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POWER
AND OBEDIENCE

Restoring Pacifism to American Politics

FENTON JOHNSON

We were four brothers, sons of the Kentucky hills who came of age in lockstep with the escalating war in Vietnam. In 1964, my oldest brother volunteered for the Air Force, following an ancient tradition in which, for the sake of education or economic advancement, men from the working classes risk our lives to fight the wars of the rich. He nearly died in an

aborted rescue mission in the mountains of Vietnam. My second brother received deferments that carried him through the war. My third brother volunteered in 1971, as the war was winding down. In that same year, on my eighteenth birthday and well in advance of receiving my draft lottery number, I filed with the Nelson County, Kentucky, Selective Service Board as a conscientious objector (CO).

Around the time of these events, in response to outrage over an induction system that provided escape routes for the rich (George W. Bush) or the clever (Bill Clinton), Congress largely eliminated deferments and exemptions, inaugurating a lottery instead. Men's eligibility was determined by a number, assigned by random selection based on birth date. Of men born in 1952, those with numbers lower than 95 had been called up. I was born in 1953.

The lottery for my birth year was conducted February 2, 1972, at 9 a.m. Eastern time. The men of my California dorm rose at 6 a.m. to watch it broadcast. The women posted the birth dates of every man, with a blank for recording his draft number. Trusting to the gods, I stayed abed, to be awakened by whoops from those who had received high numbers and by an audible hush outside my door. My number was 009, the lowest in my dorm.

The following summer, though many of us were shy of induction age, men from my county were bused to the Louisville Veterans Administration Hospital for medical examinations, the goal being, I realize in retrospect, to intimidate us into volunteering. What my high school debate research taught in the abstract, that day illustrated in fact: the war was being fought by poor urban blacks and poor rural whites. The bus was filled with boys—men—some of them my grade school classmates; almost none were educated past high school. Most assumed they would be sent to Vietnam, a prospect they viewed with unbridled enthusiasm.

Two weeks later I was classified 1-A, eligible for service. My local draft board denied my written application, now months old, for a CO; I filed an appeal. I submitted the paperwork in person. Emily B. Hart, the draft board secretary, studied it carefully. She knew me, of course; she'd seen my picture in the local paper—boys' extemporaneous speaking champion of the Commonwealth of Kentucky, president of the state student senate, scholarship winner, the sort of kid about whom the locals said, "That boy will be governor someday." "Are you sure you want to do this," she said, a statement, not a question. "Yes, ma'am," I answered. With a country woman's understanding of the ways of the world she said, "Forget about a career in politics," and of course she was right.

On the afternoon of my draft board hearing, held in August 1972, I told my mother I was going on a date and asked her to cut my hair. I borrowed the car and picked up two high school teachers who had agreed to serve as character witnesses.

The board's first question: "What the hell is a son of P.D. Johnson doing here?" The hearing lasted two hours, during which the Kentucky boys' extemporaneous speaking champ gave the rhetorical performance of his very young life.

Afterward, in anticipation of an appeal, I was required to record my version of the evening. I was covering page after page when Emily B. Hart emerged from the hearing room. I asked when I could learn the outcome and was told that I'd receive a letter "in a week or two." The board met monthly. "That means they'll make a decision tonight," I said. I was an eighteen-year-old country boy defying convention and my elders. I was about to leave for my university's program abroad in France, an impossible prospect for someone from my background—in my ancestors' long history on this continent, not one had traveled abroad, except, of course, as a soldier—but already I had decided that if I did not receive my CO

status, I would not return. With courage born of terror and conviction I said, "I'll wait until they make a decision." She returned to the hearing room. Some fifteen minutes later she emerged. "You can phone tomorrow and find out," she said. I returned to scribbling. "If I can phone tomorrow, they're making a decision tonight." She returned to the committee room, to emerge after another fifteen minutes. "You got it," she said. I stopped writing in mid-sentence, handed her the papers, and left.

Back home, I raided my parents' liquor cabinet to pour a drink for my teachers. The phone rang—it was my mother asking someone to turn off the heat under the pot roast. "I thought you were on a date," she said. "I had my CO hearing," I said. "I got it." A moment of pregnant silence. In a voice devoid of inflection she said, "Good." The subject was never mentioned again. Years later she gave me a box containing, she

a local filmmaker would claim that on a per capita basis my home county...lost more men in Vietnam than any other county in America.

said, every letter I'd ever sent; but the long letter announcing my decision to apply for a CO, the letter which above all others I longed to read, was missing.

