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From Soldier to Pacifist: How Do Convictions Change?

THOMAS F. HEAD

♦ THE CASE of John McCullough, a 1970 Air Force Academy graduate, has stirred up something of a storm. After his commissioning, Mr. McCullough requested a discharge as a conscientious objector. The air force is now attempting to collect from him \$53,575 in educational expenses — an action that Senator Mark Hatfield called an “utter disgrace.” Answering that charge, the *Wall Street Journal* said editorially:

Is it really a “disgrace” . . . for the Air Force to claim that Mr. McCullough should feel some sense of obligation under his enlistment contract? Can the former cadet argue that he was unaware when he entered the academy or during his stay there that air forces are maintained for the purpose of fighting wars? . . . If one party to a voluntary, legitimate contract can renounce it without penalty, it would seem to cast considerable doubt on the validity of any contract. That, stripped of its emotional overtones, is the fundamental issue [November 1, 1971, p. 12].

Stripped of its emotional overtones, the *Journal* is wrong, very wrong. The fundamental issue is: how do we respond to a man who recognizes that he is participating in an immoral activity and

wants to cease participating? The *Journal* ignores the fact that McCullough's contract was not truly voluntary. Every male citizen of this country is under an *imposed* contract, a “military obligation.” The only voluntary aspect of this contractual agreement is that men can occasionally make some decisions about the programming of their military service. The *Journal*, however, fails to mention the vast difference between a military service agreement and a contract entered into under the Uniform Commercial Code. But it is not only in this myopic interpretation of contract law that the *Journal* errs; worse, it seems to have no remote conception of what the McCullough case is really all about. In this, of course, the *Journal* is not alone. Many American citizens show an equal lack of understanding; they look upon a change in moral convictions about war as inspired by foreign powers and therefore highly suspect. Indeed, for many of our people moral convictions fall into the same category with, say, Rotary Club by-laws, which are static, external restraints to be accepted in their entirety by all responsible members. But morality is not an external phenomenon; it is an internal understanding of truth.

To be sure, our law system does rec-

ognize in a limited way that men's convictions change, develop and mature. However, many of our citizens ignore this fact. They simply cannot believe that convictions can honestly change to the extent that McCullough's did.

Now, of course, McCullough's case is extreme. The change from soldier to pacifist is not always that dramatic. Frequently it is not even a change from one pole to another but, rather, a change from no position to a position — from amorality to morality. Daniel Berrigan is talking about something like this when he says, “The opposite of love is not hatred; it is indifference.” Quite often the opposite of pacifism is not militarism but indifference. I doubt that McCullough moved from militarism to pacifism; it is more likely that he changed from indifference to pacifism.

I reach this conclusion on the basis of personal experience. A year ago I was a second lieutenant in the U.S. army. Today I am a conscientious objector (I-O). I moved to pacifism not from militarism, but from indifference.

I grew up in an environment — not only family but also church and school — in which people never even mentioned the idea of pacifism. My father and my uncles served in the military — one as a

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high-ranking career man. Not once in my childhood or adolescence did I hear any questioning of their role. The men themselves said that occasionally they were endangered and afraid, but they never even hinted that they thought they might be doing the wrong thing. So when the time came I accepted the only role I knew — the only morality. It was a morality born of indifference.

I was a Christian, but my religion was basically an interpersonal thing; that is, I applied its principles in personal rela-

tionships with friends, relatives and schoolmates. Seldom did I think to apply it in relationships with people with whom I did not come into direct and frequent contact; in fact I was indifferent toward them. It mattered little to me that ghetto children were receiving an inferior education, that young and old in a far-off country were starving to death, that in our cities people were killing and being killed. In other words, my actions in those days did not square with my understanding of Christ. It was the recogni-

tion of my indifference that prompted the change from soldier to pacifist.

Admittedly, it is dangerous to generalize from very personal events. However, my own experience has given me some understanding of the nature of change of commitment. One can hardly hope that an indifferent populace will come to understand the birth of a conviction like pacifism. But perhaps a few will be able to see that it is not a reversal or an about-face, but a growth, a maturing, the implementation of a faith.