

*Conscientiously Objecting to War*¹

James M. Skelly

Although I will talk tonight about my own experience of conscientiously objecting to war, I want to try to put it into a larger context by first talking about the experiences of other soldiers. What I hope I can accomplish by doing this is to demonstrate that we must allow for objection to war regardless of whether it is conscientious or not. The structure of war has changed profoundly in the last century. The tactics of Al Qaeda are just a further manifestation of that transformation. War is no longer fought between armies where soldiers suffer the overwhelming number of casualties. Although civilians died in pre-20th century wars, soldiers made up 90% of the casualties. Now the ratio is reversed – 90% of the casualties are civilian – a ratio that the war in Iraq continued despite all the talk of so-called “precision” weapons.

Some of you may have seen CNN’s recent documentary called “Fit to Kill,” which explored the psychological consequences of the training and experiences of soldiers who had killed in combat. One of the former soldiers interviewed, Charles Sheehan Miles, was a veteran of the first Gulf War in 1991. During operations in Iraq he and his colleagues had engaged two Iraqi trucks that subsequently caught fire. As one of the occupants ran ablaze from the truck, Miles fired his machine gun and immediately killed him.

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His immediate emotional response was a “sense of exhilaration, of joy.” These emotions were followed in a split-second by what he characterized as “a tremendous feeling of guilt and remorse.” The image of the man on fire, running, as our young soldier killed him, stayed with him “for years and years and years,” he said. Miles’s unit returned to the U.S. amidst great celebration, and he was awarded a medal for valor, yet he felt, in his words, “probably the worst person alive.”²

Subsequently, Miles went to the chaplain and told him that he didn’t think he could engage in killing again. What is interesting is what he says at this point in the interview with CNN. Miles reveals the threat to their humanity that all soldiers face – he says, “It’s not that I couldn’t, it’s that I knew I could. Because it was...it was so easy to pull the trigger and kill people. Yes, I was afraid of what would happen. I was afraid of what it would do to me. What kind of person I would become.”

A little over a year ago, I met a young Israeli paratroop officer, Guy Grossman, at the conference that Robert Jay Lifton, one of the world’s leading scholars on genocide and the Holocaust, organizes on Cape Cod every autumn. Grossman and some 500 other Israeli soldiers refuse to serve in the territories Israel has occupied since the 1967 war. The populations in the territories are overwhelmingly Palestinian, but the Israeli government has encouraged its citizens to settle in the territories in contravention of international law and United Nation’s Security Council resolutions. Grossman and his comrades formed a group known as “Courage to Refuse,” because they feel strongly that the occupation is undermining Israeli security and destroying the humanity of both Palestinians and Israelis.

At Lifton’s conference, Grossman spoke of his experiences as an officer leading his men on missions where the locals saw them as beastly occupiers. Guy is an intelligent and sensitive human being, but his experiences led him to the very edge of his fragile humanity. Like most young soldiers he initially believed in the policies of his government and did his best to carry out military orders in circumstances that no one should confront. In the course of his missions in the Occupied Territories, he shot and killed several people. He wounded, and probably crippled, a child of six. However, for me, the most telling story was his description of what

are called “midnight arrests.” Midnight arrests are the Israeli security forces’ efforts to capture their enemies when they are at home reposing with their families in the middle of the night. Grossman and his heavily armed platoon would break into the residence of an extended family of ten to fifteen people. There would be shouting, men roughly handled, women screaming, children crying – chaos! Grossman would order them to be quiet, and when, as one would expect, they would not, he would grab the grandmother and put a pistol to her head. At this point the five-year-old boy in the family would, according to Grossman, “shit in his pants.”

These experiences led Grossman to refuse further service in the territories because, like Charles Sheehan Miles, he feared what he could become. We all have that point beyond which we are capable of becoming beasts. What Grossman experienced, I personally would not have been able to bear.

My own epiphany with regard to military service and war took rather longer to evolve. It is important to recall the early 60s, the time of my coming of age. It was assumed without question in my family, and by me, that I would do military service. My older brothers had been foot soldiers after they had dropped out of college. I took the NROTC test in the autumn of 1962, when I was 17. That I would be an officer after going through NROTC would clearly be better. Since it was peacetime, military service was one’s personal part of keeping that peace within the simple logic of American history and the Cold War as we understood it. I think I was a rather typical American young person of the time. That my agreement with the Navy would be more like the bargain that Daniel Webster made with the Devil would not become apparent until several years later.

