
Second Thoughts on Adventists in the Military

by James Coffin

Throughout World War II and the Korean War, Seventh-day Adventists drafted into the military consistently upheld the church's official recommendation¹ of "conscientious cooperation," that is, noncombatant military participation, preferably in a medical capacity. However, during the Vietnam War, many Americans changed their attitude toward the moral legitimacy of war. Seventh-day Adventists in unprecedented numbers either dodged the draft or claimed total conscientious objection. A significant number of Adventists even carried guns and actively engaged in combat.²

Church leaders were not insensitive to the struggle going on in the minds of many young Adventists at that time. In recent years, with the probable reinstatement of the draft in the United States, the National Service Organization has drawn on the morally clarifying experience of Vietnam to equip Adventist youth more adequately for making moral decisions. Specifically, they have developed an 18-hour program called "The Conscience Project" in which youth are taught how to examine critically the options for military participation and how

to weigh the pros and cons of each option. However, while The Conscience Project makes a commendable effort to ensure that young people do not merely quote the party line, conscientious cooperation with the military remains the church's official recommendation.

While I believe the church has shown great wisdom in not making one's relationship to the military a test of fellowship, two major considerations lead me to suggest that the church should not make any recommendation at all. First, from a practical standpoint, recommendations seldom remain recommendations. Past experience has shown that as soon as the church takes any form of official position on an issue, whether it be a mere recommendation or a test of fellowship, the natural response on the part of members is to lean on the understanding of the church. Members are tempted to cease using their God-given faculties of discrimination, regardless of efforts to prevent such a response. Moreover, as soon as any stamp of orthodoxy is placed on a given position, those who conscientiously differ from that position are censured or ostracized in some way.³

Second, and more significantly, I do not think noncombatant military participation has emerged as the morally preferable choice. The essential problem with the conscientious cooperation position is its

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inability to appreciate the true nature of war, the military, and the degree of complicity that necessarily rests upon each component of the military, however far removed that component may be from the shedding of blood.

Adventists have consistently and categorically opposed both killing and bearing

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arms.⁴ At times we have made unqualified denunciations of war.⁵ However, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has never officially denounced the existence of the military, which necessarily bears arms, and which exists to kill or threaten to kill as a means of bargaining to achieve a desired end.⁶ In fact, in personal discussions with a wide variety of administrators, educators, pastors, and laymen, I have yet to find a conscientious cooperator who does not believe that it would be national suicide not to maintain at least a minimal level of military preparedness.⁷ And herein lies the ethical dilemma of conscientious cooperation: it presupposes the moral legitimacy of the military's existence while condemning as unethical the military's *raison d'être*—the taking of human life.

This position fails to confront the essential ethical question: if an army *should* exist, and if at least some of its soldiers must necessarily man weapons of destruction, then which soldiers should be called upon to fill that role? If we think it is presumptuous to expect God to intervene supernaturally on our behalf in times of national peril, then the only option is some form of human protection. Therefore, some Adventists have acknowledged that there might be some just wars in which they would feel

obligated to participate as combatants; a position of selective non-pacifists. The conscientious cooperator, on the other hand, accepts the premise that the military should exist, but inconsistently refuses to man the weapons that alone make the military a viable proposition. Such a stance is uncomfortably close to that of the Pharisee who was afraid of breaking God's law, but on cold Sabbaths, wanted a little fire and a warm meal. So he cast an eye about for someone who was willing to do what he could not. The Pharisee thought he could ask others to break the law, while he kept his morality intact.

The noncombatant can cooperate with the military because he rationalizes that if he assumes the role of a medic he is not guilty of complicity in the military's purpose of taking or threatening human life. This rationale for noncombatant military participation has been summarized briefly by Booton Herndon in his book, *The Unlikeliest Hero*:

In the period between the wars, interest increased in the question of how the young Adventist could serve his country, as he is especially adjured to do in Romans 13:1, and yet obey the sixth commandment. An elaborate program developed in which the church and armed services cooperated to enable Adventists to serve where they were best suited, in the medical department. . . . The accent was on service to the nation within the framework of religious belief . . . by young men eager to serve their country, but without taking human life. . . .⁸

Worthy though such a position may appear on the surface, it in fact makes its adherents accomplices to ethically suspect activities. An illustration may serve to prove my point. If I were a doctor and were called to treat a gunshot victim who, unknown to me, was a bank robber recently wounded in a holdup, I would in no way consider myself an accomplice to his crime if the man were to live as a result of my treatment and subsequently escape—assuming, of course, that I had complied with the law to the best of my knowledge and ability. On the other hand, the situation would be entirely different if I, as a doctor, agreed to accompany a group of bank robbers who,

recognizing the ever-present danger of flying bullets during bank robberies, requested that I be available just in case.

