

The Recruiter

Curriculum and Teacher's Guide

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The Recruiter- Resource Packet and Study Guide

Synopsis:

The Recruiter is a feature-length documentary that travels to the Louisiana coast to capture a phenomenon now occurring throughout the United States -- the push to recruit new soldiers into the U.S. Army. The documentary revolves around Louisiana's Sergeant First Class Clay Usie, one of the most successful army recruiters working in America. Shot in "cinéma-vérité" style, The Recruiter captures Sgt. Usie's day-to-day life -- almost entirely dedicated to his mission of finding new soldiers in his hometown of Houma, Louisiana. At the same time, the documentary follows the stories of Lauren, Matt, Chris, and Bobby, four teenagers recently recruited into the Army by Sgt. Usie. The new recruits spend their last semesters of high school finishing up their studies and preparing themselves for boot camp. After their graduation, the film travels with them to basic training, where they transition from students to soldiers.

Film Length: 86 Minutes

Note to Teachers:

Questions that the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars raise have the power to divide us along lines of ideology, political party, family background, and personal history. The Recruiter asks viewers to step beyond personal bias and see the war through the eyes of everyday young people, whose desire to enlist is not called into question, but placed in the context of poverty and opportunity, family and personal responsibility, the quest to find oneself and escape the limiting circumstances of being a teenager, and varying definitions of patriotism. The decision these young people make to enlist is a fact, and their stories do not allow us to simply debate the war from where we or our students stand, but to see it through the eyes of people hoping for change in their lives and pursuing this change through military service.

While many of our students are inclined to evaluate other people's choices by measuring these choices against their own beliefs and standards, this curriculum provides teachers with tools to take students beyond their own life stories and into the lives of young people making a difficult and powerful decision.

While this curriculum has been divided into eight distinct lessons, teachers might choose to screen the film in entirety beforehand, and choose selected resources and lesson plans that serve the needs and interests of their students. Alternatively, they might choose to screen the film in segments, each relating to a specific lesson plan, learning outcome, and set of suggested resources.

Teachers should note that The Recruiter contains language that might not be appropriate for more sensitive viewers.

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The Recruiter: Glossary

Absent Without Leave (AWOL): absent from one's place of duty in the armed forces without authority

Basic Training: ten week training course designed to transform civilians into soldiers

Combat: active fighting in a war

Conscientious Objector: one who has a firm, fixed, and sincere objection to participation in war in any form or the bearing of arms, by reason of religious training and/or belief

Don't Ask Don't Tell: a policy established by former president Bill Clinton in 1993, regarding lesbians and gay men in the U.S. military. Under this policy, service personnel could be discharged for disclosing their sexual orientation.

Military Draft: also known as conscription; a system for selecting individuals for compulsory military service; The military draft was discontinued in the United States in 1973, following the Vietnam War. An all-volunteer force has replaced the draft.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): an anxiety disorder that can develop after exposure to a terrifying event or ordeal in which grave physical harm occurred or was threatened. Traumatic events that may trigger PTSD include violent personal assaults, natural or human-caused disasters, accidents, or military combat

Recruitment: the strengthening of an armed force through the enlistment of soldiers

Lesson 8: Patriotism and Conscientious Objection

“I don’t agree with everything. I mean, I’m a person, I’m allowed not to agree with every decision that’s made by, you know, Commander in Chief. It’s my duty to serve wherever they send me.”

-Lauren

Overview

As Lauren prepares to enter basic training, she expresses her belief in duty and service. By the end of her training, however, she has decided not to return to the Army. For Camilo Mejia and Ehren Watada, their service in Iraq transformed their understandings of war and their definitions of duty and patriotism. As Mejia writes, “Coming home...I realized that acting upon my principles became incompatible with my role in the military, and I decided that I could not return to Iraq.”

Learning Outcomes

Students will read accounts of two veterans, one who applied for conscientious objector status following service in Iraq, and another who refused deployment to Iraq based on opposition to this particular war. Students will explore each account and discuss whether their definitions of patriotism are compatible with the definitions presented by Ehren Watada and Camilo Mejia. They will discuss the extent to which refusal to submit to orders in conflict with one’s principles compromises or defines one’s patriotism.