At the point I was commissioned in the summer of 1967, I had not given very much thought to the war in Vietnam. My concerns, like many people, were private ones. I merely took military service as a natural and unquestioned expression of life in American society at the time. Like most Americans, I was primarily an individualist in my sentiments and did not question the war from a political or moral perspective. My concerns were of a private and personal nature and were focused largely on the relationship with the woman I had married immediately after finishing university. The individualist in me wanted to minimize my encounters with the authoritarian aspects of military life for the four years that I

thought I was required to serve, but this was not framed in political or moral terms.

For the first two and a half years of my service, I sat on a rusty, converted World War II oil tanker. Mentally, I avoided the political and moral issues of the war, while pursuing what I think is all too common in American life, and what I imagined was “self-realization” of a psychological nature. In the late summer of 1969 however, the Navy Department made the decision to decommission my ship, and I received orders to Vietnam where I was told I would serve as a military advisor to the South Vietnamese forces.

Shortly after I arrived in San Diego, where I was to undergo thirteen weeks of training in preparation for Vietnam, I met Jay King, the leader of an antiwar organization called the Movement for a Democratic Military (MDM). King, it turned out, was really a member of the San Diego Police Department. King, despite his secret affiliation, gave good advice and suggested that I explore conscientious objection, which I did. In fact, I had written some letters that did indicate a personal abhorrence to war, but I did not think that they were central to my self-identity because my sense of Self was more fluid. I, of course, went about becoming a conscientious objector with all the entrepreneurial energy that I could muster. I knew rather consciously that I had to construct a Self in which conscientious objection was central. I asked for letters of support from various people of some standing including two Navy chaplains with whom I had worked while serving as Catholic Lay Leader on my ship. The chaplains wrote in their letters indicating that in their discussions with me I had “showed a certain abhorrence toward” war, and that I was trying “for a meaningful way to comprehend a God who is good in a world that is filled with evil.” Their letters also spoke of things like “personal growth” and “strong moral and religious beliefs.” In addition, the required official interview with the Navy base chaplain had gone well, and in his official report of his discussion with me, he had indicated that, “I am convinced of his sincerity and his motivation”

The final hurdle was the formal hearing with an officer, Lieutenant Commander James Robinson, appointed by the base commander. He had read the “statement of belief” that I was required to submit with the application. In it, I had stated that receipt of the orders had crystallized my beliefs. I *now* knew who I

was. I wrote that, “All of my prior religious thought suddenly had major application as it manifested itself in new ways due to my orders to Vietnam.” I claimed that I had been “shocked into a very deep state of reality and recognized as I had not previously, that my continued participation in the military was in fact in direct opposition to my religious life,” and that “before this I had not had brought home to me my complicity in the evil actions of warfare.”

I thought that the hearing went well for me, but it had not. I did not know that Robinson had recommended that I not be granted conscientious objector status. In his report, Robinson had indicated “Lieutenant Skelly conveys the impression of being sincere in his beliefs.” He also stated that he thought that my beliefs were “based more on an idealistic, intellectual, and philosophical plane rather than a personal religious experience.” More significant to him however was his opinion that I was a selective objector, solely to the Vietnam War. Robinson had apparently chosen to narrowly interpret the statements I made in the hearing by indicating that my application “was motivated by a desire to avoid duty in Vietnam,” and that though “he (Skelly) is convinced in his own mind as to the validity of his reasons, he would not have initiated his request had he not received orders to Vietnam.” This was based on an exchange during the hearing where he had asked if my beliefs would not have crystallized if I had received orders to a shore station. He quoted me as saying, “Right. I would say that’s true,” without my additional qualifying statement that the movement of U.S. troops into Cambodia, or other external factors might have caused the beliefs to crystallize.

The Navy Department in Washington affirmed Robinson’s opinion, and added, “It is the feeling of the Chief of Naval Personnel that though you may in fact be opposed to the Vietnam War, your claimed conscientious objection to all wars is neither deep nor sincerely held.” In other words, I was a “selective objector.” He therefore denied my request for discharge as a CO, stating with military finality, “you are directed to carry out your orders.”

