The denomination of Christians calling themselves Seventh-day Adventists, taking the Bible as their rule and faith and practice, are unanimous in their views that its teachings are contrary to the spirit and practice of war; hence, they have ever been conscientiously opposed to bearing arms.”

(Executive Committee, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, August 2, 1864).

J. N. Andrews, hurrying from Michigan to Washington, D.C., carried this statement as he sought to secure noncombatant status for Adventists during the Civil War. Andrews’ assignment was prompted by an alteration of the March 1863 draft law that stipulated alternatives for those conscientiously opposed to bearing arms. The option of satisfying one’s military obligation by paying a fee or participating in certain humanitarian service projects was now restricted by this law to individuals belonging to religious groups with a formal noncombatant doctrine. This change created a challenge for Adventists, formally organized only the year before, because they were too new a church to possess an established peace church reputation.

Although the draft law forced the group to articulate their stance on Christian participation in war, which might not have occurred at this time had they not been faced with a crisis, the statements prepared for Andrews represented a general consensus that biblical teachings “are contrary to the spirit and practice of war.”

The church’s official position was formulated after an intense dialog on faith and violence that was hosted in the Review and Herald. Adventists were “nonresistants,” the term applied to those who did not believe in bearing arms or using military force to resolve conflict, a stance which grew out of their commitment to conform their lives to God’s commandments and Jesus’ example. Since Jesus eschewed violence and promoted an ethic of love, it appeared to Adventists that His followers were bound to do the same.

As early as 1851, a decade before the church had organized, the Review and Herald revealed the group’s pacifist sentiments by publishing a statement by William Miller that read, “They must not countenance nor support war, for that cometh from lust, James iv, 1-3; ... they are to cry unto the Lord in their afflictions and persecutions, and make no resistance, James v,
Firm in their resolve to prepare for Christ’s return and to “keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus” (Revelation 14:10), Adventists faced the question of how a faithful remnant should relate to the social and political structures of a nation that called itself Christian but behaved in a beastly manner.

The Remnant and the Nation

Despite the fact that Christ did not come on October 22, 1844, a remnant of the Millerite movement remained convinced that the world would end very soon. America’s startling technological progress and widespread inhumanity toward the weak and vulnerable seemed to them a fulfillment of the end-time prophecy of Matthew 24. The period in which Seventh-day Adventism assumed its peculiar identity and emerged as an organized church (1845-1863) was characterized by national claims of Christian piety and acts of imperialism, genocide, and oppression. Even as tensions over slavery split the nation and its churches, anti-immigrant violence increased, and the indigenous populations were variously deprived of their homelands and/or killed. The theory of “manifest destiny” baptized national expansionist endeavors and permitted disregard for the rights of those with whom whites shared the continent.

Firm in their resolve to prepare for Christ’s return and to “keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus” (Revelation 14:10, KJV), Adventists faced the question of how a faithful remnant should relate to the social and political structures of a nation that called itself Chris-
tian but behaved in a beastly manner. A number of them had belonged to various reform movements that were critical of America's political policies. The study of the prophetic portions of Scripture had convinced many Adventists that God's judgment rested on nations as well as individuals, and that preparation for Christ's return included a separation from cultural practices that deviated from God's intentions and commands. The admonition, “Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues” (Revelation 18:4, NIV) was regarded seriously by a people preparing to live in God's kingdom.

In his autobiography, Seventh-day Adventism's co-founder Joseph Bates recounted the incremental separation that his faith journey demanded: “I then began to feel the importance of taking a decided stand on the side of the oppressor. My labor in the cause of temperance had caused a pretty thorough sifting of my friends, and I felt that I had no more that I wished to part with; but duty was clear that I could not be a consistent Christian if I stood on the side of the oppressor, for God was not there. Neither could I claim his promises if I stood on neutral ground. Hence my only alternative was to plead for the slave, and thus I decided.”

Bates' solidarity with the oppressed resulted in his critique of American policies and the Christians who endorsed them. He called America's aggressive acts during the popular 1846-1848 Mexican-American War “murder” and chided Christians for their enthusiasm for this violent enterprise. His opinion of governmental policies is made clear in his reference to the United States as “this heaven-daring, soul-destroying, neighbor-murdering country.”

