

A Rationale for Counter-Recruitment

By David Chandler

When there was a draft in the Vietnam era, and young people were being rounded up to serve as cannon fodder against their wills, I think most of us would have a pretty clear vision of what we were protesting. But there currently is no draft. We have an all-volunteer military. What, then, motivates our activism against military recruitment efforts? I personally had a sufficient gut-level feeling that we should be present to challenge the Porterville recruiting fair (or “War Faire” as Bill Warner so aptly put it), that I have been spending a significant chunk of my spring break with a table full of fliers on a Wal-Mart parking lot. But when challenged by a group of 11-somethings to explain why we opposed other people signing up for the Navy I found I had trouble putting it into simple terms. This motivated me to think the matter through more carefully. For me that means thinking at the keyboard. I am writing as much to clarify my own thoughts as anything else. Some of you may already have a clear vision. I’m just a little slow sometimes.

In the medical arena a patient must give consent before treatment. Consent must be a free and informed adult decision. Furthermore consent must be continuous. It may be withdrawn at any time. Anything less cannot legally be considered consent. For enlistment to be considered voluntary it should meet the same criteria.

True consent must be fully informed. Recruiters talk about educational benefits, they talk about job skills, they talk about travel, adventure, and becoming “all that you can be.” The most glaring omission in recruitment is anything to do with killing or being killed. What other employer has such a large system of hospitals and cemeteries as a job benefit? What does killing do to the psyche of the one who kills? What other form of employment induces such a high rate of suicide?

What about the morality of war? A conscientious objector must think through the tangled ethical and moral issues and be able to articulate his beliefs to the satisfaction of a skeptical Selective Service board. A volunteer in the military is never asked to think deeply about anything. Perhaps a case can be made among philosophers and theologians for the morality of some wars, but a recruit is never required or even encouraged to think these issues through. Anyone who is not a conscientious objector should be a “conscientious participant,” but when deep reflection is absent and actively

discouraged conscience is ignored. Passively and mindlessly stepping across the line is all that is required.

Any case for the morality of a “just war” requires that a participant make moral decisions on a case-by-case basis, yet selective objection is explicitly ruled out by law. If you would fight to defend your homeland against a direct attack, you would be denied conscientious objector status. You would then be denied the right to raise a moral objection when the roles are reversed and you are the attacker in another person’s homeland. If you give up the right to make moral choices you allow yourself to become an agent of evil. The freedom to follow one’s conscience is never absolutely blocked, as long as one is willing to risk the consequences, but the consequences of disobeying an order can be severe indeed.

True consent must be continuous, but enlistment is a trap door. Once you enlist there are very high legal hurdles, for withdrawing “consent.” Many people become conscientious objectors (or even think about the morality of war) only after experiencing combat or seeing first hand the devastation that combat has wrought. There is a provision for discharge as a conscientious objector, but the grounds are more restrictive than for civilian conscientious objectors attempting to avoid conscription, and in neither case do the grounds allow for moral selectivity.

True consent must be freely given. Joining the military, however, even without the draft, involves a major coercive element: economics. The vast majority of current recruits in the all-volunteer military do so for economic reasons. The volunteer army has been called the poverty draft. The military provides food, shelter, clothing, medical care, insurance, and the promise of job training and educational benefits. With the social safety net in tatters in civilian society, the military provides one of the few paths out of the ghetto. But volunteering for the military because one has few other options is not a free choice. The fact that some of the promises may be illusory only compounds the issue.

Enlisting in the military is entering involuntary servitude. Can such a choice ever be a truly “free” choice? The full implications are probably never recognized until life in the military has been experienced first hand, so the decision is rarely a truly informed choice. Whether or not you made a fully informed choice at the outset, once you have crossed the threshold you are no longer free, so your continuing service cannot properly be described as voluntary. You are the “property” of the U.S. government, which in a very explicit sense makes you a slave. (The Supreme Court has ruled that

military service is an exception to the 13th amendment because the military is seen as necessary for the state, but the fact that it must be seen as an exception underlines the fact that this kind of “voluntary” service is actually a special case of involuntary servitude, i.e. slavery.)

Finally, consent must be a decision made by an adult. True, there are age restrictions in volunteering for the military, but the sales pitch in teen magazines, high school Jr. ROTC, and Disneyland-style flight simulators in Wal-Mart parking lots are clearly pitches to children and immature tendencies in teens. These practices should go the way of Joe Camel.