

Statement before the Justice Department. Rev. William Sloane Coffin, Jr.
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What we are here to do is not a natural, easy thing for any of us. We are writers, professors, clergy, and this is not our "thing." But it must have been with precisely such people as we in mind that the poet Faguy wrote: "The worst of particularities is to withhold oneself, the worst ignorance is not to act, the worst lie is to steal away."

So we have come here to be with conscientious men in their hour of conscience; and because like them we cannot stand around with dry feet while wisdom and decency go under for the third time in Vietnam.

This week once again high government officials described protesters against the war as "naive," "wild-eyed idealists." But in our view it is not wild-eyed idealism but clear-eyed realism that brings us here. For as one of our number put it: "If what the United States is doing in Vietnam is right, what is there left to be called wrong?"

Many of us are veterans, and all of us have the highest sympathy for our boys in Vietnam. They know what a dirty, bloody war it is. But they have been told that the ends justify the means, and that the cleansing water of victory will wash clean their hands of all the blood and dirt. No wonder they hate us who say "There must be no cleansing water." But what they must strive to understand, hard as it is, is that there can be no cleansing water if military victory spells moral defeat.

We have the highest sympathies for those who back the war because their sons or lovers or husbands are fighting or have died in Vietnam. But they too must understand a very basic thing--that sacrifice in and of itself confers no sanctity. Even if half a million of our boys were to die in Vietnam that would not make the cause one whit more sacred. Yet we realize how hard that knowledge is to appropriate when one's husband is numbered among the sacrificed.

The mother of a son lost in Vietnam once told me "My son used to write how much he and his company were doing for the orphans. But I used to answer 'if you want to help the orphans, son, you must stop killing their fathers and mothers.'"

Like this mother we do not dispute the good intentions, the good works of endless good Americans in Vietnam. But we do insist that no amount of good intentions nor good works, nor

certainly government rhetoric to the contrary, can offset the fact that American policy in Vietnam, a policy devised by high-minded perhaps, but ideologically rigid and unimaginative men--this policy has run amok. The war is not only unjust but unjust, and if that is true then it is not we who are demoralizing our boys in Vietnam, but the government, which asks them to do immoral things.

As the war to us is immoral, so also is the draft. For the National Selective Service Act not only places the major burden of the war on the backs of the poor; it also confronts thousands of men with a choice of either violating their consciences or going to jail.

As the law now stands, for a man to qualify as a conscientious objector he must believe in God. Could anything be more ethically absurd? Have humanists no conscience? Why,--and as a Christian I say this with contrition--some of the most outstanding humanists I know would think they were slipping from their high ideals were they to take steps towards conversion. As a Christian I am convinced it is a gross misfortune not to believe in God, but it is not automatically an ethical default.

Then despite numerous appeals by numerous religious bodies, Congress last spring chose to provide alternative service only for the absolute pacifist. This too is absurd, for the rights of a man whose conscience forbids him to participate in a particular war are as deserving of respect as the rights of a man whose conscience forbids him to participate in any war at all. This is the ancient Jewish and Christian tradition we honor. Yet the tradition we honor the government steadfastly refuses to honor.

So both the war and the draft are issues of conscience. And an issue of conscience is one a man may not seek but hardly one he can avoid.

We admire the way those young men who could safely have hidden behind exemptions and deferments have elected instead to risk something big for something good. We admire them and believe theirs is the true voice of America, the vision that will prevail beyond the distortions of the moment.

We cannot shield them. We can only expose ourselves as they have done. The law of the land is clear. Section 12 of the National Selective Service Act declares that anyone "who knowingly counsels, aids, or abets another to refuse or evade registration or service in the armed forces...shall be liable to imprisonment for not more than five years or a fine of ten thousand dollars or both."

We hereby publicly counsel those young men to continue in their refusal to serve in the armed forces as long as the war in Vietnam continues, and we pledge ourselves to aid and abet them in all the ways we can. This means that if they are now arrested for failing to comply with a law that violates their consciences, we too must be arrested, for in the sight of that law we are now as guilty as they.

It is a longstanding tradition, sanctioned by American democracy, that the dictates of government must be tested on the anvil of individual conscience. This is what we now undertake to do--not as a first but as a last resort. And in accepting the legal punishment we are, in fact, supporting, not subverting, the legal order.

Still, to stand in this fashion against the law and before our fellow Americans is a difficult and even fearful thing. But in the face of what to us is insane and inhuman we fearfull neither silent nor servile. Nor can we exhort young men to be conscientious only to desert them in their hour of conscience. So we are resolved, as they are resolved, to speak out clearly and to pay up personally.