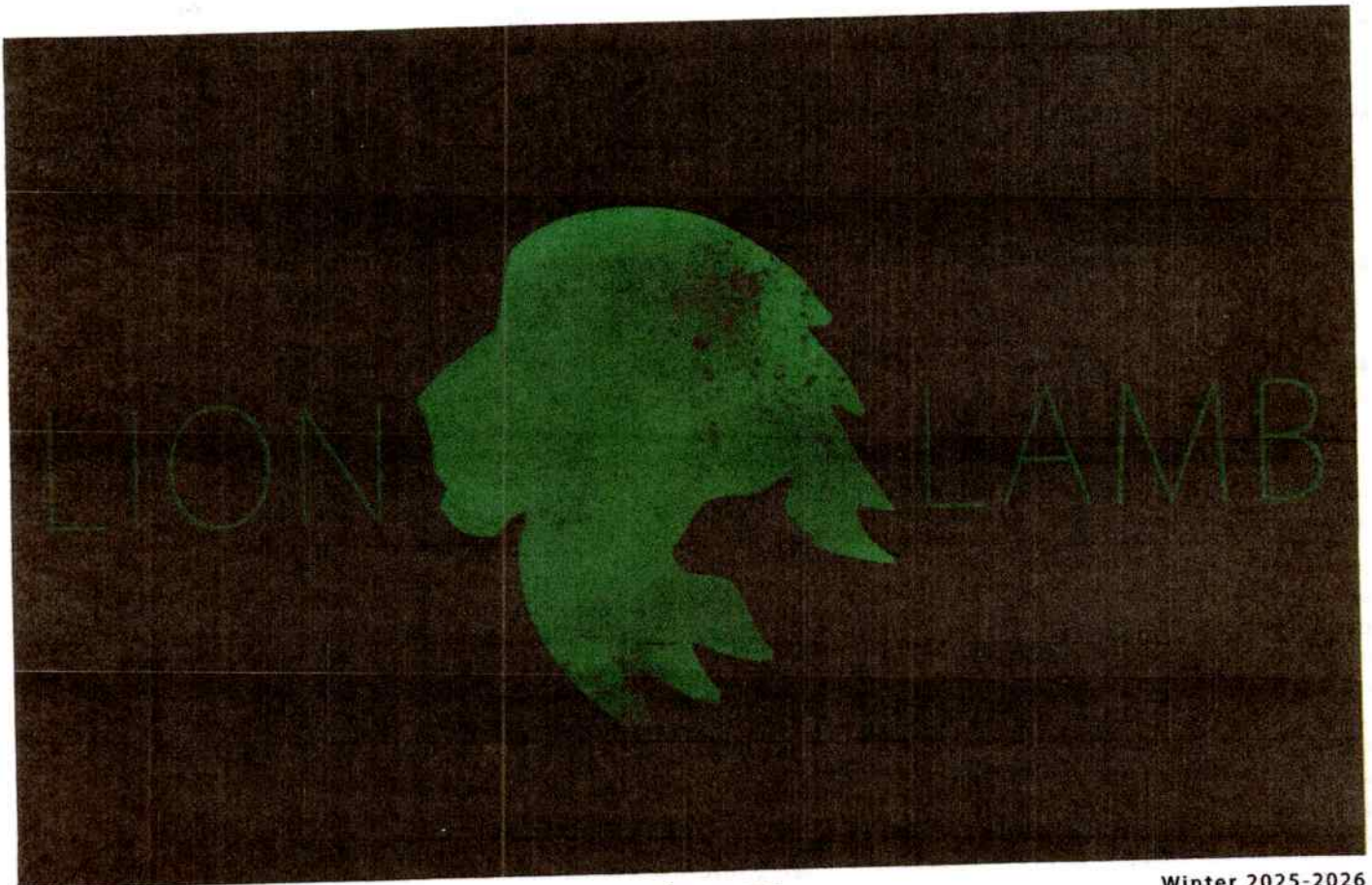


From Pacifism to Peaceful Force

by Larry Johnson

In the '60s I was a Bible College student doing evangelism with "street kids" through Minneapolis Youth for Christ. During that time I stumbled on the historic peace churches, particularly Mennonites and Church of the Brethren. Their theology was similar to my own "inerrancy of the Bible" beliefs, but they refused killing in war because of Jesus' teachings. I think it made me realize something that was very troubling. I took Jesus' Great Commission seriously — to go into all the world to make sure everyone had the opportunity to be saved. I never questioned it openly, but it did seem confusing when the same church leaders who preached the Great Commission turned around and proclaimed the need to kill Communists who might take our God-given freedoms. Now I researched early Christian history heavily and ended up going through the formal conscientious objection process. My CO statement said, "I still believe the Bible to be literally true, but I've come to a different place on killing in war. The early Christians refused to do that because of Jesus' teachings, and I figure they knew better what he meant than people 2,000 years later."

In 1970 I was drafted as an unarmed medic, and Christian friends labeled me "coward" for refusing to kill the godless enemy. When I returned to the U.S. in 1972, I joined the Fellowship of Reconciliation. I continued working with young people in more "secular" environments, but felt disconnected from organized religion. The pages of *Fellowship* magazine were good for me, but over the years I began to find pockets of peace and justice within the evangelical Christianity I grew up in. Jim Wallis' *Sojourners* was first. Then an old evangelical friend, knowing my political involvement, gave me *Jesus for President*, written by Shane Claiborne. My friend hadn't read the book, so didn't know Claiborne's evangelical community was following the early Christians' refusal to kill in war. During the Bush administration, prominent Minnesota minister Greg Boyd lost half his enormous Evangelical congregation for saying God did not want us to invade Iraq. Then, most recently, I found Idaho evangelical Dr. Preston Sprinkle's *Nonviolence: The Revolutionary Way of Jesus*. This book comprehensively studies the Bible through the lens that "Love Your Enemy" means exactly that, even regarding war.