Fortunately, there was an attorney in San Diego who took on the legal battle with a ferocity and cunning that I would never have managed. He performed legal alchemy, transforming me into a legal person. I have always felt he saved me in the sense that if I went to Vietnam, although I had no worries about my physical survival, I

would be eternally scarred psychologically. I understood that the character of the war in Southeast Asia would destroy my fragile sense of hope and optimism about the human project. I knew that I would come home as so many young men did, deeply cynical about the possibility of a positive future for humanity.

Interestingly, this came into sharper focus for me during the conference that Robert Lifton organized a year ago at which I met Guy Grossman. In the commentary on Guy's presentation that Lifton asked me to give the following morning, I realized that for me, this was THE issue – that Guy had come to the very edge of his humanity and that if he had continued his military service in the Occupied Territories, his humanity would disappear into the abyss from which humans emerged. In my own case, I knew intuitively, though I couldn't precisely articulate it at the time, that if I had complied with orders and gone to Vietnam, given my psychological makeup, my humanity would most probably have been destroyed. I had seen so many of my contemporaries who, in the face of their experience of war, had come to resemble the human version of a bombed out church – only the walls remain – a place where the human spirit has been eviscerated. If I had gone to Vietnam, I'm certain that upon my return I would most probably have chosen the "Irish solution" as solace and been drunk and dead by forty.

Although I want to soon take a turn toward the philosophical issues that this raises, let me provide you first with a quick summary of how the case played out. Fortunately, for me, the U.S. Supreme Court had issued the Welsh decision between the time of my hearing before Commander Robinson and the receipt of the letter from the Bureau of Naval Personnel. With this decision, conscientious objection could now be philosophically based rather than solely based in religious belief.

We therefore filed a petition for a writ of habeas corpus in the United States District Court for the Southern District of California. Requesting a writ of habeas corpus was the preferred legal tactic, because we were essentially arguing that I was being unlawfully held by the military against my will since I was a conscientious objector. The petition formally meant that I was filing suit in federal court against the then Secretary of Defence, Melvin Laird. In *Skelly v. Laird* we argued that since Robinson had found that my

beliefs were “on an idealistic, intellectual, and philosophical plane rather than a personal religious experience,” he had “applied the wrong standard.” The judge agreed that good cause had been shown for issuance of the writ of habeas corpus and he therefore ordered the U.S. government to show cause why the writ should not be issued and set a hearing for late July. He also signed a restraining order that my lawyer had drafted that had the affect of maximizing my freedom while the case was being adjudicated. It stated that I was “not to be removed from the jurisdiction of this Court or subject to any duties incompatible with his claim of conscientious objection.” This meant that the Navy could not order me to do anything incompatible with my beliefs, and, most significantly, that this was up to me to define. This simple sentence drove the Navy crazy over the next year.

When the hearing was held, the judge had two alternatives – he could either issue the writ of habeas corpus, or he could remand the case to the Navy for a further hearing in light of the Welsh decision, which he did, and the Navy was given 30 days to report their findings back to the Court.

Because of the publicity that surrounded the case, other military officers who were also opposed to participating in the war contacted me. Together we formed a West coast chapter of the Concerned Officers’ Movement that had recently been formed in Washington, D.C., by several former military academy officers. The founding of the Concerned Officers’ Movement chapter, as well as the filing of the lawsuit against the Secretary of Defence, had made me a very public person. Moreover, by this time, I actually *had* beliefs. I had *become* a CO. I now had a much more hardened sense of Self through the assertion of conscientious objection and my opposition to the war and the military. I had been forced through political circumstances to create a Self that others could concretely encounter. Although the more I did this, the more that the earlier sense of a fluid inner Self was forced into the background of my consciousness, I still retained a certain sense of the absurd which would come forward in my mind from time to time. It was as though the entire affair was public theatre in which I played a role, sometimes well, sometimes badly.