I believe mine to be the only CO the Nelson County draft board granted in its history. I owe that decision to the county's wounded and dead. Nearly forty years later, a local filmmaker would claim that on a per capita basis my home county—Nelson County, Kentucky, 1970 population: 23,477—lost more men in Vietnam than any other county in America. Seven Nelson Countians died in one especially brutal day in 1969,

an event memorialized in granite on the courthouse square. My draft board's decision to grant me a CO, rendered in the heartland of patriotism, was a measure less of my eloquence than of how sick we were of the war.

As of this writing 4,488 American soldiers, men and women, died in the Iraq adventure and another 6,717 in Afghanistan. Over 30,000 are recorded as wounded in Iraq alone, a figure that does not include those who return home too traumatized to function, some of whom will become tomorrow's drug abusers and homeless. To date the wars have cost well over $1.5 trillion. For the same expenditure, assuming the pre-war per capita annual income of $700 (Iraq) or $500 (Afghanistan), the U.S. could have supported every Iraqi or Afghani citizen for over twenty years. Instead, conservative estimates count over 100,000 civilians dead in Iraq alone, the economy is in ruins, and the influence of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda is arguably stronger than when the wars began.

II

Men will seek beauty, whether in life or in death.

—Krishna to Arjuna, on the battlefield of Kurukşetra, Bhagavad-Gita

Almost forty years have passed and I am standing outside the Titan Missile Museum, some thirty miles south of Tucson, Arizona, beneath the terraced tailings of an open-pit copper mine. The tailings are barren even of cactus, but teddy-bear cholla and mesquite and creosote struggle through the tawny grit at the parking lot's edge. A vast American flag flutters and snaps against the deep cloudless blue of a December desert sky.

The museum is housed in a warehouse of blue corrugated steel. Dedication plaques are mounted on slabs of granite. The principal donors ($50,000+) are the largest local auto dealer, James Click, Jr.; the National Park Association; and Count Ferdinand von Galen, a Transylvanian-esque name that demands taking note. My tour is filled: twenty-five people—twelve Anglo couples and me.

In the early 1960s the U.S. built Titan Missile silos on three sites: Little Rock, Arkansas; Wichita, Kansas; and Tucson. The eighteen sites surrounding Tucson took twenty-eight months to be completed and declared combat-ready at a cost of $12.8 million each. The officers at each site carried side arms "in the event of an uncooperative crew member." A computer archive includes a film from the period, produced and distributed by Civil Defense, interspersing staged footage of schoolchildren crawling under desks with a cartoon turtle singing "Duck and Cover!" A man's voice intones, "That flash means: Act fast! We must be ready to do the right thing at any time when the atomic bomb explodes." Onscreen, girls in yoked jumpers drop ropes in mid-skip and head into the gym. A boy in a starched white shirt leaps from his bicycle and hides his head in a gutter ("Johnny knows any shelter is good"). A family in a park hides under its picnic blanket.

Our tour guides are Bob (aquiline nose, thin upper lip, big ears) and George (plank skinny, a dried rosebud for a mouth, big ears). Both are Air Force Titan II crew veterans. Bob speaks fast, occasionally asking, "Are there any questions" but not inviting any. George has his name printed in large letters on the bill of his blue hardhat. In the next one-and-one-half hours he will say two words.

Bob leads us outside to a display of the missile engines, overbuilt versions of the internal combustion engine Henry Ford popularized. Each missile had five-and-a-half minutes

of propelled flight that took it over 200 miles into the air. "Thirty-five thousand gallons in five minutes and nobody's worrying about fuel efficiency," Bob says. From that point it operated on inertia, a metal canister with multiple nuclear warheads in its cone, coasting in a long gentle arc to earth.

The missiles had "point 8 accuracy," which Bob defines as, "If they fired 100, half would land within eight-tenths of a mile of their targets." He does not say what would have happened with the other half. Accuracy was not the point. According to Bob, the warheads they carried were nine thousand times more powerful than the bomb dropped on Hiroshima. They would have produced a three-mile wide fireball. Everything and everyone within nineteen miles would have been instantly incinerated. The Strategic Air Command (SAC) named the policy Mutual Assured Destruction, "or MAD," Bob says, "a perfect acronym for what would have happened. It worked great for fifty years."

We descend honeycombed metal stairs into the silo. Bob demonstrates the door to the control room—more than a foot thick, weighing eight tons. A fellow tourist pulls it forward with one hand. "Hung a half-inch above the floor and that's where it still hangs, fifty years later," Bob says. Christmas is coming; his tone is festive. "You know what an elephant is?" We look at him blankly. "Come on, bite. Somebody. Anybody." "What's an elephant?" I ask. "A mouse designed by nuclear engineers."

