

Pacifism and Citizenship

Can They Coexist?

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Editors



**UNITED STATES
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Preface

The Bible urges us to “seek peace and pursue it,” but it does not say how hard one should oppose a war fought by one’s own country. The clash between pacifist beliefs and the perceived demands of loyal citizenship traumatized and scarred America throughout the Vietnam era, and the seeming contradictions between them remain unresolved. Thus, when the United States Institute of Peace—established by Congress to expand available knowledge about ways to achieve a more peaceful world—addressed the dilemmas of pacifism and citizenship in its September 1988 Public Workshop, it did not promise definite answers.

The Institute seeks to examine approaches toward peacemaking from every part of the ideological spectrum, and our workshop brought together pacifists from leading American peace organizations with some of their most outspoken critics. The aim of the workshop was to provide “if not enlightenment, at least intellectual stimulation” about an enduring moral question. The three hours of sometimes emotional exchanges among pacifists and their critics proceeded as might have been expected. But, as one participant observed, the fact that the publicly funded Institute devoted a public workshop to this question was a new and encouraging development to those concerned with pacifism and citizenship. “It shows that we are taking pacifism seriously,” said Tom Cornell, the national secretary of the Catholic Peace Fellowship.

Although everyone at the workshop favored peace, almost everything about it (especially how it should be pursued) proved to be controversial, so much so that the group could not agree even on basic definitions. Elise Boulding, a sociologist, a Quaker, and a life-long pacifist and activist, opened the discussion by defining pacifism very broadly to include four types of persons who call themselves pacifists (she noted that all types are found in every major peace organization): *internationalists*, who in the end support their governments in wars involving their own country; *antiwar persons*, who reserve the right to choose which wars to fight and which not; traditional pacifists, known as *conscientious objectors*, who reject all wars on religious or moral grounds but who cooperate with their governments by undertaking alternative service of a humanitarian nature; and *absolutists*, who reject all war and violence and refuse all cooperation with their governments with respect to national defense.

All but the third of these definitions were characterized as inappropriate by Catholic theologian and long-time peace advocate George Weigel, who accused Boulding of "a bit of semantic imperialism." Charles Chatfield, an historian of American pacifism, thought the discussants might do better to describe pacifists as "peacemakers, people who favor peace over war." He ran into criticism from those who felt this was too narrow. "For me, the definition of pacifism is nonviolent struggle," said Michael Simmons of the American Friends Service Committee. "My actions must be precisely in the political arena, and not afar in the academic community, contemplating the dire state of the world."

Boulding attributed to the American peace movement a host of valid political concerns, ranging from ecology to national liberation struggles and economic development in the Third World. The foremost function of a pacifist, she argued, is to criticize government policies "in light of the highest moral values and of the long-term welfare of the nation." The pressure generated by pacifists provides nothing less than "checks and balances in the [political] system."

Contesting the notion of politically responsible pacifism, Guenter Lewy, the author of *Peace and Revolution: The Moral Crisis of American Pacifism* (1988), a book critical of American peace movements, disagreed. "The pacifist [ought to be] committed to an ethic of ultimate ends which affirms the sanctity of human life," Lewy argued. But when the forces of evil are all around us, when there is no good choice, Lewy continued, then the proper course for pacifists is to remain silent rather than to compromise their principles or publicly resist the will of the majority. David Little, ethicist, theologian, and at the time a distinguished fellow in the Institute's Jennings Randolph Program for International Peace, disagreed with Lewy, asserting that the contradictions could only really be "managed." Little recommended that pacifists attend to the production of thoughtful standards for making decisions about when to compromise their principles or when to take part in civil disobedience.

Lewy stirred more controversy by insisting that pacifists have no right to use civil disobedience against government policies. "In a democracy, you win some and you lose some," Lewy said, "but you accept the verdict of the majority, even if you think it is mistaken." Several participants objected, including Little. In "a situation of extremity . . . civil disobedience is a perfectly understandable and viable moral position," he argued. "You can't just say, 'Well, the law disallows it.'" David McReynolds, a veteran peace activist from War Resisters' International, shrugged off Lewy's defense of majoritarian democratic rules as unrealistic. "We are trying to deal with issues of great passion in times of great turbulence," he argued, "and if we did not produce contradictions, we would be men and women with ice in our veins, instead of blood."