As the group around the Concerned Officers’ Movement expanded and the relationships with other dissident military peo-

ple became more and more significant, my sense of an oppositional Self became stronger and stronger. The friendships and acquaintances that developed further contributed to this sense. Whether they were for me, or against me, so many people had come to see me as an anti-warrior that I did too. They “knew” who I was. Consequently, I did as well. To the extent that they were or became “significant others,” to use the jargon of the social psychologists, they helped me to internalize ever more deeply this new oppositional identity. This only intensified further when I later began working with Hollywood anti-warriors such as Jane Fonda, Donald Sutherland, and others.

Nonetheless, the sense of this period as absurd theater would often come to the fore when someone would attribute grandiloquent motives to my actions. I would regularly encounter individuals who would describe my actions as heroic, and attribute great courage to me. It often felt bizarre when people would speak of me in this fashion. I never forgot that my motives were both more complicated and much more mundane. I am sure this is a sentiment shared by many of the men and women who went to Vietnam, as well as those who opposed the war. The individuals, who would laud us as great heroes and speak to us of our extraordinary courage, whether we fought in or against the war, were the ones who needed the sense of high drama, not us. They lived, it seemed to me, in a cinematic reality, and though some of us were tempted by it, and a few succumbed, most of us knew that it made the public drama of the war all the more absurd to hear such characterizations.

This is one reason why soldiers who did fight in Vietnam often felt such disgust for civilian anti-warriors, especially when they were called “pigs” – and worse – by those who had had the good fortune to stay home and who seemed more sympathetic to the soldiers of the Viet Cong and North Vietnam, than to them. The soldiers knew that they had not gone to Southeast Asia out of any great love of war or from patriotism. They had just gone because that was what was expected of them. They might have explained it to themselves during or after their tour by saying that they had gone out of some patriotic feeling, but by then most could not get over their doubts about the meaning of the war.

The political elite responsible for escalating American involvement needed to characterize the war and its soldiers as heroic and

courageous. Opponents of the war needed to eulogize resisters within the military or those who opposed the draft as heroes as well. The antiwar movement needed their own heroic and courageous anti-soldiers. However, we were not such characters, any more than those who went were. Nor were we cowards, any more than those who went were “pigs” or individuals who somehow lacked the moral courage to say “no” to the war. Those who wanted to legitimize the war needed to demonize some and glorify others. The antiwar movement followed suit. The soldiers who went to Vietnam were often as victimized as the people of Southeast Asia.

When it came time for the new hearing ordered by the federal court, I had become conscious of just how “political” every word was. In his findings following the second hearing, Robinson said that I appeared “to be sincere in his stated philosophy of life,” but, he also showed a concern for his own beliefs because, I think, my arguments were a challenge to the meaningfulness of his own Navy career. He therefore said that it was his opinion that my stated beliefs were “philosophical and idealistic.” Furthermore he felt that the ideals I expounded could “be embraced by a majority of Americans as ideals but not as a practical way of life in today’s world” and that my “moral code is purely personal, based on an idealistic philosophy.”

This led Robinson to the final telling conclusion. In his opinion, I was sincere in my “desire to avoid duty in Vietnam,” but the facts led him to see me as inconsistent – in other words, the mortal sin of the Self. The “facts” that he cited in this regard were several. Most significantly, Robinson distorted the record and argued that although I had made it clear in the second hearing that I was opposed to all wars, and therefore not a selective objector, I had done this only “to cover an important requirement to qualify as a conscientious objector.” In the previous hearing he said that I had “avoided answering the question,” which I had not.

The bureau in Washington, of course, supported Robinson’s findings, and the case therefore returned to the federal court where the judge upheld the Navy. I was immediately reordered to Saigon, but we appealed to the U.S. Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals that agreed to hear the case and reissued the restraining order against the Navy. Since the court would not hold its hearing in my case for

nearly five months, I was again in a state of legal limbo.