Suggested Grade Level

Grades 8-12

Duration of Activity

60 minutes

Suggested Resources

- Mejia, Camilo. Dissent: Voices of Conscience (2008) Wright, A., Dixon, S.
- Watada, Ehren. Dissent: Voices of Conscience (2008) Wright, A., Dixon, S.
- *Army Times*, “As War Drags On, More Want Out”
- “Quotes on Patriotism”

Suggested Activity

- Suggested Warm-Up Questions:
 - How do you define the term “patriotism”?
 - Do you consider yourself a patriot? Explain.
 - Read “Quotes on Patriotism”. Which of these statements on patriotism most closely resembles your own beliefs? With which do you least agree?
 - A conscientious objector is defined as “a person who refuses to serve in the armed forces or bear arms on moral or religious grounds.” Do you believe it is possible to be a conscientious objector and a patriot at the same time?

- Before beginning Basic Training, Lauren states that it is her “duty to serve wherever they send me.” To what extent do you agree or disagree? Is it the responsibility of soldiers in the United States Army to serve and remain loyal to their chain of command, regardless of their personal beliefs?
- Read Camilo Mejia and Ehren Watada’s statements as a class. As students read, ask them to underline any quote(s) that they believe capture each veteran’s position on the war.

Reflection/Discussion Prompts

While Camilo Mejia describes himself as a conscientious objector, Ehren Watada does not. What is the difference between their beliefs? In your opinion, does this difference matter?

What does it mean to be a “conscientious objector”? Do you believe that soldiers should be exempt from service by applying for conscientious objector status? Is this a legitimate reason not to participate in war?

What is your definition of patriotism? How is it similar to or different from that of Camilo Mejia, Ehren Watada, or any of the veterans profiled in the article, “As War Drags On, More Want Out”?

Ehren Watada, Camilo Mejia, and the soldiers profiled in the article each refused to submit to orders and challenged the decisions of the United States government. In your opinion, does this compromise or define their patriotism? Can one take a stand against his or her government and still be a patriot?

January 03, 2006

As war drags on, more want out

By Martha Mendoza

Associated Press

Kevin Benderman spends his days sitting in a plastic chair in the stockade at Fort Lewis, Wash., completing a 15-month sentence for “missing movement” with his unit. Jeremy Hinzman is raising his baby boy in Toronto, awaiting a court date when he hopes the Canadian government will grant him political asylum. Aidan Delgado is back in school, studying religion at the New College of Florida and practicing Buddhism. All three are among a small but growing number of soldiers who have become disillusioned with the war in Iraq and are trying to get out of their required service.

Increasing numbers of men and women in uniform are seeking honorable discharges as conscientious objectors. Others are suing the military, claiming their obligation has been wrongfully extended. Many have simply deserted, refusing to appear for duty.

Some are more desperate: Last December, Army Spc. Marquise J. Roberts of Hinesville, Ga., persuaded a cousin to shoot him in the leg. The cousin was sent to jail, Roberts to the stockade.

“You sign a contract and you’re required to serve for whatever time period you’ve agreed to,” said a Pentagon spokeswoman, Lt. Col. Ellen Krenke. “There are certain standards the enlistment contracts oblige soldiers to, and they are required to fulfill them.”

But Pentagon policies do have exceptions, and soldiers are increasingly challenging their mandatory service.

Requests for conscientious objector status, which can qualify someone for an honorable discharge, have steadily increased since 2000. About 110 soldiers filed the complex paperwork in 2004, about four times the number in 2000. Of those, about half were approved. Those who were rejected either went back to the war or refused to serve. Some are now on the lam. Others have been court-martialed and done time.

Former Staff Sgt. Camilo Mejia, 30, of Miami Beach, Fla., says he had change of heart while on a two-week leave last year after spending a year in Iraq.

“Going home gave me the opportunity to put my thoughts in order and to listen to what my conscience had to say. People would ask me about my war experiences and answering them took me back to all the horrors, the firefights, the ambushes, the time I saw a young Iraqi dragged by his

shoulders through a pool of his own blood or an innocent man was decapitated by our machine gun fire,” he said.