In World War II, by Lewy's account, "many pacifists . . . gradually came to realize that in fighting the Nazis the United States was fighting an evil without precedent." He asserted that there was also "the feeling on the part of most pacifists that it was undemocratic to obstruct the nation's war effort and to prevent their fellow citizens from fulfilling their patriotic duty."

During the Vietnam War, however, the substantial core of the American peace movement not only gave moral support to foreign parties to violent struggle (such as the NLF [Viet Cong] and the North Vietnamese) but also “drastically” violated rules of democracy by forcibly obstructing policies adopted by a freely elected U.S. government, thereby jeopardizing the “well-being and the survival of others.”

Expectedly, Lewy was taken sharply to task by several participants. Boulding said she had opposed World War II, and Lewy asked her whether she had considered the consequences had she been successful in converting everyone to her way of thinking. David Little objected that the peace movement should not be judged “just on the calculus of lives lost” but “on the kind of world [it is] trying to promote.” McReynolds was even more indignant. “The man who can stand and say he has no questions about his role in World War II, pacifist or military, does not understand what that war was and what it did,” he asserted. To him, World War II was not a clear example of a “just war.” As for Vietnam, McReynolds continued, “the aggressor was our own country. I have no apology for the role we [pacifists] played. . . . We are by nature in opposition to our state, because we owe obedience to higher and different bonds.”

The inner conflicts of pacifists figured prominently in the discussion. Boulding, a Quaker, spoke movingly of the torment which she felt during World War II, when she identified with both American soldiers and Japanese victims in Hiroshima, and after the war, when she visited Auschwitz and was struck by the tragedy of the ashes of victims of Nazism as well as of the German people. “The tension of identifying with both sides in a conflict . . . is very much a core part of my life,” Boulding said.

Duality of viewpoint—the feeling of citizenship both in one’s country and the world—is at the heart of pacifists’ readiness to turn against their own governments, according to Boulding. Peace advocates, she said, look at the world “with

an inward and an outward eye. The outward eye sees things as they are, but inwardly, the visionary eye can see a more peaceful, more just, more humane social order." When the policies of their own country fail to live up to the ideal, Boulding said, pacifists sometimes plunge into unbridled protest actions. "They love their country very, very deeply," she maintained, and they can't "bear seeing it act in a way which they regard as betrayal" of the highest moral standards.

For once, most of the participants agreed with the speaker, although there were differences about the origins of the pacifist's split vision. One workshop participant traced the dilemma in part to the United Nations Charter, which created a model for the behavior of all states. According to Betty Goetz Lall of the Peace Studies Consortium at New York University, that supranational constitution clashes with the traditional American concept of "my country, right or wrong," and thereby blurs the definition of citizenship.

Chatfield, who is a professor at Wittenberg University, took an even broader view. To him, peace activists are social reformers struggling with "the enormous, pervasive, universal dilemma of those who are trying to change the culture of which they're part." Chatfield summed up the pacifist's inner tensions: "You're part of a nationalism which you try to universalize."

This publication presents the full discussion that took place during the Institute's "Pacifism and Citizenship" Public Workshop. Although what follows is drawn nearly verbatim from transcripts of the event, it has been divided into chapters for greater readability, and references (in chapter notes) have been added at the suggestion of several workshop participants. At the request of Dr. Elise Boulding, we also have included (in an appendix) a reproduction of a letter that figured significantly in the discussion. The letter is entitled "An Epistle to People of All Conditions, Everywhere." Dr. Boulding and her husband sent it as a plea for peace soon after the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

We hope the reader will agree that this addition to the Institute's Dialogues from Public Workshops series provides a thought-provoking look at the relationship between pacifism and citizenship in both its contemporary and eternal dimensions.

Samuel W. Lewis, President
United States Institute of Peace