My colleagues in the Concerned Officers' Movement and I became more brazen in our opposition to the war, however. Four of us held a press conference at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles that received national media coverage because we were specifically implying that the members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the nation's highest ranking officers, might be war criminals. Telford Taylor, the chief U.S. prosecutor at the Nuremberg War Crimes trials following World War II, had argued that by the ground rules laid down at Nuremberg, those throughout the chain of command might be liable to charges as war criminals given the My Lai Massacre and other atrocities that had come to light by 1970. Taylor had said that, "the ultimate question of 'guilt' " is how far what the troops did "deviated from general American military practice in Vietnam."³

What we did at the press conference was technically a matter of simple military procedure, but politically reasonably powerful. There is a clause in America's military law, the Uniform Code of Military Justice, which says that anyone subject to the Code can ask that a military Court of Inquiry be convened to ascertain whether someone else subject to the Code has committed a crime under its jurisdiction. Normally, the Admirals and Generals distance themselves from judicial proceedings against their underlings by using Courts of Inquiry and thereby assume an air of objectivity. Never does a junior person ask that a Court of Inquiry investigate his or her superiors. Given Taylor's statement however, a group of Concerned Officers on the East coast, followed by my colleagues and me on the West coast, formally asked the Secretary of Defence to convene a Court of Inquiry to determine whether the Chiefs were war criminals. At the press conference, I said that I did not think it was important whether we had personally seen atrocities, but that, "The important thing is that allegations have been made and it is important that these things be investigated." Though we did not really expect a Court of Inquiry to be convened, the press coverage made continued prosecution of the war a bit more problematic. Around the same time the Ninth Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals convened a three-judge panel in Los Angeles to hear our arguments to overturn the U.S. District Court's decision as well as the government's defence of it. There was no immediate opinion from the

Ninth Circuit Court in the case, and we were led to believe that it would be two months or more before they issued one.

Sometime during the next month, I met Jane Fonda, who along with Donald Sutherland and a large number of other entertainers, had formed the Entertainment Industry for Peace and Justice. Among other activities, they had begun producing an antiwar variety show for soldiers, called FTA, which was meant to counter the quasi-official Bob Hope show. FTA was publicly said to mean 'Free the Army,' but everybody knew that the "F" really stood for something else – it was the favourite epithet of an overwhelming number of lower ranking soldiers. My friends and I wanted the FTA troupe to put the show on in San Diego since it had the largest concentration of Marine and Navy personnel in the country. We worked out a date and arranged to hold it on Armed Forces Day in mid-May.

In the meantime, the three-judge panel of the Ninth Circuit handed down their opinion in my case. They had ruled two to one against me. What surprised me in their decision however was that they accepted Robinson's distortion of the record in which he had quoted me out of context to support the government's case against me. We therefore decided to ready a request for a re-appeal to the Ninth Circuit with the judges meeting en banc – all 12 judges, in other words – on the grounds of procedural errors including the clear distortion of my remarks. In this regard, we had strong support from Judge Koelsch, the dissenting judge, who had eloquently written that, "I cannot agree with the confident assertion made by the other members of this panel 'that the record makes quite clear that Skelly's application was denied not because of the nature of his beliefs but because he lacked sincerity'." "Therefore," he said, "I will not place a judicial imprimatur on a judgment which will constitute the prelude to the melancholy events that will surely follow."

While awaiting the next legal move, I was organizing for the FTA show, which was scheduled for two weeks after the Ninth Circuit had ruled. Since public facilities were available for rental to private citizens, I arranged to rent the auditorium of San Diego High School for two performances on the 15th of May. No one in the school administration knew that I was renting it for Jane Fonda and her troupe of antiwar entertainers, but when word got out, there was tremendous controversy. One local television station scheduled an unprecedented thirty-minute round table of its

reporters to discuss the issue, since many people felt that the show might tear San Diego, THE Navy town, apart.

It did not, but the show was a great success. A thousand sailors and marines came to each of the show's two performances. In addition to Jane and Sutherland, Peter Boyle, who now stars in a popular TV sitcom, Dick Gregory, Country Joe McDonald, and others appeared in each of the performances. As we had hoped, many of those who attended became more vocal in their antiwar sentiments. One had only to hear them chanting epithets about war along with Joe McDonald's "Fixin' to Die Rag," to know that the government's policies in Vietnam didn't have the support of many of those who were supposed to fight there.

