

SOLDIERS OF CONSCIENCE

After the Film Ends: Extended Discussion Guide

This film was made to encourage discussion and reflection. If you and your audience have time for in-depth discussion and reflection, feel free to use the following discussion questions to get the conversation started. Please revise as appropriate for your audience, perhaps including questions based on your faith tradition's teachings. If you have limited time for discussion, please see the **Brief Discussion Guide** included in this packet.

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PART 1. GENERAL DISCUSSION

Filmmakers Gary Weimberg and Catherine Ryan wanted to create a film that does not tell you what to think, but rather encourages thought and discussion. SOLDIERS OF CONSCIENCE includes multiple and sometimes opposing points of view from both “sincere war fighters and sincere conscientious objectors.”

- **What is the message of the film?**
- **Which statements in the film did you most agree with? Which statements in the film did you most disagree with?**
- **Did your opinion of any of the soldiers change over the course of the movie?**
- **Has this film made a difference in what you think about soldiers, conscience, war, or peace?**
- **Choose one of the soldiers in the film. Talk about what you would have done if you were in their shoes?**
- **What do you think about the following statements from the film?**

Joshua Casteel: When does loyalty to a nation-state come into conflict with loyalty to the Kingdom of God?

MAJ Peter Kilner: War can be an awful, but necessary and morally right choice.

Camilo Mejia: I have a conscience, which goes way beyond any law, way beyond any order that I could receive.

Sgt Jaime Isom: You may not like what you’re doing in the military, but if they give you an order to do something, even if you don’t like it, you got to do it.

Kevin Benderman: Humanity eventually figured out that human sacrifice was wrong, so we stopped doing that. And we eventually figured out that slavery was wrong, so we stopped doing that. So why don’t we use that same criteria for war and just get away from it altogether?

Sgt. Todd Savage: Soldiers do what soldiers do. They’re trying to kill us. We’re trying to kill them. And that’s just the ugly face of war.

Aidan Delgado: If people could see the bodies, the blood, they wouldn’t be able to support this war with a clear conscience. They wouldn’t be able to say, “Yes, that’s what I want representing me. That’s what I want representing America. I’m proud of that.”

PART 2. KILLING IN WAR

SOLDIERS OF CONSCIENCE begins with a statistic from World War II based on research by US Army Historian, Brigadier SLA Marshall: “Among US soldiers in combat, less than twenty-five percent actually fired their weapons at the enemy. Even with their own lives at risk, seventy-five percent did not try to kill the enemy.”

- **Were you surprised to learn this statistic?**
- **What does this statistic say about human nature?**
- **Do you believe that you yourself would find it hard to kill in combat?**

After Marshall presented his findings, the military developed training techniques – like “reflexive fire” – that successfully increased firing rates in subsequent conflicts. However, Major Kilner raises the concern that these techniques “bypass a soldier’s moral decision making process.”

- **What do you think about “reflexive fire” training techniques?**
- **How did you feel when you saw the new recruits training on the bayonet course, yelling “Kill” and stabbing dummies?**
- **Do you agree with the statement that current military training “bypasses a soldier’s moral decision making process?” If not, why not? If so, do you think this is a problem?**

All soldiers know there are rules in war, including rules governing the treatment of surrendering forces, prisoners-of-war, and civilians. These regulations are found in a broad array of international treaties and domestic legal codes, including the Uniform Code of Military Justice, the U.S. Army’s Field Manual 27-10, and the Geneva and Hague Conventions. In combat and occupation, soldiers also operate under Rules of Engagement that govern when and how they may use force.

- **Is it important to have rules in war? Why?**
- **Does having rules in war affect the morality of what is done in war?**
- **What is a soldier’s individual responsibility in following these rules?**
- **Are there situations when soldiers might find it difficult to interpret these rules? Who is at risk in such situations?**

In the film, Aidan Delgado says: “Every soldier who goes, goes in our place. They fight in our name. They’re us.”

