

## Conscientious Objector

In 1661, conscientious objection was first recognized in America (Schlissel 28). The Quakers in Massachusetts were termed men with "tender conscience (Schlissel 28)" and were relieved from every duty to bear arms when dealing with the Indians. Throughout history conscientious objection has become more prominent. The American Revolution, Civil War, both World Wars, and the Cold War had conscientious objectors. The peak numbers for objection occurred during Vietnam when over 470,000 men claimed to be conscientious objectors and 170,000 of them were actually granted a conscientious objector deferment (Tollefson 6). Also, throughout history, the process to claim conscientious objector status has evolved. In 1948, the Selective Service Act was passed that made believing in a Supreme Being a requirement to apply to be a conscientious objector. Then in 1970, the belief in a Supreme Being was repealed and the reasons were changed to provide for any "objection based on a deeply held and coherent ethical system with no reference to a Supreme Being" (Columbia). This remains the current requirement; however, unlike during Vietnam era, today more of the country is in support of the military action. In a current CBS News poll, 68% of the voters said that they believe the United States is justified in taking action against Iraq. Even though the majority of the public is supportive of military action, there are still many protests and history has demonstrated there will again be conscientious objectors. If a draft is enacted, conscientious objectors should not be able to avoid it because they receive the same benefits from the country; however, they should be able to avoid being combatant.

One must understand that there are three types of conscientious objectors. First is the conscientious objector who only refuses to be in combat. This objector is willing to join the military; however, he refuses to participate in any actions that deal with combat. When applying to be a conscientious objector, the person is classified with a "4A-0 status" (Moskos 61). This states that the person will go into a noncombatant position. The second category includes people who refuse to join any military branch. These people are against the military in general and will not participate in the service.

These objectors are given a "10 status" (Moskos 61). Thirdly are those objectors who refuse to be drafted in any way, including community service. These people do not have a certain claim status. These people are the most difficult to deal with because they are not willing to serve the country in which they live.

It is not fair for conscientious objectors to be able to avoid the draft. Every person who lives in this country has certain rights and freedoms that they are entitled to because they live in this country. People who live here believe in freedom and expect to have their specific freedoms. These freedoms, referenced in the Constitution, include freedom of speech, press, the right to bear arms, the right to a trial by jury, protection from cruel and unusual punishment. As a person living in the United State of America one is automatically guaranteed these fundamental rights. To ensure these freedoms are not abolished by another country the military was formed. The military protects the country to keep everyone safe. It does not seem fair that people can avoid helping the military; yet, they still enjoy the freedoms of living in America.

Some people only claim to be a conscientious objector to benefit themselves. Technically, this is not allowed; however, to apply to be a conscientious objector the process is very simple. All that a person must do is interview with the local board. He must provide written proof about how he arrived at his beliefs and how these beliefs influence his life. If desired, a person can choose to have others, who can also attest to the claims, make appearances at the interview (<http://www.sss.gov/FSconsobj.htm>). Since this is all that is required it can be fairly simple to fake a conscientious objector claim. In fact, before World War II conscientious objector claims were issued even if a person did not want one. I "refused classification as a *conscientious objector* (which my heavily Catholic draft board was quite willing to give me because of my Catholic Worker background) and chose to go into the military instead (O'Gara 56) ." Since conscientious objector deferments were issued abundantly it probably was not difficult for a person to fake his beliefs. If a person does not believe that the government's actions are correct he may try to avoid the draft by claiming that he is a conscientious objector.

