

Alternative Service or Alternative Resistance?: A Vietnam War Draft Resister in Canada

Sam Steiner, *Mennonite Archives of Ontario*

A Personal Story

On November 2, 1968 I became (in practical terms) an American refugee in Canada when I obtained landed-immigrant status at the border crossing between Port Huron, Michigan and Sarnia, Ontario. Three days earlier, on October 30, 1968, while I was in Canada as a visitor looking for a job and a place to live, I was indicted by a Grand Jury in the U.S. District Court in Cleveland Ohio for violation of Title 50 A, Section 462 of the United States Code. The indictment said Samuel Jay Steiner “unlawfully, willfully and knowingly did fail and neglect to perform a duty required of him under and in the execution of the Universal Military Training and Service Act, ... in that the defendant did fail and neglect to comply with an order of his local [draft] board to report for and submit to induction into the armed forces of the United States.”¹

This paper examines one slice of the Mennonite experience with the Vietnam War. It is partly autobiography and partly a review of the non-cooperation alternative to “alternative service” that was taken by about 50 Mennonite young men during that war.² The review focuses on the arguments used by this subset of young Mennonites who found the traditional alternative service system an inadequate approach to peacemaking.

The route from a small-town Ohio Mennonite bishop’s kid to a political activist was not direct. My family of origin was deeply rooted in the Mennonite faith; my father was in the last of six consecutive generations of Mennonite bishops or ministers going back to Europe.

The small church of one hundred members that I attended in the 1950s cared much about love and mutual aid within the congregational community. It cared much about the eternal destination of those within its midst and the unsaved souls on Mennonite mission fields. It cared less about justice in the larger American society. It prayed for peace. It didn’t work for justice.

In the fall of 1964 I went off to Goshen College in Indiana. President John Kennedy had been assassinated less than one year before. In 1964 the U.S. war in Vietnam was beginning to heat up, though few Americans had yet been killed. The Cold War was expanding – the Berlin Wall had only recently been erected. The Civil Rights movement, then primarily in the Southern States, was making Americans uncomfortable as African-Americans called for justice in voting rights, education and basic human services. The counter-culture of the “1960s” was really just beginning.

I attended Mennonite-owned Goshen College in 1964 with little sense of how Christian faith might constructively work within the larger secular Society. In high school I had shifted from naïve Sunday-school faith to naive American patriotic, racial bigotry that manifested itself in my support for Barry Goldwater in the 1964 presidential race against Lyndon Johnson.

Like all 18-year old American males, I needed to register for the military draft on my birthday in September 1964. I did so, but not as a conscientious objector to war as Mennonite young men routinely did. As an 18-year old patriot and bigot I clung to the old American dream that was coming under siege. I believed the Civil Rights movement was manipulated by America’s enemies, and that Cuba’s Fidel Castro was a real threat to the American way of life.

Six months after I registered with the Selective Service System for the military draft I underwent a political, if not spiritual, conversion. With a carload of other Goshen College students I planned to be a passive observer at the large civil rights march between Selma and Montgomery, Alabama, led by Martin Luther King. This was in March, 1965. During that ride into Alabama I finally became emotionally involved in the visible racial injustice that has always been around me. For the first time I experienced internally the underside of the American way of life. That’s ironic, since one of my older brothers had been in a Mennonite voluntary service unit in the near south side of Chicago, and I had visited him several times with my family. But the poverty and repression of black folks living in the south side of Chicago was a curiosity – something to see but not to absorb.

In Montgomery, Alabama we were billeted with the demonstrators at a Catholic high school surrounded by a high chain link fence. Every ten feet around the perimeter of that fence a United States soldier, armed with rifle and bayonet, protected us from other Americans as we slept. After the march to the state capital building the next day I was a different person. I heard the hopes and dreams of black men and women, in sharp contrast to the white hatred and black poverty around me.

When I returned to Goshen College from Montgomery, Alabama, I recognized I could not kill another human being on the basis of political (or economic) differences. I also saw the need to combine social justice with my new-found (or rediscovered) pacifism. Belatedly I registered with my draft board as a conscientious objector, but on philosophical, non-religious grounds. I argued that life was inherently sacred, and that I did not have the right – ever – to terminate another human life. I believed I did not have the wisdom to make that kind of decision, nor did I believe Lyndon Johnson had that authority.