When it was time to ship out, Mejia went into hiding. For the next five months he didn’t use his cell phone or his computer. He stayed away from his family and friends.

Eventually, with the help of anti-war advocates, he found a lawyer and turned himself in. But his request to be a conscientious objector, which he filed after he went on the lam, was denied. Mejia spent nine months in military prison and was dishonorably discharged in February.

Mejia was among the first from Iraq to request to be a conscientious objector, and he now speaks at antiwar rallies and conferences, counseling other would-be resisters.

“As this war continues, we’re going to see more refusals, disobeying of orders, stop-loss lawsuits,” said Marti Hiken, who co-chairs the National Lawyers Guild Military Law Task Force. “There’s going to be more and more resistance.”

Conscientious objection, as defined by the military, is a “firm, fixed and sincere objection to war in any form or the bearing of arms because of deeply-held moral, ethical, or religious beliefs.”

A soldier cannot be a conscientious objector just because of opposition to a particular war.

To apply as a conscientious objector is a labyrinthine process that includes a written application and interviews with a psychiatrist, a military chaplain, and an investigating officer.

“Being a conscientious objector is not an easy way to get out of the military and not a fast way to get out of the military,” said JE McNeil, executive director of The Center on Conscience & War, a 65-year-old Washington D.C.-based nonprofit organization that supports the rights of conscientious objectors.

The organization runs the GI Rights Hotline, and McNeil said it received more than 36,000 calls this year from soldiers interested in how to get out of their required service. That’s up from fewer than 1,000 a year before the war in Iraq, she said.

McNeil said her counselors usually get calls from soldiers who are already considered AWOL (absent without leave) or even deserters. She said they often counsel soldiers away from trying to be conscientious objectors, pointing them instead toward other types of discharge requests: hardship, parenthood, health problems, drug or alcohol use.

These are usually more appropriate reasons, she said. Military studies show the main reason deserters cite for leaving the service are “dissatisfaction with Army life, family problems and homesickness.”

Simple desertion has been decreasing in the military in recent years. About 2,500 troops last year simply didn’t show up for work, down from almost 5,000 in 2001, according to the Pentagon public affairs office. Some of these men and women are in hiding in Canada, where about 20 have applied for refugee status.

Army paratrooper Jeremy Hinzman, who fled from Fort Bragg, N.C., in January 2004, weeks before his 82nd Airborne Division was due to go to Iraq, is awaiting a February hearing in Toronto.

“Perhaps I made a mistake by enlisting in the Army, but the U.S. is putting the lives of its soldiers in jeopardy in order to the line the pockets of big money,” he said.

Hinzman said he vowed to his wife that he wouldn’t go to Iraq, and then had to decide whether he would face a court martial or flee. He said he didn’t want to miss out on his son’s formative years, so he chose Canada.

Hinzman’s attorney said as many as 200 American war resisters are hiding in Canada, waiting to see how Hinzman’s case plays out before coming forward.

Hinzman said he and his wife plan to use every legal channel they can to stay where they are. “We simply want to be granted some sort of status here and then sink into a life of obscurity where we can be decent, hard-working, tax-paying citizens,” he said.

About a dozen reservists have filed “stop loss” lawsuits, arguing that it is illegal to make them stay in the military once their required term of service is complete. The Bush Administration has argued with success so far that under federal law the Pentagon can involuntarily extend the deployment of any reserve officer who’s on active duty, if the president believes it’s essential to national security.

Several of these objectors, like Army Spc. David W. Qualls, signed up for a so-called “Try One” program with Army National Guard which the Army says “allows a veteran to serve for only one year on a trial basis before committing to a full enlistment.”

Just a few months into his service last year, the Army told Qualls he was recalled to active duty and his “expiration of term of service” had been extended for an undetermined number of years.

“What this boils down to in my opinion is a question of fairness,” said Qualls.

He filed a lawsuit, and even though he later accepted a \$15,000 bonus and re-enlisted for six years, the suit has not been dropped, said his attorney, Staughton Lynd of Niles, Ohio.

“He felt that his family was on the verge of bankruptcy and he had no economic alternative but to re-enlist,” Lynd said.

Many resisters complain that they were misled by recruiters. Others say their beliefs have changed.

