

CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION AND GUIDANCE RESPONSIBILITIES

Today the rights of conscientious objectors in the United States are recognized by all branches of the military, supported by all major religious denominations and protected by law. High school students have the right to know their options with regard to military service. Educators and counselors have a responsibility to provide information on conscientious objection as an integral part of citizenship training and career guidance.

—From “Responsibilities of the High School for Providing Information on Conscientious Objection to War,” by Dean A. Allen, Chief Psychologist, Mental Health Service, Univ. of Mass.

WHAT IS CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION?

Generally, conscientious objection is a deeply held moral, ethical, or religious conviction that prevents someone from participating in war or military training. Federal law recognizes as Conscientious Objectors (Cos) persons who are conscientiously opposed to participating in war in any form, as well as those who are opposed to participating in war, but who do not object to performing noncombatant duties. One can be a CO regardless of one’s religion—an agnostic or atheist can make a CO claim based on deeply held, personal beliefs.

WHY SHOULD GUIDANCE AND CAREER COUNSELORS BE PREPARED TO PROVIDE INFORMATION ON CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION TO STUDENTS?

While high schools frequently permit presentations by military spokespersons, they have tended to ignore the issues of war, peace and conscientious objection, perhaps on the grounds that they are too controversial or complex for adolescents to confront. As a result, high school students arrive at age 18 ill-prepared to understand the significance of military enlistment and registration for the draft. It is essential that these young people who bear the burden of our country’s military policies be fully conscious of the issues. Counselors must provide them with all the appropriate information and ample opportunity for open discussion as they grapple with these important questions.

Because the military is often presented in terms of career training, many men and women who sign up do not examine their beliefs about war and military training until they are already in uniform. CO discharges are usually not secured without considerable effort and anguish. An example is the case of Warren Davis, a Washington state resident who enlisted in the Navy Reserves in 1987. His reason for joining was to receive financial help for his wife and young child as well as the job training. In January of 1990, his beliefs against participating in war grew and he attempted, unsuccessfully, to learn how he could get a discharge. Because of an unsatisfactory year of drill participation, he was placed on active duty status for seventeen months and sent to Port Hueneme, California. In April he further sought release from the military, but was never told the process to follow to obtain conscientious objector status. In August, it was announced that U.S. troops would be sent to the Persian Gulf. When his unit was sent to the Gulf in November, he had still received no help in applying for CO status and, because of his beliefs, refused to deploy. He spent two months in a Navy brig and received an other-than-honorable discharge that could hurt his chances for future civilian employment.

To avoid similar problems, students need to have information that helps them examine their beliefs about war and killing *before* they enter the military, not after.

USING THE STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE:

The questions on the following page may be used to help young people explore their feelings about war, peace and military training. This cover page can be given to students along with the questionnaire to help them understand what conscientious objection means. The questionnaire can be reviewed by a counselor and student together, or it can be given to a student to answer privately as a method of self-evaluation.

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WHERE DO YOU DRAW THE LINE?

Questions for Young People Who Are Thinking of Joining the Military or Who Could Be Drafted

What is worth fighting for? What methods would you be willing to use? Who would you be willing to fight against? Every person has his or her own definition of what is moral. An Army colonel speaking to a group about the human rights of soldiers said: *“Everyone has a line he will not cross, something he will not do because his conscience tells him it is wrong.”* It is important to know what lines you are not willing to cross and to ask yourself the following questions before making a choice about entering the military. You should also learn as much as you can about the duties of a soldier so you will know if any of your answers below would be in conflict with the military.

Note: More than one answer can be given. You decide which answers are right or wrong.

1. When would you be willing to get involved in a conflict?

- Anytime my government ordered me to do so.
- If our country were being invaded.
- If another country's freedoms were being threatened by others.
- To defend my beliefs or values. Some of these beliefs are:

- To get oil or other natural resources from another country.
- If personally attacked.
- Other (explain): _____

2. Which methods could you personally use in good conscience?

- Nuclear weapons.
- Germ, chemical or biological weapons.
- Conventional weapons (guns, tanks, non-nuclear bombs).
- My own physical strength (maybe with Judo, Karate, etc.).
- Nonviolent action (strikes, boycotts, refusing to cooperate, public education, persuasion).
- Spiritual methods (meditation, prayer, group worship).
- Other (explain): _____

3. One of the facts about war and other kinds of conflict is that the people who threaten or harm others are not the only ones punished. Who are you willing to fight as the enemy?

- Anyone that my government says is the enemy.
- Leaders of the other side and those who give the orders.
- People in the military.
- People at military facilities (like weapons factories, storage sites, bases, supply lines).
- Civilians
- No one.
- Other (explain): _____

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