By 1966-67 the number of American soldiers going to Vietnam – disproportionately young, non-white and poorly educated – increased. The political conversion I had experienced led to an activist phase in my life. I joined radical student organizations like Students for a Democratic Society and participated in mass demonstrations in Chicago, Washington, D.C. and New York City. The culture of the “1960s” also came to Goshen College where I was a student. On three occasions I was suspended from the College – the last time indefinitely. On that occasion, in the fall of 1967, I with three other students published two issues of a mimeographed underground newspaper called *Mennopause*. Our humor was heavy-handed and vulgar, but was by no means on the extreme end of the free speech movement.

After my suspension from Goshen in the fall of 1967 until my move to Canada in November 1968 I lived on the north side of Chicago, Illinois. I focused my attention on military draft issues. As long as I had been a student, my military obligations had been “deferred.” Now this was no longer the case. A series of legal procedures unfolded that included two appeals to local and state draft boards, both denied, for conscientious objector status which was still based on philosophical, non-religious grounds.

I worked for some months as a supply clerk at a hospital in Evanston, Illinois. Some of my co-workers were Mennonite young men who were putting in their two years of “alternative service.” Throughout the Vietnam War it remained relatively easy for young men from peace churches like the Mennonites and Quakers to avoid military service if they stuck to the routine. For a young Mennonite man this often meant having his pastor help fill out the relevant forms with the appropriate answers, and ending up with a paying position in a hospital, service agency or educational institution. Sincerity of belief (for a Mennonite) was not a crucial factor, and some of my Mennonite co-workers at the hospital thought North Vietnam should be bombed to oblivion to stop the Communists. I also learned the hospital liked to hire Mennonites to do alternative service in order to avoid hiring “niggers from the South Side.”³

Gradually, I became more involved in the draft resistance movement that expanded along with the Vietnam War. Eventually I destroyed my draft card, which all American men were legally required to carry, and I mailed the pieces back to the government informing them I would no longer participate in the military system. Among other things in my letter to the government, I questioned the use of death as a technique for conflict resolution. I questioned the alternative service system, lovingly embraced by Mennonites for decades. I believed "alternative service" simply helped the U.S. military system work more efficiently as Mennonites and other pacifists often performed meaningless service that aided the "national welfare" or replaced the work of others who needed employment.

On April 20, 1968 the U.S. government finally called me to take up arms. I refused induction into the army in my home community in Ohio. This negative response included a small demonstration at the federal building, and refusal to board the bus taking inductees to Cleveland for formal swearing-in ceremonies. This took place sixteen days after Martin Luther King, the most prominent of the pacifist Civil Rights leaders, was assassinated in Tennessee. The aftermath of that assassination had led to violence and burning in many U.S. cities, including Chicago. The leaflet I handed out at my demonstration pointed to King's death as further evidence that death and violence, state-sanctioned or not, was an inadequate response to conflict. Robert Kennedy's assassination took place two months later.

During that summer of 1968 I remained inactive as I awaited the next move by the government in response to my induction refusal. On one occasion the FBI invited me to come downtown for a chat. The rioting one night in August during the Democratic Presidential Convention in Chicago resulted in over 600 injuries when police charged demonstrators from four sides. I escaped that charge at the last moment because of access to a friend's car parked nearby. My experience during the Democratic National convention left me disenchanted with the radical Left in the United States. I recognized that the New Left leaders, like Tom Hayden, also invited violence to help bring their revolution to fruition.

At this point I moved into a period of apolitical depression. In the fall of 1968 student friends from Goshen College, in particular Sue Clemmer, the woman who later became my wife in Canada, persuaded me that Canada was an honorable alternative to prison. And so I came to Canada in November 1968. I missed a scheduled December 4 court date in Cleveland.

About one week before Christmas in 1975, the U.S. government dropped its charges against me after the American Civil Liberties Union filed a legal brief on my behalf. The government did this because

they had violated my rights in at least three ways during the draft process. In the early 1970s I completed my university education and took a number of courses at Conrad Grebel. I was engaged by professors like Walter Klaassen and Frank Epp whose “peace with justice” positions were unashamedly linked to their, and my, Mennonite heritage. For me these connections were important as I slowly found my way back to Christian faith within a Mennonite context.