As with all analogies, this one has its deficiencies. However, there is a significant difference between helping to save life wherever and whenever such a need might arise and deliberately placing oneself in a certain place at a certain time for the express purpose of assisting those committed to killing other human beings. Although both cases involve lifesaving, in one case it is an end in itself; in the other lifesaving is a means to the end of killing.

If the military is to be an effective aggressive or deterrent force, it needs to be made up of a vast array of highly specialized components, each functioning and interrelating with optimum efficiency. The strategist, the gunner, the mechanic, the communications man, the cook, the intelligence officer, and a host of paramilitary personnel all play vital roles in the smooth running of the machine. The crucial contribution of the medic is highlighted by the fact that the military establishment has always seen medics as holding a position of considerable importance within this interdependent fighting force. Army instructors and instruction manuals point out that men will fight with more enthusiasm and take more risks if they know that a competent medic is backing them up.

Indeed, many of my friends who served in the army during the Vietnam era were told during training that, theoretically, the enemy would first try to hit the company commander, then the communications man, and then the medic, knowing that without a leader, without contact with reinforcements, and without a medic to attend to casualties, their foe was all but defeated.

Obviously, therefore, the army in no way considers the medic a humanitarian "extra" that it could do without. The medic has a vital, indispensable role to play, and if conscientious cooperators do not come forward to take up the task, others will be appointed to do it. From this it is clear that

the conscientious cooperator is making no humanitarian contribution that otherwise would not be realized, and that the army is little concerned with altruistic motivations. The army wants every role filled and the military machine functioning efficiently. If medics wish to think of themselves as lifesavers, that is quite acceptable to the army, but the army's main concern is that medics help maintain a fighting force. Given these considerations, I question whether one could participate as a medic without a high degree of complicity in an activity that is ostensibly condemned by the church: taking human life.

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A medic is told that on the battlefield he should first attend to those most capable of returning to combat and then turn his attention to those more seriously injured. Although the army does not deny the lifesaving role of the medic, the language employed in training stresses far more his role in the maintenance of an effective fighting force, both by bandaging wounds and by boosting morale. If the medic actually were to save the greatest number of lives, he would attend to those who were more seriously wounded but for whom there appeared to be hope, while letting those who were in no immediate danger of death wait until he found time to give them attention. However, to do so would be a violation of military code, which, as we have shown, is not concerned with saving the greatest possible number of lives.

A further consideration is that if the medic were really in the army for the purpose of saving lives, he would have to give absolutely equal consideration to the enemy. (Are not all lives of equal value?) He would be willing to pass by his own com-

rades and give preferential treatment to the enemy if the lives of his compatriots were not in immediate danger while those of his enemy were. Yet what army would tolerate such a breach of military ethics? Regardless of the occasional stories in which army medics assist the enemy, no army would tolerate their medics consistently treating enemy soldiers the same as they do their own comrades. What red-blooded American medic would not first assist all of his own wounded and then, and only then, turn his attention to seriously wounded enemy soldiers? Yet, are not such priorities a tacit admission that lifesaving is not the primary concern of the army medic?

In contrast, however, if Adventists and other noncombatants were to join the International Red Cross or a similar organization as an alternative to military service, they would be offering their services wherever and for whomever they were required, making no distinction among nationalities.

Booton Herndon illustrates these problems in his portrayal of the experience of Desmond Doss.

"Our heavenly Father," Desmond prayed, . . . "Please give each and every one of us the wisdom and understanding concerning how to take all the safety precautions necessary in order that, if it be Thy will, oh Lord, we may all come back alive . . ." Then confident, almost carefree, . . . the members of the suicide squad, with their medic at their heels, climbed the cliff and without hesitation moved on across the top of the hill toward the enemy pillbox . . . Under cover of two automatic riflemen . . . one of the men ran forward and threw a satchel charge of explosives into the pillbox . . . the fortification flew up like matchsticks. A soldier rushed to it with a flamethrower and directed its full force into the gaping hole. No resistance came from it. . . . They blew up several pillboxes in the immediate area . . . In all this furious action the squad from Company B had had just one injury. Sergeant O'Connell's hand had been hit by a piece of flying rock! This was incredible—to everyone except Desmond. Had he not prayed?"

