

Why I registered for the draft

The battle is still to come

Christopher Garlock

There's a feeling you get when you walk into a hospital, no matter how slight the problem to be treated—a vague, general fear of your own human frailty and a realization of helplessness once the doctors and nurses take over.

That was the feeling I experienced in July when I walked into the post office to register my name with the Selective Service System. Much thought and discussion had brought me to the post office, firm in my conviction that registering was both the practical and moral course for me.

But when the postal clerk slid the registration form in front of me, my confidence and poise slid away, leaving a naked feeling of helplessness. What was I doing there? Was I making a dreadful mistake?

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Several months ago I chuckled over an editorial in *The New York Times*—not realizing how soon I would gag on my own laughter—which expressed support for registration and the draft. The thrust of the editorial was transparent—fear that the predominantly black armed forces might not be willing to defend capitalism when this country goes to war over oil.

From discussions with my father, who opposed the Vietnam war, I have learned that there was no draft resistance in the early stages of that war, when black men were being drafted and middle-class white men were able to obtain college deferments. It was only in the late 1960s, when the Government began drafting the sons of the white middle class, that a draft-resistance movement came into being.

It seems to me that if anybody is going to be drafted this time around, everybody should be drafted.

This time, too, the thrust of the resistance has come from the white middle class. The elevation of the registration issue to a high moral and ethical plane is largely a cop-out.

Though the Government can pass and enforce its laws, it cannot force its citizens to violate their consciences in order to obey those laws. Conscience is a funny thing, though. How many of us can honestly say we

have never made a compromise with conscience for one reason or another? The question then becomes where we draw the line.

When you're fighting a war, you want to choose your battlegrounds carefully. People who say that registration must be fought because the draft must be stopped before it starts are either ignorant or naive. The move toward the draft did not begin with the symbolic requirement of registration, and it will certainly not end with the actual draft.

When the U.S. Government decides to draft me to fight for the oil fields in Saudi Arabia, I'll draw up my battle plan.

But with my commitment to social change, I must consider how best the struggle can be carried forward. My abhorrence of violence, the military, and authority notwithstanding, I may be most useful inside the armed forces. Or I may decide to fight the draft every inch of the way.

That battle is still to come.

When I walked into the post office and felt that helplessness, and saw again the naked power of the Government, I was strengthened in my conviction that I must work as hard as possible to fight the misuses of that power. I know that many young men stayed away from the post offices during those last two weeks of July. I know that they, too—perhaps for the first time—felt that same sense of helplessness, and maybe that helped them to begin the long fight for themselves against the abuse of power. ■



Why I refused to register

To participate is to accept

Matthew Bunn

The Selective Service Act states that "it shall be the duty of every male . . . between the ages of eighteen and twenty-six . . . to present himself for, and submit to registration. . . ." On January 23, 1980, President Carter announced that the "duty" to "submit" would once again become the law of the land. As a child of 1961, I was more dismayed than buoyed by Carter's new-found "toughness."

The bizarre machinations that followed were equally dismaying. Administration officials announced that draft registration would save ninety days in an emergency, though more than a week earlier the White House had received a Selective Service System report saying it would save only seven. On January 16, Selective Service Director Bernard Rotsker had called registration "redundant and unnecessary"; he later claimed he had "recommended" it to the President and said it would "substantially reduce the time it takes to mobilize." Secretary of Defense Harold Brown executed a similar about-face with true military flair.

Then Carter sent his "comprehensive" report on registration to Congress; Representative Les Aspin revealed that the original version had condemned registration, and there had been "a mad scramble while the bureaucrats rewrote the study so it would

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conform to Carter's speech rather than conform to what they learned from their research." Aspin then voted for registration. House Majority Leader Jim Wright announced he "would not allow the President to be embarrassed" on this issue; to save one man a moment's embarrassment, he would threaten thousands with jail.

In the midst of this confusion, I was forced to examine my beliefs and values more thoroughly than I ever had before. At nineteen, no one is really prepared to make a moral/political decision that will affect the whole course of his life; no amount of education can help you see your soul. Suddenly, questions of peace and freedom became more urgent than Maxwell's equations, T.S. Eliot, or even the movie at Central Square Cinema.

The first question (and the most easily answered) involved the meaning of registration. If registration were no more than a name on a card, the command wouldn't be backed with threats of prison. Registration is part and parcel of warfare; it serves no other useful purpose. To kill another human being, or to force another to do so, is *wrong* by any civilized moral code. Is it less wrong by the tens of thousands with the approval of Congress? To participate is to accept; by signing the card, I would have given my support to a foreign policy which accepts mass murder as a useful tool.

"Submit" is probably the most honest word in the entire Selective Service Act; registration is a *submission*, of both your body and your con-

science, for use at any moment by the military machine. It is a blank check to the old; when their own failures necessitate it, they will cash it in the terrible coinage of the lives of the young.

These answers to the first question prepared me for the second: What is my real duty? Senator Sam Nunn claims that all those who refuse to register are "unpatriotic." On the other hand, Thoreau said the greatest patriots "serve the state with their consciences . . . and so necessarily resist it for the most part; and they are commonly treated by it as enemies." I realized that if I really opposed the draft, it was my duty to disobey. No system was ever toppled by cooperation. Even a conscientious objector has accepted the system's right to decide who can and who cannot be forced to kill. This is more than I feel willing to accept; as Gandhi said, "He who is a passive spectator of crime is really, and in law, an active participator in it."

Many readers may feel this is merely the impetuosity of a hot-headed child—and it may be. But idealism is a strength of youth, not a weakness, and it is a natural obstacle the draft must overcome.

The last and most difficult question has yet to be answered: Do I have the courage to carry this duty through? In February, I took the first step, announcing at a rally that I would refuse to register. The crowd roared, but I felt strangely queasy. I don't know whether I have what it takes to endure a prison term; the only answer is waiting for me in a cell. ■

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