Review and Herald articles expounded the view that the emergence of the United States was predicted in Scripture, and depicted the nation as a lion-like creature. By 1851, the Adventist press regularly identified the United States as the beast from Revelation 13 that began as a lamb and changed into a dragon. As James White commented in the opening lines of an 1862 editorial, “For the past ten years the Review has taught that the United States were a subject of prophecy, and that slavery is pointed out in the prophetic word as the darkest and most condemning sin upon this nation.”

Uriah Smith, the Adventist authority on prophetic interpretation, cited slavery, religious intolerance, corruption, and oppression as the clear marks of the nation's dragon-like nature.

Far from being impressed with American claims of Christianity, Adventists pointed to national social policies as primary evidence of the country's willful rejection of God's commandments and Jesus' teachings. They questioned whether they could participate in the political system without assuming responsibility for the beastly national acts committed in the name “of the people” by elected officials and military.

Believers Debate About Response to War

James White's August 1862 editorial, “The Nation,” sparked a highly charged debate, as readers wrestled with their Christian obligation to be peacemakers. The Review provided a place for the scattered Adventists to dialog on one of the most controversial topics in Christian America: What should a follower of Christ do when faced with structured, organized violence? An intense and lengthy forum debated the faithful response to the moral and social dimensions of war. The letters revealed a range of interpretations: Some individuals asserted that they were ready to fight, while others were certain that Adventists should submit to death by the military rather than to compromise their pacifist principles.

James White adopted a less ideological stance: Although he clearly believed that following the Prince of Peace meant that Christians should not resort to violence (even nationally sanctioned violence), he was not ready to advise church members to choose execution over military service. Seeking a third path, he encouraged Adventists to avail themselves of all the legal means to stand by their noncombatant principles. He supported campaigns to raise money to buy Adventist exemption from service in the early stages of the draft, as well as the effort to obtain church-wide deferment after draft laws closed that option.

Despite the passion for the various stances evinced in the letters, the group reached a consensus to follow the Jesus of peace, even in time of war.

“Just War” and Adventist Principles

Ellen White, along with many other Christians, regarded the outbreak of war as a judgment on a nation that had knowingly profited from human bond-
In early 1863, Ellen White spoke against Adventists engaging in the war, despite their strong empathy for the enslaved. “God’s people” could not participate in the military endeavor, she wrote, “for it is opposed to every principle of their faith. In the army they cannot obey the truth and at the same time obey the requirements of their officers.”

The situation became even more complicated in late 1862 when President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. Adventists had to decide whether they would embrace “just war” theory or maintain their non-resistance position despite the high stakes involved. If the North’s war effort succeeded, slavery would be abolished; a righteous cause with a divinely desired outcome! Alternatively, if the “Southern insurrection” was successful, there would be little hope for emancipation in Confederate-controlled areas. Although some Adventists were ready to fight, there was a general consensus that even righteous causes failed to justify taking up arms to kill one’s neighbors.

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The National Draft and Peace Church Status

Obtaining peace church status during wartime was a daunting task, but the group proceeded anyway. They produced a document summarizing their position, and authorized J. N. Andrews to petition the government for this status. Andrews took statements from local and regional leaders who were acquainted with “the sentiments of Seventh-day Adventists in relation to bearing arms and engaging in war,” hoping that their testimony would be credible to the Provost Marshall General, who had the power to grant the petition.

The Review and Herald recorded Andrews’ progress. The September 13, 1864, edition printed a letter to “Bro. White,” in which J. N. Andrews reported his successful negotiations with the government. Under the triumphant headline, “Seventh-day Adventists Recognized as Non-combatants,” Andrews outlined the steps that individual draftees must take to secure this status, along with his letter to Provost Marshall General James Fry introducing Adventists as a “people unanimously loyal and anti-slavery, who because of their views of the ten commandments and the teachings of the New Testament cannot engage in bloodshed,” and his recommendation that Adventists be given peace church status. Seventh-day Adventists thus gained entrance to the tiny sisterhood of peace churches, those recognized as “conscientiously opposed to the bearing of arms, and are prohibited from doing so by the rules and articles of faith, and of practice, of their church.”