“When I enlisted I believed that killing was immoral, but also that war was an inevitable part of life and therefore, an exception to the rule,” said Texas Army National Guard Spc. Katherine Jashinski, 22, who in November asked a federal judge to order her release from service.

After joining the military, Jashinski said she “started to reevaluate everything that I had been taught about war as a child. I developed the belief that taking human life was wrong and war was no exception. I was then able to clarify who I am and what it is that I stand for.”

Jashinski, a cook, learned in October that her 2004 conscientious objector discharge application was denied. Now awaiting a hearing, she says she will not deploy with her unit.

Although there have always been soldiers who refuse to fight on moral grounds, the U.S. government made conscientious objector status official in 1962. Four years later, during the Vietnam War, requests began to pour in. Desertion rates also hit historical highs, and thousands of soldiers who refused to deploy were court-martialed. In 1971, requests peaked when 4,381 members of the military applied to be conscientious objectors.

Twenty years later, during the Gulf War, conscientious objector applications rose to 441 in 1991. At that time, about 500,000 soldiers were deployed in the Persian Gulf.

Aidan Delgado decided he was a conscientious objector last year, after spending a year in Iraq where he was stationed at Abu Ghraib prison. His application was approved and he was honorably discharged last January.

“When I met Iraqi prisoners firsthand, I saw the people who were supposed to be our enemies but I didn’t hate them. They were young, poor guys without an education, like us. They were supposed to fight us and we were supposed to fight them. It didn’t make sense,” said Delgado, who speaks Arabic and lived for a while as a child in Egypt. “I told my commander that I wouldn’t kill anyone. I turned in my rifle.”

The Recruiter: Quotes on Patriotism

I love America more than any other country in this world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually.

James Baldwin

Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.

John F. Kennedy

Each man must for himself alone decide what is right and what is wrong, which course is patriotic and which isn't. You cannot shirk this and be a man. To decide against your conviction is to be an unqualified and excusable traitor, both to yourself and to your country, let men label you as they may.

Mark Twain

It is in vain, sir, to extenuate the matter. Gentlemen may cry, Peace, Peace--but there is no peace. The war is actually begun! The next gale that sweeps from the north will bring to our ears the clash of resounding arms! Our brethren are already in the field! Why stand we here idle? What is it that gentlemen wish? What would they have? Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!

Patrick Henry

I will fight for my country, but I will not lie for her.

Zora Neale Hurston

No matter that patriotism is too often the refuge of scoundrels. Dissent, rebellion, and all-around hell-raising remain the true duty of patriots.

Barbara Ehrenreich

This nation will remain the land of the free only so long as it is the home of the brave.

Elmer Davis

And I'm proud to be an American,
where at least I know I'm free.
And I won't forget the men who died,
who gave that right to me.

Lee Greenwood

When fascism comes to America, it will be wrapped in the flag and carrying the cross.

Sinclair Lewis

☞ **Camilo Mejía**

In 1994, at the age of 18, Camilo Mejía, a Nicaraguan citizen, moved to Florida with his mother. The following year, he enlisted in the U.S. Army for three years and rose to the rank of Staff Sergeant. After completing his active duty service, he joined the Florida National Guard to qualify for tuition assistance so he could attend the University of Florida. In April 2003, as Mejía was entering his final semester of college, his National Guard unit was ordered to active duty in Iraq. By this time, he had spent more than seven years in the military, including three years of active duty.

Camilo Mejía was deeply affected by what he saw in Iraq—fire-fights, ambushes, excessive use of force, soldiers who were poorly trained and equipped, commanders who put glory over good strategy. He watched Iraqi citizens turn from welcoming the American forces to becoming hostile in response to the roadblocks, raids on their homes, and the senseless killing of civilians. He also witnessed the abuse of Iraqi prisoners. Months before the Abu Ghraib prison photos were made public, Mejía notified his superiors about conditions at a makeshift detention camp near Baghdad’s airport, “where Iraqis were arbitrarily arrested and detained and where he and his men were directed by three unidentified interrogators to ‘soften up’ prisoners for questioning.” Mejía says he was taught to stage mock executions, clicking a pistol trigger near the ears of hooded prisoners, and to bang on metal walls with sledgehammers to keep prisoners awake for up to forty-eight hours.³⁴

After six months in Iraq, Camilo Mejía returned home on leave. He applied for conscientious objector (CO) status and refused to return to his unit in Iraq, citing moral reasons, the legality of the war, and the conduct of U.S. troops toward Iraqi civilians and prisoners.” He became the first combatant in the Iraq War to publicly refuse to return.