Arguments for War Resistance

I turn now to a broader discussion of the draft resistance movement during the Vietnam War, especially as it concerned Mennonites. The number of American draft dodgers is always difficult to quantify.⁴ The most conservative estimates of U.S. resisters who immigrated to Canada start at 25,000-30,000 men. Not nearly all of these were in legal difficulties at the time they left the United States. Although 200,000 men were referred for prosecution in the U.S. for draft law violations, less than 10,000 were actually arrested and convicted.⁵ Melissa Miller and Phil Shenk, in their 1982 book on Mennonite draft resisters, estimated that more than 50 Mennonite men “illegally tried not to cooperate with the government’s call to arms.”⁶ In December 1968, of 27 men serving time in the Allenwood Federal Prison in Pennsylvania for draft violations, two were Mennonites.⁷

Commentators on the draft resistance movement have not been particularly interested in non-cooperation by members of peace churches, with the possible exception of Quakers. I want to review some of the arguments that Mennonite resisters and non-cooperators used in the 1960s and 1970s. They were not always explicitly religious arguments, but they suggested the inadequacy of a Mennonite witness that cooperated with a military system in an alternative service program. I identify three primary arguments.

- 1) Peacemaking is a Christian vocation (which Mennonites have consistently held since the Reformation). It requires something other than working within a framework designed by the military.

A. J. Muste in his short 1952 work, *Of Holy Disobedience* specifically critiqued the traditional Mennonite nonresistance. He asked whether, through compulsory alternative service, “the State may determine what one’s Christian vocation is. Some of the Mennonite statements ... seem to me to fall under this head. The position seems to me a very precarious one and I question whether Mennonites, for example,

can maintain it as consistent with their own theology and Christian ethics.”⁸

C. Norman Kraus, a religion professor at Goshen College, stated in 1969 that the traditional Mennonite understanding of nonresistance was no longer adequate. He said, “We need a theology of involvement rather than of noninvolvement.” He suggested nonresistance should be redefined to be the response of the Christian to hostility that results from the Christian’s “aggressive involvement and identification with the cause of the exploited, powerless and oppressed.”⁹ Seminary student Roger Kaufman suggested cooperation with the military draft in performing alternative service “in the national interest” during Vietnam hopelessly involved Mennonites in serving the “national interest” of a country on the wrong side of a civil war in Vietnam.¹⁰

Goshen College Religion Professor, J. Richard Burkholder, in a summary analysis of Mennonite draft resistor arguments, said the most basic and oft-repeated ground for draft resistance was that the Selective Service System was “an integral part of the ‘military,’ and that moral consistency demands a complete break with that system.” Burkholder said this echoed earlier Mennonite arguments against non-combatant service within the military.¹¹

Nonetheless, the traditional Mennonite argument that government-mandated alternative service resulted in “less harm” and “relative good” continued to be accepted by the vast majority of Mennonite young men.¹²

2) Alternative Service programs gave privileged status to historic peace churches, to the detriment of persons from non-peace churches or from non-religious positions.

This was the argument that particularly resonated with me once I had arrived at an absolutist pacifist position.

In January 1949 a young Mennonite man, Austin Regier, was sentenced to prison for refusal to register under the newly-implemented draft law in the United States. One of the reasons he gave for his stance was refusal to accept special privilege not available to others.¹³ However, the question of “privilege” was not a concern for most Mennonites during World War II and the Korean conflict. Generally speaking, Mennonite leaders sought exemption or alternative service for the historic peace churches within a structure through which the church maintained some control over its young men. Conscription ended in Canada after the war, but this was not the case in the U.S. Gradually the Mennonite Church drifted into the 1-W program that allowed for alternative service for full pay in a government-approved employment situation.¹⁴ At least by the 1960s, there was little oversight by the church

of the 1-W program. The issue of whether there was something inherently unjust or inequitable about this alternative service arrangement did not arise until the civil rights movements began in the 1950s, and faced Mennonites more directly with the question of justice.

Harold Bender in 1960 still wrote in support of civilian alternative service, and explicitly rejected the legitimacy of non-registration or non-cooperation with the draft system. He did not address the question of justice, but said that “conscription was merely the command of the state to do work,” and noted Jesus’ command to accept conscription (whoever compels you to go one mile, go two). Bender also insisted that registration for the draft was not a military act, and said that refusal to register was a sin and an error in judgment. He allowed only two conditions for disobeying the state: when the Christian is required to perform an act which is “clearly forbidden in Scripture or is a clear implication from such a prohibition” (e.g. military service), or when the Christian is “forbidden to do what the Scripture or the clear implications of it require.”¹⁵ This narrow understanding of the individual’s relationship to the state was the position of the Mennonite Church through World War II and into the Vietnam era.