- **Do you agree with Aidan’s statement?**
- **What does it mean to you personally to say that soldiers are fighting and killing “in your name?”**
- **If our soldiers fight in the name of all Americans, what is the responsibility of all citizens to determine when, where, and how soldiers are deployed?**

PART 3. TALKING ABOUT KILLING

For many soldiers and civilians, the subject of killing in war is a taboo subject. As Maj. Kilner explains in the film, soldiers often refrain from talking about their experiences because they fear the condemnation of their families and friends. Sgt. Washington says that when he told his family that he had killed in combat, they changed the subject.

- **Have you yourself been to war?**
- **Do you know anyone who has been to war? Has a friend or a member of your family been to war? Do they choose to talk about their experiences or do they remain silent?**
- **In your opinion, is it OK to talk about killing in war? What makes this subject difficult to talk about?**
- **How can we be better listeners for friends or family members who may want to share their experiences in war?**

In the opening minutes of the film, Sgt. Jaime Isom tells the following story: “I had to go shoot a ten-year-old boy over there. He was throwing grenades at my squad. I had no conscience about it or anything like that. I didn’t even look at the face. I said, “Hey, if he threw that grenade, it would have been five or six, maybe the entire squad would have been either killed or wounded...or just one kid.” ... I made the decision because I was the person in charge at that time. And I got no regrets about it. But looking back at it, though, it’s like the demons come back.”

- **How does Sgt. Isom’s statement make you feel?**
- **What does Sgt. Isom mean when he says, “the demons come back?”**
- **Sgt. Isom chose to kill the boy to protect his fellow soldiers. Is he a bad person for making this decision? What can we learn from Isom’s story about the complicated moral decisions involved in war?**

In the film, Maj. Kilner reads a letter from a Vietnam veteran who wrote: “Now that I’ve been to the heart of darkness and done things that I supremely regret, will I ever again be the person I used to like?”

- **What do you think the Vietnam veteran means?**
- **Have you ever felt “supreme regret” for something you’ve said or done? Did it change how you felt about yourself?**

- **Do you think that the experience of war – and the experience of killing in particular – is a burden on the soldiers who participate?**
- **Is this a reasonable sacrifice for our nation to ask of soldiers?**

Maj. Kilner has argued that the military needs to do a better job of preparing soldiers morally and psychologically for combat. He believes the military should provide soldiers with a clear moral justification for war in general as well as for specific military actions. Kilner believes this preparation would help reduce the prevalence of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD. To support his case, Kilner cites a “growing body of research that indicates that what soldiers do—not only what happens to them—can lead to psychological trauma.”¹ In short, the act of killing can be traumatizing.

- **Based on information presented in the film, do you believe that killing in combat – even killing enemy soldiers – can be a traumatic experience?**
- **Do you agree with Maj. Kilner that a stronger moral justification for killing in war would help soldiers?**
- **Do you think a stronger moral justification would make the act of killing in war less traumatic?**
- **If so, would that be a good thing? Why or why not?**

¹ Major Peter Kilner. “The Military Leader’s Role in Preventing and Treating Combat-related, Perpetration-Induced Psychological Trauma.”
<http://soldier-ethicist.blogspot.com/2005/07/military-leaders-role-in-preventing.html>

PART 4. CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION

While conscientious objection to military service has a long established history in the United States, the treatment of conscientious objectors (COs) has changed considerably over the course of the 20th century. In World War I, only members of traditional “peace churches” such as the Quakers or Mennonites were recognized as COs. Those who declared themselves COs based on their own beliefs were prosecuted, imprisoned, and often beaten. During World War II, many thousands of Americans became COs, with many serving as unarmed medics or performing alternative service. By the Vietnam era, thousands of Americans became COs or otherwise refused military service – and the military officially recognized that conscientious objection could be based on moral, rather than solely religious, beliefs.

- **Do you personally know anyone who was a CO in any of the wars listed above? Can you give a brief description of their experience?**
- **Why do you think the military recognizes conscientious objection?**

US military guidelines require that an individual be opposed to “war in any form” in order to be considered a conscientious objector.² This is known as “universal conscientious objection.” Opposition to specific wars – also known as “selective conscientious objection” – is not recognized by the US military.