After five months of being AWOL from his unit, on March 15, 2004, Staff Sergeant Mejía spoke at a rally and held a press conference at the Peace Abbey, near Boston, and then turned himself in to military police. On May 21, 2004, he was court-martialed for desertion. During his trial at Fort Stewart, Georgia, his commanding officers and men in his squad described Mejía as “exemplary and popular.”³⁵ The military court found him guilty and sentenced him to the maximum one-year imprisonment, reduction in rank to E-1, forfeiture of two-thirds of his pay for one year, and a Bad Conduct discharge. Amnesty International declared him a prisoner of conscience. On February 15, 2005, after serving nine months of his sentence, Camilo Mejía was released from prison. He continues to speak publicly against the war.

Mejía has written about his experiences in *Road from Ar Ramadi: The Private Rebellion of Staff Sergeant Mejía*.

☞
Camilo Mejía's Statement

Written while in prison at Fort Sill, Oklahoma

I was deployed to Iraq in April 2003 and returned home for a two-week leave in October. Going home gave me the opportunity to put my thoughts in order and to listen to what my conscience had to say. People would ask me about my war experiences, and answering them took me back to all the horrors—the firefights, the ambushes, the time I saw a young Iraqi dragged by his shoulders through a pool of his own blood, or an innocent man decapitated by our machine gun fire. The time I saw a soldier broken down inside because he killed a child, or an old man on his knees, crying, with his arms raised to the sky, perhaps asking God why we had taken the life of his son.

I thought of the suffering of a people whose country was in ruins and who were further humiliated by the raids, patrols, and curfews of an occupying army.

And I realized that none of the reasons we were told about why we were in Iraq turned out to be true. There were no weapons of mass destruction. There was no link between Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda. We weren't helping the Iraqi people, and the Iraqi people didn't want the U.S. there. We weren't preventing terrorism or making Americans safer. I couldn't find a single good reason for having been there, for having shot at people and been shot at.

Coming home gave me the clarity to see the line between military duty and moral obligation. I realized that I was part of a war that I believed was immoral and criminal, a war of aggression, a war of imperial domination. I realized that acting upon my principles became incompatible with my role in the military, and I decided that I could not return to Iraq.

By putting my weapon down, I chose to reassert myself as a human being. I have not deserted the military or been disloyal to the men and

women of the military. I have not been disloyal to a country. I have only been loyal to my principles.

When I turned myself in, with all my fears and doubts, I did it not only for myself. I did it for the people of Iraq, even for those who fired upon me—they were simply on the other side of a battleground where war itself was the only enemy. I did it for the Iraqi children, who are victims of mines and depleted uranium. I did it for the thousands of unknown civilians killed in war. My time in prison is a small price to pay compared to the price Iraqis and Americans have paid with their lives. Mine is a small price compared to the price humanity has paid for war.

Many have called me a coward; others have called me a hero. I believe I can be found somewhere in the middle. To those who have called me a hero, I say that I don't believe in heroes, but I believe that ordinary people can do extraordinary things.

To those who have called me a coward, I say that they are wrong. They are wrong when they think that I left the war for fear of being killed. I admit that fear was there, but also the fear of killing innocent people, the fear of putting myself in a position where to survive means to kill. There was the fear of losing my soul in the process of saving my body, the fear of being lost to my daughter, to the people who love me, to the man I used to be, the man I wanted to be. I was afraid of waking up one morning to realize my humanity had abandoned me.

I say without any pride that I did my job as a soldier. I commanded an infantry squad in combat and we never failed to accomplish our mission. But those who called me a coward are also right without knowing it. I was a coward not for leaving the war, but for having been a part of it in the first place. Refusing and resisting this war was my moral duty, a moral duty that called me to take a principled action. I failed to fulfill my moral duty as a human being, and, instead, I chose to fulfill my duty as a soldier. All because I was afraid. I was terrified, I did not want to stand up to the government and the Army, I was afraid of punishment and humiliation. I went to war because at that moment I was a coward. I apologize to my soldiers for not being the type of leader I should have been.