I do not wish to undermine in any way the valor and heroism of Desmond Doss and the thousands of other noncombatants who have served their country and their consciences with similar dedication, irrespective of whether or not they have received public acclaim. However, in this story, which here

has been reduced from several pages to a few lines, we see portrayed in a most graphic manner the tension between the alleged lifesaving work of the medic and his actual role. Aside from the obvious morale-boosting contribution described here, the fighting force is faced with the rather commonplace and equally unavoidable them-or-us scenario. In a situation where soldiers are going out with the express purpose of destroying the enemy, can the conscientious cooperator medic offer the same prayer on behalf of the enemy that he is offering for his comrades? Can he equally pray that God will grant to the enemy sufficient wisdom that they may take such precautions as are necessary to keep *them* from being killed? To pray such a prayer for them would be an inherent contradiction. It would negate the purpose of the whole exercise.

Unfortunately, the more we examine the role of the conscientious cooperator, the more apparent it becomes that his primary

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concern, of necessity, cannot be the unconditional saving of lives, but must be saving the lives of his countrymen and maintaining the fighting force. And if one accepts *a priori* the proposition that even in war killing is morally wrong, then an inescapable tension exists that cannot be easily explained away.

The fact that such tensions exist does not invalidate the option of conscientious cooperation. It merely demonstrates that it is more intrinsically inconsistent than we have traditionally acknowledged. But we should note as well that inconsistencies are present in both pacifism and active military participation. We are dealing with an extremely complex ethical issue for which there are no

facile solutions or black and white answers—only shades of gray.

I would suggest, therefore, that as a church we would serve our moral and ethical interests better if we made no recommendations whatsoever in the area of military involvement. Clearcut lines are too difficult to draw. Rather, I suggest that we publish a comprehensive work wherein articulate spokesmen for all viewpoints set out the line of thought that has led them to adopt their respective positions. Contributors should not only defend their own views, but provide detailed critiques of the other stances. An ample bibliography of historical, philosophical, and biblical materials should be included, along with

a summary of Ellen White's comments in their full context. Young people as well as teachers, ministers, counselors, and youth leaders would then have at their disposal sufficient information to assess the options intelligently. Together with prayer and the guiding of the Holy Spirit they could then make a decision regarding this difficult ethical issue.

Inevitably, some still would decline to use their own rational faculties, preferring to lean on the understanding of pastors, teachers, or parents. But overall, such an approach could only be advantageous and could play a useful role in helping Adventist youth to become thinkers and not mere reflectors of other men's thoughts.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Conscientious objection (noncombatancy) has never been a test of church fellowship. However, it is highly unlikely that a person recently returned from active military service would be granted a major church office were it known that he had borne arms and taken human life in battle. The likelihood would be reduced still further if the individual in question were to admit publicly such behavior and to maintain its moral legitimacy.

2. There is no available documentation as to how many young Adventists changed their draft status. From personal experience as a college student during that period, I know that a substantial number of my associates, myself included, embraced pacifism. I know that of my acquaintances who served in Vietnam, a significant percentage have indicated to me personally that they carried guns while there, some of them knowing for sure that they have taken enemy lives. Paradoxically, I have seen them sit through Sabbath school classes and other discussions where the topic of noncombatancy has arisen and they have remained either noncommittal or silent. When questioned privately, several have said that Vietnam was the worst chapter of their lives, and the sooner they forget it the better. If they admit to carrying a gun, and perhaps even killing, they face the possibility of subtle and not so subtle forms of ostracism.

3. Personal experience and discussions with other Adventists who chose to embrace pacifism and go through the necessary procedures to change their

draft status suggest that the average church member and pastor fail to appreciate that the church's position is only a *recommendation*. It was not uncommon for pastors not to have been as helpful in effecting the change as would have been hoped. Both within and without the church, pacifism often is perceived to be cowardly and unpatriotic.

4. R. W. Schwarz, *Light Bearers to the Remnant*, (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Pub. Assc., 1979), p. 425.

5. F. M. Wilcox, *Seventh-day Adventists In Time of War*, (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assc., 1936), p. 58.

6. It can be argued that the army exists for more than just to kill. Numerous projects of a civilian nature are undertaken when the nation is not at war. However, such employment is not *the* purpose for the army's existence. It is nothing more than a means of temporarily utilizing the time and talent of military personnel until such time as they are needed for their real purpose—war.

7. The information cited here again is personal observation and thus subjective. There might be those within the ranks of conscientious cooperators who oppose the existence of the military—but to do so would be a glaring inconsistency.

8. Booton Herndon, *The Unlikeliest Hero*, (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Pub. Assc., 1967), p. 17.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 102–104.