In August 1968, after I had refused induction, in a letter to the *Gospel Herald*, the weekly periodical of the Mennonite Church, I asked why white Mennonite boys should accept exemptions that were unavailable to their black brothers and sisters, or to a Catholic young man who only believed “this” war was wrong. I quoted A. J. Muste, the Quaker pacifist noted above, who wrote that many Christian pacifists had misinterpreted nonresistance to an evil government to allow cooperation *with* that government.¹⁶

The issue of unearned privilege for Mennonite young men certainly rankled me, as I thought of those Mennonite lads who wanted to bomb Vietnam to oblivion and of my knowledge that most persons of color in the 1960s had no idea the option of a conscientious objection application was even possible.¹⁷

3) Participation in the military system, whether by registering or accepting alternative service, allows the machinery of war to run smoothly. It is rather our role as peace-makers to hinder the operation of the military machinery as much as possible. Non-cooperation would do this more effectively than alternative service.

This was not a new position under discussion by Mennonites at the time of the Vietnam War. Gordon Kaufman, an ex-CPS graduate student and later Harvard professor, raised serious objections about registration and conscription in 1948. He said registration was for no

other purpose than to raise an army, and that registration provided the list to do so. He also argued that conscription, either to the army or to alternative service, was aimed at the destruction of individual creative personality.¹⁸ Austin Regier, mentioned earlier, also said that registration gave explicit assent to military conscription.¹⁹

J. R. Burkholder also commented on the “stop the war machine” argument, but found the ethical questions it raised to be murky, since the validity of the position required the action to be effective. Would it work? What level of non-cooperation would be required for it to succeed?²⁰

This argument was probably less often used by Mennonite non-cooperators than the first two. One was more likely to hear this rhetoric on the streets outside the Democratic National Convention than from the individual facing severe legal consequences for non-cooperation. The self-awareness of a minority among Mennonites also mitigated against an undue sense of political influence. However, the optimism rooted in the civil rights movement – that North American society could be changed by mass action – influenced Mennonite resisters as much as others on the political left.

Conclusion

When registration was reinstated in the United States by President Jimmy Carter in 1980, even though a military draft was not re-instituted also at that time, the question of Mennonite non-cooperation with the draft was re-ignited, and large numbers of young Mennonite men chose to not register as an expression of non-cooperation with the military system.²¹

However this surge of interest in resistance diminished as the U.S. government lost interest in prosecuting non-registration cases. There did not appear to be active pursuit of cases after 1986. This meant that in 2006 many more American young men were not registering than was the case during the “Resistance.” In June 2003 the Selective Service System took pride in reporting that a “record 89 percent” of 18 year old men registered in 2002, which meant over 10% of U.S. males did not register.²² There were still penalties for non-registrants (limited access to driver’s licences, financial aid at university, etc.) but there have not been criminal implications for 20 years.

I offer three final observations: 1) The Civilian Public Service program in the United States and the Alternative Service program in Canada during World War II differed in significant ways from the U.S. “1-W” program of the 1960s because they demanded greater personal sacrifice from Mennonite young men. Although “voluntary

service” still existed in the 1960s, the 1-W “approved service” was clearly more attractive to most young Mennonite men. 2) The United States, because of Supreme Court rulings, did begin to recognize the conscientious objector claims of pacifists from non-peace churches. However, this meant little in practical terms for disadvantaged young men who were either unaware of the option, or who did not have the educational background to provide a strong argument in support of the position. 3) Canada is a very different place today than it was in 1968. The Canada of Pierre Trudeau is not the Canada of Steven Harper. Under 2006 Canadian immigration law I would not have been welcomed to Canada.