I also apologize to the Iraqi people. To them, I say I am sorry for the curfews, for the raids, for the killings. May they find it in their hearts to forgive me.

One reason I did not refuse the war from the beginning was that I was afraid of losing my freedom. Today, as I sit behind bars, I realize that there are many types of freedom, and that in spite of my confinement I remain free in many important ways. What good is freedom if we are afraid to follow our conscience? What good is freedom if we are not able to live with our own actions? I am confined to a prison but I feel, today more than ever, connected to all humanity. Behind these bars I sit a free man because I listened to a higher power, the voice of my conscience.

While I was confined in total segregation, I came across a poem written by a man who refused and resisted the government of Nazi Germany. For doing so he was executed. His name is Albrecht Hanshofer, and he wrote this poem as he awaited execution.

Guilt

The burden of my guilt before the law
weighs light upon my shoulders; to plot
and to conspire was my duty to the people;
I would have been a criminal had I not.
I am guilty, though not the way you think,
I should have done my duty sooner, I was wrong,
I should have called evil more clearly by its name
I hesitated to condemn it for far too long.
I now accuse myself within my heart:
I have betrayed my conscience far too long
I have deceived myself and fellow man.
I knew the course of evil from the start
My warning was not loud nor clear enough!
Today I know what I was guilty of . . .

To those who are still quiet, to those who continue to betray their conscience, to those who do not call evil more clearly by its name, to those of us who are still not doing enough to refuse and resist, I say, "Come forward." I say, "Free your minds." Let us, collectively, free our minds, soften our hearts, comfort the wounded, put down our weapons, and reassert ourselves as human beings by putting an end to war.³⁶

☞ Ehren Watada

First Lieutenant Ehren Watada joined the U.S. Army in 2003 and served one tour in Korea. In January 2006, Watada told his commanders at Fort Lewis, Washington, that he believed the war in Iraq was illegal, and therefore his orders to deploy there were unlawful and he did not have to obey them. However, he did not consider himself a conscientious objector, since he was willing to fight in wars that were justified, legal, and waged in defense of the nation. Watada's commanders told him that he could submit his resignation but that they would recommend disapproval. His resignation was rejected in May 2006. On June 7, 2006, Lieutenant Watada became the first commissioned officer to refuse deployment to Iraq.

He was charged with missing a deployment movement and multiple counts of "conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman" for his public opposition to the war on Iraq. Political charges of "contempt toward the President" were dropped. "The last known prosecution of this charge was in 1965, resulting from Lt. Henry Howe's opposition to U.S. foreign policy during the Vietnam War."⁵⁹

Lt. Watada's February 2007 court-martial ended in a mistrial when the trial judge nullified the Stipulation of Facts that had been agreed to by the defense and prosecution a week before the trial began. The Army refiled charges, and a second court-martial was scheduled for October 2007. Ehren Watada faces up to six years' imprisonment for his act of conscience in refusing to be deployed to Iraq.

☞ *Lieutenant Ehren Watada's Statement*

Veterans for Peace Convention, Seattle, Washington, August 12, 2006

You are all true American patriots. Although long since out of uniform, you continue to fight for the very same principles you once swore to uphold and defend. No one knows the devastation and suffering of war more than veterans—which is why we should always be the first to prevent it.

Yes, I'm just a lieutenant. And yet, I feel as though we are all citizens of this great country and what I have to say is not a matter of authority—but from one citizen to another. We have all seen this war tear apart our country over the past three years. It seems as though nothing we've done, from vigils to protests to letters to Congress, have had any effect in persuading the powers that be. Tonight I will speak

to you on my ideas for a change of strategy. My action is not the first and it certainly will not be the last. Yet, on behalf of those who follow, I require your help—your sacrifice—and that of countless other Americans. I may fail. We may fail. But nothing we have tried has worked so far. It is time for change and the change starts with all of us.