The president of the Bible College I attended was a military chaplain. He told me I was wrong, because military action was the same as police trying to stop the bad guys. When I went to defend my conscientious objection statement to the draft board, I encountered what I now know was a standard trap. The question was, "What would you do if someone tried to rape your wife?" The tone and body language implied that if I said I would do anything, I didn't believe in the nonviolence I was professing. I was paralyzed and don't remember what I mumbled about that, but I had a respected Lutheran minister standing up for me. His position was, "These are difficult times for everyone, and I will support young men wherever their faith leads them." Less tolerant Christians went after me, saying Jesus supported war when he used "violence" to tip over the money changers' tables in the Temple.

I had articulately thought out my reasons for not killing in the name of Jesus, but had done no thinking on what to do when bad things happen. I couldn't find anything in the Bible that spoke to me. But then I found a Hindu story where a holy man demanded a poisonous snake stop killing people. When the snake obeyed, people took advantage and beat him up. So the holy man said, "I told you not to kill people. I didn't say you shouldn't hiss to scare them off if they try to hurt you or others!"

At that point I realized Jesus saw a problem with selling inside the House of God, so he dismantled the system: he didn't move in with weapons and start killing the vendors. Unjust killings by police happen, but historically they are trained to maintain law and order, with weapons as a last resort. I began to think about my high school wrestling experience, where the intent was to defeat the opponent with strength and strategy, not brutality and killing. I learned the original Greek Olympics were revived in 1896 with the intent of international athletic competition replacing war. I began to learn what the negotiation and nonviolence possibilities would be if we pumped war-level spending into efforts like the United Nations, the International Criminal Court, and NGOs like Minnesota's Nonviolent Peaceforce (started by my conscientious objector friend, Mel Duncan). I also began to notice animals like the skunk, the conch snail, the monarch butterfly, and others who defend themselves without killing their predators. What if we studied these beings the way we watched birds in flight for centuries until we too learned to fly? What if we learned to defend ourselves without deliberate killing? What if we lost the knee-jerk "Look what they did! Let's bomb the hell out of them."