If a person claims to be a conscientious objector, then he should serve as in a noncombatant position in the military. Certain conscientious objectors only object to participation in war and combat

military training. These conscientious objectors, if drafted, should serve in noncombatant military positions. A conscientious objector should act "as a *conscientious* cooperator, a proud non-combatant (U.S. News & World Report 60)." If they acted with this attitude they would not have problems serving as a noncombatant. Conscientious objectors can still serve their country proudly without fighting in combat. If conscientious objectors are not completely against serving in the military, "By the provisions of [the Military Selective Service Act], there are two classes of CO status under a draft...They can be inducted into the armed forces and can receive training and service assignments, but only of a *noncombatant* nature, such as in the medical corps (Moskos 61)." This is a good compromise because that way people are not directly avoiding the draft and military service and while doing so they are not going against their beliefs. Currently, Charles Rangel, a Democrat Representative for New York, has proposed a new bill titled "Universal National Service" which will actually reinstate the draft. With this proposal, "COs who are drafted would go into the military as non-combatants (<http://www.nisbco.org/>)." If his proposal were to be accepted this would be a decent plan that allowed people to still uphold their beliefs while still serving in the military. However, this plan does not address the other conscientious objectors who object to any military service.

For conscientious objectors that refuse to belong to a military branch, they should perform a different public service to fulfill their obligations as citizens in America. If a person is living in America, he needs to perform some public service in lieu of military service. The Military Selective Service Act addressed this by placing these men in alternative service programs. "The second category of COs recognizes men who are conscientiously opposed both to any war and to any participation whatever in the armed forces...This is the basis for alternative service programs (Moskos 61)." Through this program, conscientious objectors still perform a service for their country. If a person chooses to live in this country, he has an obligation to help the country out in a time of war. There are many positions that do not even deal with the military that are still beneficial to the country. People who claim this status are normally placed in jobs dealing with either health care, caring for the very young or very old, conservation, or

education. The Alternative Service jobs are normally through local employers and the conscientious objector will have to serve for the same amount of time if they were in the military, 24 months (<http://www.sss.gov/FSconsobj.htm>). For a job to qualify as an alternative service job it "must be deemed to make a meaningful contribution to the maintenance of the national health, safety, and interest (<http://www.sss.gov/FSconsobj.htm>)." This Alternative Service Program is an effective way to have everyone that is drafted perform a type a public service. During times of war, the country not only needs soldiers to fight but it also needs people to perform the background tasks. It seems fair that the conscientious objectors perform the background tasks. Although they are not in combat, they are still taking a temporary break from what their prior jobs were in order to serve the country.

As long as conscientious objectors only claim the status because of their strong beliefs, they should be required to not completely avoid the draft. Ideally, it would be best if the draft was reworked to accommodate conscientious objectors more easily. The draft should be revised so that if a person is drafted, he can choose whether he wants to be in the combatant, noncombatant, or public service field. If the draft is operated in this manner, then everyone will have a minimal choice and conscientious objectors will be included along with the rest of the population. This will help eliminate some of the hatred that combat soldiers have towards conscientious objectors because now everyone will have the choice, not just conscientious objectors. Another detail that can be helpful will be if everyone is required to be assigned to one of the three categories for at least two years after high school. This will ensure that the government will always have enough members. Also, serving in the military or being committed to any other form of public service is an extraordinary experience. If everyone serves they will learn a great deal; moreover, it could improve the country greatly. The details with conscientious objection need to be reformed, after more than 300 years it will be outstanding for a process to be formed that actually works.

## Works Cited

- ☒ O’Gara, J. “Why I Went to War.” U.S. Catholic Vol 57. Issue 5 (1992): pages 56-58. 9 Feb. 2003.
- ☒ CBS News | Poll: U.S. Has Made Case Against Iraq. 7 Feb. 2003. CBS News. 8 Feb. 2003
- ☒ Center On Conscience & War. 9 Jan. 2003. Center On Conscience & War. 8 Feb. 2003.
- ☒ “Conscientious Objector.” The Columbia Encyclopedia. 2001 ed.
- ☒ “Conscientious Objector.” U.S. News & World Report Vol 109 (1990): page 60.
- ☒ Fact Sheet: Conscientious Objection. 5 May 2000. Selective Service System. 9 Feb. 2003.
- ☒ Moskos, Charles, and John Chambers III. The New Conscientious Objection. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- ☒ Schlissel, Lillian. Conscience in America. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1968.
- ☒ Tollefson, James. “The Strength Not to Fight.” Appendix for Module two. Teachers’ Guide. 8 Feb. 2003.