I stand before you today, not as an expert—not as one who pretends to have all the answers. I am simply an American and a servant of the American people. My humble opinions today are just that. I realize that you may not agree with everything I have to say. However, I did not choose to be a leader for popularity. I did it to serve and make better the soldiers of this country. And I swore to carry out this charge honorably under the rule of law.

Today, I speak with you about a radical idea. It is one born from the very concept of the American soldier (or service member). It became instrumental in ending the Vietnam War—but it has been long since forgotten. The idea is this: that to stop an illegal and unjust war, the soldiers can choose to stop fighting it.

Now it is not an easy task for the soldier. For he or she must be aware that they are being used for ill-gain. They must hold themselves responsible for individual action. They must remember duty to the Constitution and the people supersedes the ideologies of their leadership. The soldier must be willing to face ostracism by their peers, worry over the survival of their families, and of course the loss of personal freedom. They must know that resisting an authoritarian government at home is equally important to fighting a foreign aggressor on the battlefield. Finally, those wearing the uniform must know beyond any shadow of a doubt that by refusing immoral and illegal orders, they will be supported by the people not with mere words but by action.

The American soldier must rise above the socialization that tells them authority should always be obeyed without question. Rank should be respected but never blindly followed. Awareness of the history of atrocities and destruction committed in the name of America—either through direct military intervention or by proxy war—is crucial. They must realize that this is a war not out of self-defense but by choice, for profit and imperialistic domination. WMD, ties to al Qaeda, and ties to 9/11 never existed and never will. The soldier must know that our

narrowly and questionably elected officials intentionally manipulated the evidence presented to Congress, the public, and the world to make the case for war. They must know that neither Congress nor this administration has the authority to violate the prohibition against preemptive war—an American law that still stands today. This same administration uses us for rampant violations of time-tested laws banning torture and degradation of prisoners of war. Though the American soldier wants to do right, the illegitimacy of the occupation itself, the policies of this administration, and rules of engagement of desperate field commanders will ultimately force them to be party to war crimes. They must know some of these facts, if not all, in order to act.

Mark Twain once remarked, “Each man must for himself alone decide what is right and what is wrong, which course is patriotic and which isn’t. You cannot shirk this and be a man. To decide against your conviction is to be an unqualified and inexcusable traitor, both to yourself and to your country.” By this, each and every American soldier, marine, airman, and sailor is responsible for their choices and their actions. The freedom to choose is only one that we can deny ourselves.

The oath we take swears allegiance not to one man but to a document of principles and laws designed to protect the people. Enlisting in the military does not relinquish one’s right to seek the truth—neither does it excuse one from rational thought nor the ability to distinguish between right and wrong. “I was only following orders” is never an excuse.

The Nuremberg Trials showed America and the world that citizenry as well as soldiers have the unrelinquishable obligation to refuse complicity in war crimes perpetrated by their government. Widespread torture and inhumane treatment of detainees is a war crime. A war of aggression born through an unofficial policy of prevention is a crime against the peace. An occupation violating the very essence of international humanitarian law and sovereignty is a crime against humanity. These crimes are funded by our tax dollars. Should citizens choose to remain silent through self-imposed ignorance or choice, it makes them as culpable as the soldier in these crimes.

The Constitution is no mere document—neither is it old, outdated,

or irrelevant. It is the embodiment of all that Americans hold dear: truth, justice, and equality for all. It is the formula for a government of the people and by the people. It is a government that is transparent and accountable to whom they serve. It dictates a system of checks and balances and separation of powers to prevent the evil that is tyranny.

As strong as the Constitution is, it is not foolproof. It does not fully take into account the frailty of human nature. Profit, greed, and hunger for power can corrupt individuals as much as they can corrupt institutions. The founders of the Constitution could not have imagined how money would infect our political system. Neither could they believe a standing army would be used for profit and manifest destiny. Like any common dictatorship, soldiers would be ordered to commit acts of such heinous nature as to be deemed most ungentlemanly and unbecoming that of a free country.