The Sinfulness of War

After the war ended, Adventists determined to gather more evidence to document their nonresistance stance in case of future crises. In 1865, as well as passing a resolution at the General Conference Third Annual Meeting in which they stated that “we are compelled to decline all participation in acts of war and bloodshed as being inconsistent with the duties enjoined upon us by our divine Master toward our enemies and toward all mankind,” they compiled their existing peace materials and published a booklet, “Compilation—or—EXTRACTS, from the PUBLICATIONS OF SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISTS, Setting Forth their Views of the SINFULNESS OF WAR, Referred to in the ANNEXED AFFIDAVITS.”The booklet featured various Review articles that revealed their conviction that Christians were called to reject violence and live lives of peace.

Quoting, among others, Adventist notables Joseph Bates, James White, M. E. Cornell and J. H. Waggoner, the booklet documented Adventist rejection of
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http://education.gc.adventist.org/jae

som of the church, there is being fostered a spirit of militarism that few appreciate. . . .”25 America’s victory over Spain did not change the Adventist perspective that Christians must adhere to Christ’s methods.

A Century of War

In the 20th century, militarism challenged the newly international Adventism. Although not all Adventists were pacifists, members’ refusal to bear arms evoked hostility on both sides of the Atlantic during World War I. Noncombatants found themselves in prison, or

Rebuking a Nation United

Before the close of the 19th century, America initiated what the U.S. Ambassador to England called a “splendid little war” in Cuba and the Philippines.23 While most Americans enthusiastically supported endeavors to “liberate” these Spanish colonies, Adventist leaders critiqued both governmental imperialism and Christian ministers who praised the war as a means of spreading Protestant Christianity. By then, Bates and White had died, but Adventist stalwart Percy Magan opposed the war with a book, The Peril of the Republic of the United States of America. Challenging clerical war enthusiasm, Magan queried pointedly, ‘Will the people whose fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons have been shot down in this ruthless war, be more ready to accept the gospel at the hands of the murderers of their relatives? Will it cause them to be kindly inclined towards the teachings of the Saviour?”24

In May of 1898, the Review critiqued “The Gospel of War,” in an article prepared by evangelist Merritt Cornell. Rejecting the national military fervor, Cornell asserted, “There is nothing in the teachings of Christ that sanctions war. War and Christianity are antipodes—just as far apart as the east is from the west.” Acknowledging that Christians frequently ignore Christ’s peace teachings, he noted, “Yet from the days of the Saviour down to the present time, many of the most destructive and cruel wars have been waged solely in the name of religion.

“The gospel of Christ is a gospel of peace; yet right within the bo-

Desmond Doss, a Seventh-day Adventist medic who served in World War II, is the only conscientious objector to have received the U.S. Congressional Medal of Honor.
treated harshly by their officers, other soldiers, and local citizenry. To facilitate Adventist draftees’ assignment to medical duties, church institutions offered training for battlefield medical situations.\textsuperscript{26}

Evangelistic success during wartime filled the pews with new members who were unaware of the church’s peace witness. Francis Wilcox, Review editor, penned a volume, dedicated to Christian veterans, that reviewed and reaffirmed Adventist commitment to nonviolence in principle and practice. Referring to the church founders’ strongly worded documents condemning violence, he sketched the history of Adventist resolve to follow the Prince of Peace, reminding his readers that “God is supreme, and His requirements are paramount to all others.”\textsuperscript{27}

As another world war threatened to explode, the Adventist Medical Cadet Corps expanded to every American Adventist academy and college to prepare eligible youth for battlefield medical service. Despite this pro-active preparation, drafted Adventists encountered frequent hostility, and “conscientious co-operators” such as Desmond Doss found themselves facing continual harassment for their stance.\textsuperscript{28}

The church continued to assess and refine its stance after World War II. The 1951 report on actions of the General Conference (GC) Autumn Council, stated that the church “devotes its energies and resources exclusively to spiritual and humanitarian work,” and that war conditions only increased the commitment to such work. Further, the report recommended that the statement of the relationship of Seventh-day Adventists to war appear in the church manual “immediately following the statement of Fundamental Beliefs.”\textsuperscript{29}