- **Is this a reasonable distinction to make? Do you believe that an individual can object to war in certain cases but not in others?**
- **Why do you believe the military only recognizes universal conscientious objection?**
- **Are you opposed to war in any form? Are there certain circumstances when you would not be opposed to war?**

Some argue that since today’s military does not rely on a draft to recruit soldiers, there could not possibly be any conscientious objectors. They argue that any soldier who chooses to join the military must certainly understand that they may be deployed to fight – and kill – in war. However, the military acknowledges that an individual can change his or her beliefs. To prove that their beliefs about military service changed after they joined the military, COs must describe their “crystallization of conscience” – the moment when they realized that they could no longer serve in the military. (see next page)

² Department of Defense. “Directive 1300.6.”
<http://www.dtic.mil/whs/directives/corres/html/130006.htm>

- **What was the “crystallization of conscience” for each of the four conscientious objectors in the film?**
- **Do you believe an individual’s beliefs can change significantly based on their experiences?**
- **Have you ever had a crystallization of conscience?**

Four of the soldiers in the film consider themselves conscientious objectors: Camilo Mejia, Aidan Delgado, Joshua Casteel, and Kevin Benderman. Aidan and Joshua submitted conscientious objector applications. Their applications were eventually approved and they were honorably discharged from the military. Kevin applied for CO status, but was rejected. Camilo refused to return to Iraq with his unit, effectively going AWOL (Absent Without Official Leave).

- **What was the difference between their cases? Did they have different reasons for becoming conscientious objectors?**
- **Did the military treat them fairly and justly?**
- **Did Camilo and Kevin deserve the punishment they received?**

After a screening of SOLDIERS OF CONSCIENCE at a senior center, one man stood up and told the audience that he had served in World II as a heavy machine gunner. He confessed that, despite being in combat, he had not been able to bring himself to fire at the enemy. “I thought I was the only one,” he admitted to the group.

- **Have you ever thought you were the only one who was opposed to doing something?**
- **Did you tell others about your misgivings? If so, did it make you feel better?**
- **In the end, were you really the only one? Or did others silently share your beliefs?**

Conscientious objector Aidan Delgado applied for conscientious objection while deployed in Iraq. Despite pressure and harassment from many of his fellow soldiers, Aidan continued his stand as a conscientious objector throughout the remainder of his tour in Iraq.

- **Have you ever had to stand up for your beliefs in the face of opposition?**
- **Was it difficult? How did you persevere?**

PART 5. RELIGION, CONSCIENCE, AND WAR

In the film, Joshua Casteel asks: “When are there situations in which loyalty to a nation-state comes into conflict with loyalty to the Kingdom of God?” By becoming a conscientious objector, Joshua chose to obey his commitment to his religious beliefs over his commitment to his military duty as an Army interrogator.

- **What does Joshua mean when he describes the conflict between “loyalty to the nation-state” and “loyalty to the Kingdom of God?”**
- **Have you ever had to face such a conflict in your own life?**
- **Can you cite examples in today’s society where this conflict arises?**
- **Is it always possible to follow the principles of our faith privately but obey the dictates of society and government for our public responsibilities?**
- **Is it possible for a person of faith to refuse military service but support political or military decisions that requires others to fight?**

In the film, Major Peter Kilner refers to the “Parable of the Good Samaritan” (Luke 10:25-37) to argue that the use of force – and even lethal force – can be justified in order to protect those in need of assistance.

In the parable, a man is robbed on the way to Jericho by assailants who beat him and leave him for dead. Two men pass without stopping to help the injured man. A third man, a Samaritan, does stop to help the man. He bandages the man’s wounds and takes him to an inn where he pays for the man to stay and recuperate.

Major Kilner asks a hypothetical question based on this parable: What would a conscientious objector do if he or she arrived on the scene while the victim was being attacked on the road to Jericho? Would the conscientious objector act to stop the beating? Would he use lethal force to stop the beating?

- **What would you do in the hypothetical situation Maj. Kilner describes?**
- **Do you agree with Maj. Kilner that the morally right choice in this situation is to stop the aggressor by using physical force – even to the point of using lethal force?**
- **Do you think this example is an appropriate metaphor for warfare in the modern world? Why or why not?**
- **Are there examples in history when nations have used military force to protect others or prevent atrocities?**