The American soldier is not a mercenary. He or she does not simply fight wars for payment. Indeed, the state of the American soldier is worse than that of a mercenary. For a soldier-for-hire can walk away if they are disgusted by their employer's actions. Instead, especially when it comes to war, American soldiers become indentured servants whether they volunteer out of patriotism or are drafted through economic desperation. Does it matter what the soldier believes is morally right? If this is a war of necessity, why force men and women to fight? When it comes to a war of ideology, the lines between right and wrong are blurred.

Soldier or officer, when we swear our oath it is first and foremost to the Constitution and its protectorate, the people. If soldiers realized this war is contrary to what the Constitution extols—if they stood up and threw their weapons down—no President could ever initiate a war of choice again. When we say, "... against all enemies foreign and domestic," what if elected leaders became the enemy? Whose orders do we follow? The answer is the conscience that lies in each soldier, each American, and each human being. Our duty to the Constitution is an obligation, not a choice.

The military, and especially the Army, is an institution of fraternity and close-knit camaraderie. Peer pressure exists to ensure cohesiveness,

but it stamps out individualism and individual thought. The idea of brotherhood is difficult to pull away from if the alternative is loneliness and isolation. If we want soldiers to choose the right but difficult path—they must know beyond any shadow of a doubt that they will be supported by Americans. To support the troops who resist, you must make your voices heard. If they see thousands supporting me, they will know. I have heard your support, but many others have not. Increasingly, more soldiers are questioning what they are being asked to do. Yet, the majority lacks awareness of the truth that is buried beneath the headlines. Many more see no alternative but to obey. We must show open-minded soldiers a choice, and we must give them courage to act. Many soldiers don't refuse this war en masse because, like all of us, they value their families over their own lives and perhaps their conscience. Who would willingly spend years in prison for principle and morality while denying their family sustenance?

I tell this to you because you must know that to stop this war, for the soldiers to stop fighting it, they must have the unconditional support of the people. I have seen this support with my own eyes. Convince them that no matter how long they sit in prison, no matter how long this country takes to right itself, their families will have a roof over their heads, food in their stomachs, opportunities, and education. This is a daunting task. It requires the sacrifice of all of us. Why must Canadians feed and house our fellow Americans who have chosen to do the right thing? We should be the ones taking care of our own. Are we that powerless? Are we that unwilling to risk something for those who can truly end this war? How do you support the troops but not the war? By supporting those who can truly stop it. Let them know that resistance to participate in an illegal war is not futile and not without a future.

I have broken no law but the code of silence and unquestioning loyalty. If I am guilty of any crime, it is that I learned too much and cared too deeply for the meaningless loss of my fellow soldiers and my fellow human beings. If I am to be punished it should be for following the rule of law over the immoral orders of one man. If I am to be punished it should be for not acting sooner. Martin Luther King, Jr., once said, "History will have to record that the greatest tragedy of this period

... was not the strident clamor of the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people.”

Now, I'm not a hero. I am a leader of men who said enough is enough. Those who called for war prior to the invasion compared diplomacy with Saddam to the compromises made with Hitler. I say, we compromise now by allowing a government that uses war as the first option instead of the last to act with impunity. Many have said this about the World Trade Towers, “Never again.” I agree. Never again will we allow those who threaten our way of life to reign free—be they terrorists or elected officials. The time to fight back is now—the time to stand up and be counted is today.

I'll end with one more Martin Luther King, Jr., quote: “One who breaks an unjust law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law.”⁶¹

☞ **Agustín Aguayo**

Agustín Aguayo was 35 years old when he joined the Army in 2003. Within a year, his beliefs had changed so much he felt “he could no longer, in good conscience, be a part of the armed forces,” and he applied for conscientious objector status. While his application was being processed, he was sent to Iraq to serve as a medic. In Iraq, he refused to load his gun, even while he was on guard duty. The Army denied his conscientious objector application, but because it had been mishandled, Aguayo challenged the ruling, filing a *habeas corpus* appeal in federal court. His appeal was denied, and, one week later, on September 1, 2006, his unit redeployed to Iraq. Aguayo “made it clear to his chain of command that, as a conscientious objector, he would not participate in war in any form,” and this time he refused to deploy.

After nearly three years of attempting to be recognized as a conscientious objector, Aguayo went AWOL, missing his unit's deployment. The next day, he turned himself in to the Military Police on his base in Germany. He was told by Army personnel that he would be going