

Levi Pennington

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Pennington to The Friends Committee on National Legislation, August 3, 1948

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August 3, 1948.

Friends Committee on National Legislation,
1111 Florida Avenue N.W.,
Washington 8. D.C.

Dear Friends:--

Let me thank you for "Advices on Conscription and War" which I have just received. We shall be trying to get this document, copies of the conscription law and other material into every meeting, and as nearly as possible into every home where a young Friend is who is now or will soon be subject to the draft.

I do not know just who is responsible for the final form of these advices, and so I am expressing to you some of the thoughts that have been burdening me ever since I first heard of this pronouncement. I had understood that some of the things I feel to be objectionable, and which will give unnecessary grounds for opposition to our position, were to be altered. I do not want Friends to go about seeking martyrdom, and I know that some of the statements in these advices will look like that to some Friends, and still more so to others who do not sympathize with our position. As thoroughly committed as I am to Friends testimony and to the support of those who are following the dictates of their consciences, some of these statements seem to me statements that we ought not to make, at least in the form in which they are made.

I think the one thing which I object to most is the one which says, "We warmly approve civil disobedience." For one thing that statement will not be understood by many, and will, in their minds, put us into the category of the anarchists. For another thing, it gives our enemies an opportunity, which they will certainly use, to misrepresent us before the world. For another thing, it states things negatively, declaring that we approve disobedience to the civil government instead of saying that we approve complete obedience to a government higher than any civil authority. And for another, it seems to go out of its way to avoid the sort of statement that is made in the law itself about the recognition of that higher demand which God makes upon us.

One of the metropolitan papers of Portland came out the other day with the statement, I am told, that Friends had advised all their members to refuse to register. The statement in Paragraph 1 gives color to that statement, if it does not fully justify it. That is going to make a real split in our own denomination, as well as bringing on us, as I see it, unnecessary reproach. I am ready to stand by to the limit the man who conscientiously refuses to register. But personally I should not feel free to advise him not to register. If he can consciously do it, as I think I could if I were of draft age, I think he ought.

Maybe my theory is wrong, but I hold it very definitely, that as long as I am accepting services from my government, that government has a right to my services when it asks for them, so long as the doing of the services asked do not violate what to me is the higher law and the requirement of a higher authority and government. Civil government, local, state and national, do give

me many services, some of which I pay for, and some of which I receive whether I pay for them or not. Public education, the postal system, police protection, fire protection, water supply, legal protection from many forms of injustice, these and many other things I get from my government. It seems to me that when my government needs my services, in the payment of taxes, in jury service or in other ways, it is my patriotic duty to give that service to the government, from which I am taking benefits every day. But no government has the right to demand that I violate the commands of God in service to the state. My state takes profits from pari-mutuel gambling on horse and dog races; but it does not have the right to demand that I handle this business in violation of my conscience. My state runs the liquor business within its boundaries; but it has no right to demand that I run one of the liquor stores in violation of my conscience. My state has capital punishment; but it does not have the right to demand that I throw the switch or pull the trap or release the poison gas in violation of my conscience. And when my government demands that I register, with the promise in advance that if I am conscientiously opposed to war, I shall not be required to participate, I can see how many, and I'll guess the very great majority of conscientious objectors, Friends and non-Friends, will feel that this is not an unreasonable nor an improper requirement of the government. Most of them, for a guess, will be convinced that as patriotic citizens they have no right to refuse to register, and they will register without any disobedience to conscience.

I doubt the wisdom of raising the question of refusal to pay taxes, because the major portion of some of that tax goes into use for military purposes. There are so many difficulties in the way of handling that matter that I think it should have been omitted. How is a man going to segregate his taxes into what is to go for military purposes and what is to go for boondoggling? And how is he going to get out of paying them, anyhow? Will he refuse to turn in his income tax reports, and get into trouble that far back from contributing to war purposes? If he does that, what will be the result so far as anything practical is concerned? Won't the government get the money anyhow, in addition to the big trouble he will get into? And how is a man going to avoid making his contribution? If it were not for the war, this letter could go in ordinary mail for two cents. Must I decline to send it because part of the cost of the stamp is spent for military purposes, directly or indirectly?

Well, I've said enough, perhaps a lot too much. If two of the statements in these advices had been different, I'd not have written this letter. With most of the statements made I am in complete and hearty agreement. We'll find it hard enough to make our stand understood -- and without that understanding martyrdom self-sought will not get our cause anywhere -- and to win adherents to our convictions of the right without going out of the way to add to our own difficulties.

With best wishes, with sincere appreciation of the courage and devotion of the young people who were so enthusiastic for the more radical statements in these advices, but with the feeling that they might have been better advised in some matters,

Sincerely your friend,