Notes

- ¹ My draft resistance account has appeared in print in three places. The earliest was a chapter in Melissa Miller and Phil M. Shenk, eds., “Something was wrong with America,” *The Path of Most Resistance* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1982), 95-114. See also Sam Steiner, “Confessions of a lapsed radical,” *Mennonite Historical Bulletin* 52 (1991), 6-10. This was reprinted in *Mennonite Reporter* 23 (May 3, 1993), 10-11. An earlier short version was Sue Clemmer Steiner, “We could not go home,” *With* 8 (June, 1975), 6. Papers related to my legal case are in the Samuel J. Steiner Collection, Hist. Mss. 1.138, Mennonite Archives of Ontario (hereafter MAO).
- ² Miller and Shenk, “Something was wrong with America,” 13.
- ³ Sam Steiner, “I could not tolerate the war machine,” *With: a magazine for the middle teens* 2 (March 1969), 25.
- ⁴ John Hagan, who has perhaps done the most careful work on the number of draft resisters who came to Canada between 1965 and 1974, suggests 25,000 men and 26,000 women immigrated to Canada from the United States because of the war, and that over half of these had remained in Canada in 1996. John Hagen. *Northern Passage: American Vietnam War Resisters in Canada* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 241-242.
- ⁵ James Dickerson, *North to Canada: Men and women against the Vietnam War* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999), xii.
- ⁶ Miller and Shenk, “Something was wrong with America,” 13.
- ⁷ “Prison is no picnic,” *With: a magazine for the middle teens* 2 (March 1969), 14. The two Mennonites were Eli J. Miller and Raymond Stauffer.
- ⁸ A. J. Muste, *Of Holy Disobedience* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, 1952), 11. This little work was important to my own thinking; I made allusions or references to it in a number of letters and other writings during those years.
- ⁹ “Intercollegiate Peace Fellowship almost loses sight of its theme,” *Canadian Mennonite* 17 (April 1, 1969), 2.
- ¹⁰ “National interest” was required for the service rendered. Roger Kaufman, “In the National Interest,” *The Mennonite* 83 (May 14, 1968), 344-345.
- ¹¹ J. R. Burkholder, “Christ, Conscience, Church and Conscription: Toward an Ethical Analysis of Mennonite Draft Resistance,” *Conscience and conscription* (Akron, PA: Mennonite Central Committee Peace Section, 1970), 10. This booklet contains papers from a consultation held in November, 1969. Burkholder noted that Guy Hershberger in his classic work, *War, Peace & Nonresistance*, acknowledged the evil within the military conscription system. He also noted that the arguments of

Melvin Gingerich against non-combatant service in 1949 could be extended to draft resistance. See Melvin Gingerich, *What of Noncombatant Service* (Akron, PA: Mennonite Central Committee, 1949), 42ff. A number of Mennonite resisters used variations of the Christian vocation argument against the government's right to determine what kind of service should be given. See David Rensberger, "My Testimony: (Response to 'Resist or not to Resist,'" *Gospel Herald* 64 (Feb. 2, 1971), 96-97.

- 12 See for example S. Roy Kaufman, "Mennonites and draft resistance," *The Mennonite* 83 (May 14, 1968), 344.
- 13 Austin Regier, "The Faith of a Convict," *The Mennonite* 64 (February 15, 1959), 8-10.
- 14 1-W was a draft classification under the Selective Service System. "W" stood for "work" and indicated the individual was performing alternative service in an acceptable work setting.
- 15 Harold S. Bender, "When may Christians disobey the government?" *Gospel Herald* 53 (Jan. 12, 1960), 25-27, 44. Roland Brown in the article mentioned below addresses this issue. He says the injunction to carry the burden an extra mile teaches love for one's enemy, and is not an injunction for greater service in one's own army. Bender wrote his article in response to an earlier article by Edgar Metzler, "Another alternative for draft-age youth," *Gospel Herald* 52 (Nov. 17, 1959), 977-978, 997. Metzler said the church had "joined forces" with the military to administer the conscription system, and suggested alternative service merely "shuttled" conscientious objectors off in a corner by themselves. He went on to suggest that non-registration was a legitimate alternative for Mennonite young men to consider.
- 16 Sam Steiner, "Readers Say," *Gospel Herald* 61 (August 20, 1968), 762.
- 17 Vincent Harding, a Black Mennonite leader, also noted the incongruity of 1-W men supporting the war in Vietnam. See his "Conscientious objection: is it a Christian response to Vietnam?" *Builder* 17 (October, 1967), 12-13.
- 18 Gordon D. Kaufman, "Should Mennonites register for the draft?" *The Mennonite* 63 (June 8, 1948), 4-5. See follow-up discussion by Paul Goering, "Should we make registration the issue?" *The Mennonite* 63 (June 15, 1948), 3 and Roland Brown, "The implications of registering for war and the alternatives," *The Mennonite* 63 (Oct. 12, 1948), 13-14.
- 19 Regier, "The Faith of a Convict," 10.
- 20 Burkholder, "Christ, Conscience, Church and Conscription," 13.
- 21 See *Mennonite Non-Cooperators Newsletter* (1980-1981) and its successor, *Mennonite Conscientious Resisters' Newsletter* for activity on Mennonite college campuses in the U.S. during these years. See also Mark Becker, "Men and Women who Dare to Say No: Mennonite Resistance to Draft Registration, 1980-1985" (Undergraduate paper, Bethel College, North Newton, KS, 1985). Accessed online 17 October 2006. < <http://www.yachana.org/research/writings/draft/>>
- 22 Selective Service System, "States With Driver's License Legislation Report Increased Selective Service Registration Compliance," June 2003 release. Accessed 18 October 2006. <http://www.sss.gov/current_story_archive/2003_june03/2003_feb04.html>