Today, my limited military experience is fused with 60 years of working with children. When kids get in a fight on the playground, we don't provide weapons and say, "Work it out." We work with them to help them understand that there are better ways to resolve differences than hurting people. I know international relations are more complex, but why can't similar principles prevail?

What are the existing forces, short of killing, that might change how we solve world problems? I know all religious holy books carry some version of the teaching to love your neighbor as yourself. For those who can't get past the belief that the way to love some neighbors is to kill them, I advocate absolute adherence to the principles most everyone does adamantly claim to believe. (Actually I favor that also for my peace activist friends who say, "But you're not saying End All War Now!" Whenever that comes up, I say, "I do believe we should end all war now, but we need everyone for it to happen, and most folks stop listening if I say that.") We may not

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all believe war is wrong, but a lot of suffering could end if liberal, progressive Christians and so-called "right-wing" believers stood united and honestly behind such commonly-held principles as the oath to protect the Constitution, the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ), Geneva Conventions, Just War Theory, and more.

THE CONSTITUTION AND THE UCMJ

When a citizen begins government service, he or she is required to swear an oath to support and defend the Constitution against all enemies, foreign and domestic. As a younger person, I heavily researched my naïve position on not being able to kill as a Christian, but the oath to protect the Constitution was a mere formality until many years later. The Constitution says that only Congress, not the President, can declare war and then allocate funds to fight it. This was done to make it difficult to enter into such a horrendous endeavor. Our last several wars — including Vietnam, when I was drafted — were not declared, and therefore in violation of the Constitution. Many years after the war in Vietnam, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara said publicly, "I'm sorry. We knew at the time we shouldn't have been there." He and others held prestigious jobs during and after, while their lying killed almost 60,000 American soldiers and countless civilians. I'm advocating for all churches to be as adamant about protecting the Constitution as they are on either side of the abortion issue. Ending unnecessary soldier and civilian war casualties is both pro-life and pro-choice.

Soldiers also swear to obey the orders of the president and other superior officers, according to the provisions of the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ). The UCMJ includes severe provisions against rape, drunkenness, adultery, premarital sex, as well as specific military issues like being absent without leave. It also requires soldiers to refuse to obey unlawful orders, like killing civilians, and to report infractions of the Code. The difficulty is that too often that refusal lands them in deep trouble. The argument, usually code for "cover-up," is always something like, "We'll deal with it. If we bring that out publicly, it will destroy morale." The brave women soldiers who began to step up and report military sexual harassment and assault have taken much abuse for bucking a system that should never have been tolerated. I support the faith community knowing these issues totally, and absolutely supporting those who tell the truth. That support might mean providing work, not just words, when livelihood is threatened by standing up for the truth.

JUST WAR THEORY AND GENEVA CONVENTIONS

Jesus' teachings led his early followers to refuse to kill even in war. In the 4th century CE, Constantine made Christianity a state religion and theologians "Christianized" the ancient "just war" concept to sanction regular military participation. I'm guessing even most church leaders haven't read this doctrine, because it says it's not a just war if you attack another country. Luther believed in just war, but he said (*What Luther Says*, Concordia 1959) "It is not right to start a war when a frantic lord takes it into his head to do so . . . he who starts a war is wrong." The argument about Vietnam, and again about Iraq, was, "We have to stop them over there, before they attack us here." That is simply a new spin to justify an illegal invasion. Another main tenet is it's only a just war if no civilians are harmed. That one is sometimes left out in modern commentary, but it's on the original lists that Saint Augustine's team created. Perhaps it's left out so people won't notice that bombing and other new weapons systems make civilians 90 percent of those killed or injured in modern warfare.

The Geneva Conventions are international treaties signed by many countries, including our own. It was the strongest class I had in the military. The drill sergeant would pound out, "We abide by them. They don't." This international law states that it is a war crime to kill civilians. We still argue whether or not it was a good thing to use nuclear weapons at the end of WWII. Rarely is it stated straight out that bombs, by their very nature, are a violation of international law (and Just War Theory) because they inherently kill civilians. We call it "collateral damage" rather than colossal criminal activity.