My activities around the FTA show however finally made the Navy take some action about me. I did numerous radio and television interviews in preparation for the show, so that finally someone with political clout in Washington concluded that the Navy was playing a losing game with me. As long as they kept me in uniform, I had a more substantial platform from which to attract media attention for antiwar views. Two days after the FTA troupe left town, Secretary of the Navy John Warner sent a message in which he indicated that he had decided to accept my resignation, as I had requested a year before. I was to be out of the Navy within forty-eight hours and given an Honorable Discharge, since, of course, I had never done anything contrary to military law or regulations during the entire evolution of the case.

Although Warner had no choice but to grant the honorable discharge, there was one minor punitive note. All honorably discharged officers were at this time being given official notices of appreciation for their service during the "Vietnam Era," as it was called. At the bottom of the message therefore, Secretary Warner had written, "Certificate of Appreciation from President Nixon not authorized." Needless to say, I was free, and not terribly upset by this slight on the President's part!

At this point I want to briefly address some philosophical issues regarding conscientious objection. The existing scholarly literature on conscientious objection is, in my opinion, deeply flawed. It continues to operate with the concept of a fixed subjectivity on the part of humans, rather than one that conceives of the Self as inherently plastic. In the volumes edited by Michael Noone,

as well as Charles Moskos and John Chambers, all of the authors write using a conception that assumes the stability of the Self as a counterpoint to the stability of society. The authors assume that whether the individual is a conscientious objector to all wars, or is a selective objector to particular wars, he or she will be motivated by “deeply held moral or ethical beliefs.”⁴

Inherent in such conceptions is the notion that belief is solid, while what we may be seeing in these times is both the disappearance of belief, and/or of the idea of belief as a concept with stable content. To be qualified as a conscientious objector one had to engage in a form of moral reasoning that was extremely abstract but pretends to be concrete. Many of the ideological legitimations upon which public political action is based are rooted in this “male” form of reasoning. This of course suits governments since it has meant that very few people were able to abstractly reason to the standard established for conscientious objection. Objection to war is thus controlled and muted.

We see a parallel here, I think, with Carol Gilligan’s and Seyla Benhabib’s critiques of Lawrence Kohlberg’s theory of moral reasoning.⁵ Gilligan’s criticism of the de-contextualized rationality inherent in Kohlberg’s perspective is particularly apt since what the conscientious objector is asked to do is to deny immediate experience and to privilege a world of principle removed from the concrete circumstances of his or her life.

The person with substantial moral principles which I tried to present myself as, and who Commander Robinson in his own way also wanted to be, is the manifestation of the pretence that the abstract world holds greater truth than the concrete. Robinson was actually much closer to this understanding with his concern for the practical, and was in fact from a legal perspective, incorrectly trying to assess my beliefs using this standard. He should technically have used a more abstract one, but it was not within his realm. He was a decent guy, and was much more “feminine,” in this sense, than the standard allowed, though he skewed this by his deference to the so-called democratic majority and military authority. What made him conflicted in his assessment of me therefore was the dissonance between his practical orientation and the abstract standard of moral reasoning prevalent in the male world. Throughout the battle with the government, I kept trying to deploy a Self that met

the abstract standard to which I had never lived. I failed to see that Robinson was also caught between the contextualized, or “practical” perspective as he put it, and the demands of a system that allowed only a de-contextualized form of moral reasoning to prevail. My seeming “inconsistency” was therefore rooted not in me, but in the gap between these two forms of moral reasoning.

The underlying reality of war has been captured most compelling I think by Chris Hedges, *The New York Times* war correspondent who wrote the book, *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*. Hedges describes the culture of war and its addictive character. “War is a drug,” he argues:

It dominates culture, distorts memory, corrupts language, and infects everything around it, even humor, which becomes preoccupied with the grim perversities of smut and death. Fundamental questions about the meaning, or meaninglessness, of our place on the planet are laid bare when we watch those around us sink to the lowest depths. War exposes the capacity for evil that lurks not far below the surface within all of us.⁶

This capacity for evil was graphically displayed recently in a series of stories in the *Toledo Blade* newspaper in Ohio about the exploits of Tiger Force, a unit of the 101st Airborne Division in Vietnam in 1967. According to a long suppressed official U.S. Army investigation, Tiger Force committed war crimes on an unprecedented scale. The unit was responsible for the deaths of hundreds of civilians, and engaged in atrocities that made the My Lai Massacre pale in comparison. They executed and tortured unarmed civilians, decapitated a child, and mutilated the bodies of the dead so that the men of the unit could wear necklaces made from the ears of their victims. As horrific as it is to read, I would urge everyone here to go online and read this story because it is at the heart of the concerns I have raised here tonight.

