to serve as cooks. Others went to prison. There are records of conscientious objectors being tortured.

In World War One, about 26,000 physically fit men registered as conscientious objectors although the draft laws had no provision for non-military service for them. They could be assigned to non-combatant duties such as the medical corps, into which 25,000 were inducted. Approximately 1,200 lived in military camps and were assigned agricultural work. Ninety nine were assigned to recovery efforts in France. Forty five men were sentenced to prison.

During the slaughter, Congress passed laws equating antiwar sentiment with espionage, with jail terms for those who would not “defend their country” liable to prison sentences up to a life term. Seventeen conscientious objectors were sentenced to death but none of these executions were carried out. However, prison officials allowed beatings and abuse of those “spies” and “traitors”. The latter term, of course, has been thrown at peace-seekers today, and during the Cold War the spy slander remerged as peace protestors were labeled Communists, lost their jobs, or in a few cases sent to the electric chair. The tactics of slander and intimidation continue today, as one may recall the terms “dirty hippy peacenik” or “Hanoi Jane” Fonda and the treason charges hurled at those who wish to end the Iraq incursion.

The first Selective Service Act of World War II had a provision for non-combatant service for conscientious objectors but still military serving positions. The Quakers, Brethren, and Mennonites joined in a united effort to get the government to agree to the concept of the Civilian Public Service (CPS) that allowed non-military service for conscientious objectors who could not in good conscience perform even non-combat war jobs. The churches essentially agreed to foot the costs of the program and in return, the CPS units were run by civilians under the final authority of the military. Throughout the war, there was tension as civilian and military officers struggled to exert authority for the CPS’s administration.

In World War Two, nearly 43,000 filed for conscientious objector status. The draft boards assigned 25,000 to noncombatant status (medical corps) in the armed forces and 12,000 to the Civilian Public Service. Because the draft boards rejected claims or men refused induction, 6,000 went to prison, including some 271 non-registrants who refused even to register. Those placed with the Civilian Public Service worked in forestry projects, fire fighting units, hospitals or “guinea pig” projects.

Although the nonviolence idea has not stopped wars from occurring, peace advocates have effected widespread social, economic, and political changes in our society. Leaders of the civil rights movement, George Houser, James Farmer, Bayard Rustin, and Martin Luther King, Jr., studied Gandhi’s philosophy and tactics. The 1950s and 1960s the civil rights movement came to be the most influential and copied social effort of the 20th century.

During the Vietnam War, conscientious objectors had to prove: 1) they were opposed to serving in all wars, 2) they were sincere and not just scared and 3) their beliefs originated from their moral or religious values, not just political ones. If a draft board thought the applicant did not meet these criteria, the applicant did not receive conscientious objector status.

Starting with the Vietnam War, there has been increasingly greater skepticism in our society about the benefits of military power and a growing peace movement. The peace movement in that era included huge demonstrations in Washington, a march on the Pentagon, and many “silent objectors” becoming illegal aliens in Canada. Our efforts in Vietnam, the Cold War, and the Bay of Pigs availed us about as much as World War I, landing the Marines at Vera Cruz or the protracted military repression of the Philippines. The Revolutionary, 1812, and Civil Wars suggest that nonviolence would have had better practical results than force.

Up to 1775, the colonists were achieving most of their goals by boycotts and passive resistance. Activists in the Boston Tea Party destroyed property, not people. Maintenance of British forces in the colonies was a drain on the English economy. Members of the British Parliament openly criticized the official policy and sometimes expressed sympathy for the colonists’ cause. Of course, the colonists were not saints: They used the terms *enslavement* and *slavery* protesting taxes and non-representation, even as the trade in human chattel flourished. Native Americans would have been better off under British or French rule. The death toll in the Revolutionary War was the second highest in American history. The Great Awakening, the rise of evangelical sects and the circuit riders, the lingering Puritanism, and bustling Yankeeism had

little to say on behalf of peace. Tories were fair game for anyone (being “traitors”) and the colonists paid in blood and money far in excess of old-fashioned protests and boycotts to achieve representation in Parliament or autonomy.

The Founding Fathers, the Great Emancipator, the Mount Rushmore Four—history has not only absolved them but deified them. Yet in shadows of all their glory, one can discern a consistent motive of national and commercial aggrandizement. Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, for example, implies no end to slavery and may be read as a call for continuous militarism. General Sherman’s march through Georgia and Wilson’s 14 Points accomplished equally minimum results in the long run. All wars are waste, but some seem the ultimate in folly, as if the Monroe Doctrine came from Mount Sinai and was meant to apply to the entire globe.

Think of the War of 1812 that was set in motion by the “sacred” principle of Freedom of the Seas. The United States declared war on Great Britain even though a major political party, the Federalists, was opposed to the war. Freedom or commerce? The war sought to break the embargo on French territory since the New England states depended on “free trade”. By 1815, however, the New England states that depended the most on ocean trade were ready to pull out of the United States and start their own confederation to end the war.