In 1954, the GC Autumn Council reconfirmed its noncombatancy position and stressed the necessity of “strong spiritual preparation for the stern tests of military service in order that they may meet these tests successfully and by their faithfulness give encouragement to one another and the church they represent.”\textsuperscript{30}

**Freedom of Conscience**

The 1960s are often characterized as a time of social restlessness and alienation from institutional traditions and structures, but were also a period when church members’ opinions on participation showed less unanimity. In the U.S., the unpopular Vietnam War stimulated a closer examination of the church’s “conscientious co-operator” position. Those who objected to the war charged the church with complicity in an immoral endeavor, while others thought that the church should provide more pastoral support for Adventists in the military. Many rejected what they saw as the church trying to usurp personal moral decision-making responsibility.

In 1969, the North American Division moved to formally recognize respect for individual conscience concerning military participation, while retaining church commitment to noncombatancy. Although one might conscientiously refuse to serve in the military even as a noncombatant, or conceivably choose to carry weapons, the individual should “first consider the historic teaching of the church on noncombatancy.”\textsuperscript{31} Reflecting the North American step, in 1972 the General Conference clarified and amended its 1954 statement, asserting that the church stance on noncombatancy was not binding doctrine. This meant that each individual had the responsibility for decision making about military service. Choices were not to be made in a vacuum, however, and the statement reminded church members that their choices needed to be informed by their primary commitment to God, their Christian obligation to “contribute to saving life,” and respect for the voice of conscience.

“The breaking out of war among men, however, in no way alters the Christian’s supreme allegiance and responsibility to God or modifies his obligation to practice his beliefs and put God first.”

“This partnership with God through Jesus Christ who came into this world not to destroy men’s lives, but to save them, causes Seventh-day Adventists to advocate a noncombatant position, following their Divine Master in not taking human life, but rendering all possible service to save it.”\textsuperscript{32}

While American Adventists had the option to register as objectors and refuse to bear arms, governments in the Soviet Union, China, Korea, and several Eastern European bloc nations made little accommodation for religious beliefs relating to noncombatancy. Where possible, the church worked to negotiate with governments to arrange for an alternative to bearing arms. Where that was not
possible, some Adventists endured long prison terms and extreme abuse rather than to violate “the commandments of God.”

**Keeping Faith in the 21st Century**

Today, members of the rapidly growing Seventh-day Adventist Church reside in hundreds of countries, under all manner of political regimes, only some of which respect the religiously based refusal to bear arms. As the current world situation is one of “wars and rumors of wars,” Adventists remain resolved to live faithfully as Christ’s followers in the midst of violence and bloodshed. Church members must continue to examine their own consciences and to reassess the church’s position on participation in military endeavors.

Although divided by geography, culture, and political experience, the church must find ways to stay united around core Adventist understandings of Christian life and witness. Despite variations in worship styles and expressions of faith, Adventists must maintain their commitment to “keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus.” While respecting individual conscience on matters of carrying arms, the Seventh-day Adventist Church must invite all people to follow the Prince of Peace in every aspect of their lives, including the imperative to embody God’s inclusive healing and redemptive love.

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4. Compilation or Extracts From the Publications of Seventh-day Adventists, Setting Forth Their Views of the Sinfulness of War, Referred to in the Annexed Af-fidavits (Battle Creek: Seventh-day Adventist Publ. Assn., 1865) pp. 4, 5.
5. James White, Review and Herald (August 14, 1856).
7. E. Everts, “Christianity Requireth a Renunciation of the World, and All Worldly Tempers,” Review and Herald 9 (July 1, 1856), pp. 102, 103.
17. White, Testimonies, vol. 1, pp. 357-361; quote is on page 361.
22. Compilation or Extracts From the Publications of Seventh-day Adventists, op. cit., p. 17.
28. For a short and readable view of this significant period that sketches the evolving accommodations made to military requirements, the most helpful source is probably Douglas Morgan’s excellent article, “Between Pacifism and Patriotism,” Journal of Adventist Education 65:5 (Summer 2003), pp. 16-27. Everett N. Dick provides the insight from personal involvement in his article, “The Adventist Medical Corps as Seen by Its Founder,” Adventist Heritage 1:2 (July 1974), pp. 33-45.