As some of you know, Guy Grossman and I wrote an open letter to U.S. soldiers in Iraq about two months ago in which we urged soldiers to take care lest their very humanity is destroyed by what they are called upon to do in the murky moral swamp that they have been placed in. The letter has been making its way

around the internet and translated into half a dozen or more languages. I regularly receive comments from people about the letter – for the most part positive, but there was an extremely poignant one from the mother of a soldier stationed just outside Baghdad. She wrote, “I have been struggling with this issue all week, very upset and angry with my son for what he is becoming, his growing callousness toward Iraqi people, even though I can rationally understand that this is the result of the deterioration of his mental state. And he certainly is not the worst of them”⁷

In his book, Hedges cites the distinction that the psychologist Lawrence LeShan made between “mythic reality” and “sensory reality” in wartime:

In sensory reality ... we see events for what they are. Most of those who are thrust into combat soon find it impossible to maintain the mythic perception of war. They would not survive if they did. Wars that lose their mythic stature for the public, such as Korea or Vietnam, are doomed to failure, for war is exposed for what it is – organized murder.⁸

A few weeks ago at Fort Carson in Colorado, U.S. Army Staff Sergeant George Porgany was ordered to appear before a military court charged with showing “cowardly conduct as a result of fear.” Sgt. Porgany’s “crime” is that on the 29th of September, after seeing the mangled body of an Iraqi killed by his comrades in a Bradley Fighting Vehicle near a village north of Baghdad, he started to shake, repeatedly threw up, and was unable to focus. He told one of his superiors that he thought he was having a “nervous breakdown.” Although we might consider this to be an entirely human response, and military psychologists would characterize Porgany’s behavior as a completely normal stress reaction to combat, his commanders did not. One apparently told him to “get his head out of his ass and get with the program.”⁹ Because the unfortunate Sergeant was having some difficulty in this regard, his commanding officer ordered him back to the States to face a court-martial. By way of this unusual form of therapy, Sgt. Porgany now faces time in prison and the further trauma of a bad-conduct discharge from the Army.

Peter Sloterdijk, the contemporary German philosopher, has

suggested that we need “a philosophical physiognomy” that follows on the idea of “speechless language” because our cultures have become so saturated with signs that in the area of physiognomic knowledge we are dyslexic.¹⁰ Although I will admit that as someone who has invested great time and energy in intellectual work, I find it somewhat difficult to take this position, the message that we can elaborate from Sloterdijk’s insight is that Sgt. Porgany’s vomiting in the face of the sensory reality of war is as worthy an objection as that which is conscientiously arrived at.

As for me, in the end, I have decided to be who I have become, and without any equivocation. The person who I have become is focused on what I think is the overriding threat to the human project – the destruction, not only of human life, but also of our very humanity through war. War is obsolete. We must stop its use as an instrument of public policy, and we must challenge those who are addicted to it and valorize all those who resist regardless of how they articulate their objections. If we do not, I fear that the behaviors demonstrated by the men of Tiger Force will become the norm rather than the aberration. Therefore, I hope you will join me in vigorously expressing “War No More!”, “War No More!”



NOTES

¹ This talk was presented as part of the Baker Institute World Affairs Lectures at Juniata College, Huntingdon, Pennsylvania, USA. It is not for publication or quotation without the express permission of the author. ©James M. Skelly, November 18, 2003.

² “Fit to Kill,” CNN Television broadcast, October 26, 2003.

³ Telford Taylor, *Nuremberg and Vietnam: An American Tragedy* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970), 53.

⁴ Michael F. Noone Jr., *Selective Conscientious Objection* (Boulder: Westview Press Inc., 1989) and Charles C. Moskos and John Whiteclay Chambers II, *The New Conscientious Objection* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁵ Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), and Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).

⁶ Chris Hedge, *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), 3.

⁷ Personal communication.

⁸ Hedge, *War is a Force*, 21.

⁹ [Colorado Springs] *Gazette*, October 30, 2003.

¹⁰ Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 139.