The question really becomes, what would I do as a soldier if ordered to kill civilians? Even if I believe it's okay to kill enemy soldiers, could I drop a bomb on a city full of innocent civilians if ordered to do so? Even more, how is it that some countries can get away with not signing on to the International Criminal Court, thereby making it difficult to prosecute some leaders' war crimes? Why not cry out like the Old Testament prophets about the injustice of mainly prosecuting dictators of small African countries?

SUPPORTING THE TROOPS

During the war in Vietnam, the righteous anger of peace activists was too often directed at veterans, not the government leaders who ordered them to war. There are still forces arguing that what we did in Vietnam was good, because to say otherwise would be detrimental to those who sacrificed by being there. Sadly, it has long been devastating. Vietnam veterans are among the highest percentage for homelessness and suicide. Because we violate the Constitution, we easily leverage money to wage war, then haggle the cost of veteran care. We have been trained these days to say, "Thank you for your service" or "Thank you for fighting for our freedom." Long ago I began observing that those who loudly shout "Support our troops!" are too often the first to vote down veterans' benefits, or to vote for those who do.

Thousands of years ago the Greek playwright Aeschylus said, "The first casualty of war is truth." So I prefer, "Thank you for fighting for the truth, which Jesus and other great faith leaders say will truly make us free!" Our faith mandate should be to totally support those who were sent out to do what no one should have to do — plus not to create veterans in the first place merely because church donors are profiting from war.

NOT LETTING THE WICKED PROSPER

Too many veterans have been injured by weapons sold to the other side. The Book of Job, and the Psalms, ring with the lament, "Why do the wicked prosper?" Places of worship would do well to couple that cry with current books like Sally Denton's *The Profiteers* or Andrew Feinstein's *The Shadow World: Inside the Global Arms Trade*. World War I was so horrendous for almost everyone that it was called The War to End All Wars. Then it was revealed that weapons makers had increased their profits immensely, some by as much as 800 percent. That led to concerted effort for change, especially when the government was saying it had no money for bonuses promised to WWI soldiers.

The American Legion started in 1919, and an early national convention was built around establishing peace, ending profiteering, and making sure veterans got promised benefits. The Legion's national liaison was in D.C. in the '30s to support attempted Congressional legislation to make it impossible to profit from war. Sadly, the momentum was killed by lobbyists from companies already secretly selling to the Nazis. This sort of thing continues today, largely cloaked in obfuscations like, "Putting regulations on defense contractors would discourage free enterprise."

Part of my working life involved children's TV activism, arguing the ethics of damaging children's health for bottom-line profits through excessive advertising of sugared foods. Similarly, I believe it should be illegal to even manufacture weapons that automatically violate international law by killing civilians. The questionable ethics of selling weapons to the "enemy" should draw immediate support even from those who teach that God wants us to kill Nazis or godless Communists.

Deep in my heart, I believe we should not make weapons of war at all. But as a strategic thinker, I say defense contractors should be held to the same level of sacrifice asked of soldiers. If there's a perceived need for weapons, make them with zero profit for shareholders and CEO types. If weapons can't be made "patriotically" under such guidelines, maybe they weren't really needed.

I believe that every point I've mentioned here should be examined regularly in all faith communities for the purpose of asking leaders to care for all God's children, no matter what name they use to worship God. The best guide I know for talking comes from Thich Nhat Hanh in one of the first *Fellowship* magazines I read over 50 years ago. As I recall, he said, "In the peace and justice community we are good at writing angry protest letters. We should instead learn to write love letters, filled with ideas leaders might want to consider, not just get angry at, and throw in the trash." 🌱



Larry Johnson writes a monthly Sun Post column in Minnesota, a culmination of working all his life with children as a storyteller/educator. His 2016 book, *Sixty-One*, is 61 stories reflecting his fierce advocacy for veterans and civilians as victims of war, as well as for ending the lies that allow us to continue to wage war unjustly.