In Bob Dylan’s famous song, “With God on Our Side”, there is a passage, “The Civil War came and it went. The reason for fighting, I never did get”. The war certainly was not worth the terrible destruction of the South and its aftermath. Economist John Kenneth Galbraith reasoned that given no Civil War, the plantation owners would have started paying wages to slaves to prevent them from seeking work at the booming factories in the North. Lack of bloodshed would not have meant lack of problems such as runaway slaves or the probability that a Southern government would have made every attempt to expand slavery into Mexico, western U.S. states, and Cuba. There was little public support for the idea of separation into two countries followed by compensated emancipation of the slaves. Yet other countries managed to free their slaves without a civil war and its virulent aftermath.

The war set back blacks and poor whites. There was nothing like a Marshall Plan or the Fellowship of Reconciliation. When emancipation came, it was only with the weight of an occupying army hated by the southern whites. The emancipated blacks’ lives changed little. There followed the Ku Klux Klan, the carpetbaggers, and the rise of an unreconstructed South, whose machinations may still be seen today.

Nowadays, war protesters generally work in secular and sometimes multi-issue groups linking peace with efforts to save the planet. For example, the Green Party of Texas cites nonviolence as a key value, “We reject violence as a way of settling disputes—it is shortsighted, morally wrong, and ultimately self-defeating. We work to create a world in which war is obsolete.” The party accurately links war to economics and politics, though true motivations for war are usually unspoken or lied about. Weapons of mass destruction or oil? Anti-Communism or anti-terrorism or the “need” for SUVs and overeating? Defense or aggression? Serious questions arise when one considers the cost of armed forces, even in times of peace, or the fact that the US defense budget is equal to or greater than the rest of the world’s combined. It is no secret that our country could be secure if it spent only half as much on weapons, recruitment, and training. But fear and disinformation—not to mention slander and oppression—makes for a pliable public.

Some positive steps toward a more peaceful world have emerged, although they have not been generally legitimized or even noticed. Almost unmentioned in national discussion is the call for a world free of nuclear weapons by former Secretaries of State George P. Schultz and Henry A. Kissinger, former Defense Secretary William J. Perry, and former Senator Sam Nunn. Their article in the January 4, 2007 issue of the Wall Street Journal noted that “...reliance on nuclear weapons for this purpose [deterrence] is becoming increasingly hazardous and decreasingly effective.” One is inspired by the thought that the day without nuclear weapons will come, since it is no longer a goal offered by only of peaceniks, hippies, and Quakers but of cold-blooded practioners of realpolitik.

In 1947, Harry Stimson, the US Secretary of War from 1940-1945, wrote, “We as well as our enemies have contributed to the proof that the central moral problem is war and not its methods, and that a continuance of war will in all probability end with the destruction of our civilization.” He cited Allied submarine and bomber strategies. US submarine policy in the Second World War resembled German policy in the First World War. In 1937, the American public condemned the German air bombardment of Guernica in the Spanish Civil War. In the 1940s, Allied bombers deliberately aimed for civilian targets. Allied bombers in Europe killed about 300,000 German civilians and injured about 800,000 more.

In several statements Pope John Paul II came close to joining the peace movement, “War is not always necessary. It is a defeat for humanity. International law, honest dialogue, solidarity

between States, the noble exercise of diplomacy: these are methods worthy of individuals and nations resolving their differences. I say this as I think of those who still place their trust in nuclear weapons and of all-too-numerous conflicts which continue to hold hostage our brothers and sisters in humanity.”

History books and the media have ignored peacemaking efforts idolizing war instead. The current war in Iraq is no exception. They are all like this. As usual, pundits and historians spend a significant amount of time analyzing and demonizing the enemy and slandering peaceniks but no time looking at the ugly truth of our own leaders’ lies and our own army’s atrocities. War advocates compared Saddam Hussein with Hitler and characterized protestors as people who wished to “offer therapy and understanding for our attackers.” Freedom fries anyone? Is Hugo Chavez of Venezuela the next Hitler? Is this one nation under fear with global liberty and justice or else? The Roman and British Empires both claimed to be bringing civilization to the world and about both it could be said, “They made a wilderness and called it peace”. So, there is nothing new about militarism, and not even torture, sadism, and waste, even the destruction like that in Dresden, Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The Romans left no stones standing in Carthage and plowed the land with salt. The flip side too, of the effect of war on societies is well documented in the stories of the decadence of Rome, imperial racism, and the damage of a war economy.

What is new is the birth and slow growth of many organizations dedicated to peace and justice. Even conservative Houston, Texas has its share, in the form of Pax Christi and numerous other groups. They are tiny and hardly have two nickels to rub together—but they exist. These groups have learned from the American Civil Rights Movement and have the patience to endure over the long haul. Like the American Civil Rights Movement, the African National Congress, and Solidarity, they will overcome. They will overcome the slander and physical punishments, the work of lying informers, perhaps the callousness and brutality of our society crystallized and justified in media and government. They face a mountain of obstacles, but their hope and faith can perhaps move mountains, or at least create conditions that will keep it from becoming another volcano.

Ed O’Rourke is an environmental accountant in Houston. 713-664-4343 eorourke@pdq.net

Morris Edelson, English professor at the Houston Community College, contributed to this article.