The control panels are simple. A few rows of lights labeled in clear sequence, ready, fire, no need to aim—the crew never knew their targets and wasn't empowered to change them. To one side sits a black Bakelite dial telephone, the same design as the phone that hangs beside the doors of aging New York apartment buildings. Greenwich Mean Time was kept with a wind-up clock.

In one corner sits the home of the secret codes—a battered metal filing cabinet painted a saturated crimson and featuring a dial lock and two small padlocks. Bob runs down the checklist of steps to be performed if the Bakelite phone rang. "Everything by the numbers in SAC," he says, a mantra of his talk. "Once you turned the key you abandoned control of the missile. There was no second chance."

From the first I've been bothered by the question *Would he have done it?* If the call had come, the order given, the codes checked out, would this amiable guy-next-door have pushed the button that would end most life and make what little remained unendurable? As if in response to my question he barks, not a request but a command. "I need a volunteer!"

Until this moment we have been on a holiday excursion, but now there is palpable hesitation—we know what's coming. Nobody steps forward. Nobody raises a hand. Bob points at the control panel chair—four wheels, military-issue gray Naugahyde patched with duct tape. The gods, ever on the

If the call had come...would this amiable guy-next-door have pushed the button that would end most life and make what little remained unendurable?

watch for a joke at our expense, have placed me next to it. For other visitors to volunteer they would have to climb over me, so I sit.

The button turns out to be not a button but a small aluminum-alloy key of the type that opens a gym locker. Bob gives rapid instructions containing lots of numbers.

"You got that?" "Uh, no," I say. He screws up his face. "You a schoolteacher?" "As a matter of fact, yes," I say. He sighs. "I knew it. Teachers can give orders but can't take 'em."

I so want to believe this to be true. It would explain so much—why as a kid I liked school, why I filed for a CO, why I teach.

Bob crosses to a companion desk. "One-and-two-and-three." He turns a key. "Okay, your turn."

And I'm staring at the sleeping panel of lights with their key, well-worn from many turnings. Conscientious objector at eighteen, forty years a pacifist, here's my chance to say, this time with an audience, "I can't do it. I wouldn't do it. I won't do it." We are many feet underground in a tiny windowless space. On my back I feel the eyes of the twelve Anglo couples. Across from me sits Bob, impatient with the schoolteacher who can't take orders.

I turn the key. The lights blink in sequence. I have made a choice, followed orders, played a role, maybe the only role that finally matters, in the destruction of life as we know it.

They had a thirty-day food supply, Bob tells us, and thirty days worth of recycled air, "or that's what they told us." Later I overhear him tell another tourist, a Navy veteran, that when the crews serviced the diesel engines used to fire the missiles they dumped the old fuel down the silo, contaminating the air supply, "but who wanted to live for thirty days?"

On the drive home I think how this is where it all began—the age of paranoia, the end of life calibrated on assumptions other than the constant, eternal threat of wholesale annihilation. The radio tells me that the CEOs of various Wall Street banks, so recently brought by their managements to the brink of collapse and rescued by the government, have declined the president's invitation to meet in Washington. A gutted version of national health care is struggling to pass the

Senate. In Copenhagen the U.S. declines to cooperate in the effort to slow climate change.

I turned the key.

From the *New York Times*, July 8, 1986:

> *A Frankfurt court today convicted Ferdinand von Galen, former head of the prestigious West German bank Schroder-Munchmeyer-Hengst, of breach of trust. He was sentenced to three years and nine months in prison for his role in the bank's reaching the verge of collapse.*

Count Ferdinand von Galen emerged from prison to immigrate first to California, then to Arizona, our domestic Paraguay for white-collar criminals. Here he is a land developer, major donor to the Titan Missile Museum, and supporter of the local Roman Catholic Church, which teaches that God forgives all sins of the genuinely penitent heart.

III

> *Experience proves that a man who obstructs a war in which his nation is engaged, no matter whether right or wrong, occupies no enviable place in life or history. Better for him, individually, to advocate "war, pestilence, and famine," than to act as obstructionist to a war already begun.... The most favorable posthumous history the stay-at-home traitor can hope for is—oblivion.*
>
> —Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs*

In his eloquent memoir President Grant condemns the "stay-at-home traitor" to "oblivion," but let us consider the fates of four of Grant's contemporaries, the brothers of New England's famous James family. The two brothers who fought in the Civil War suffered from what today we call post-traumatic stress syndrome: wounded in battle, Wilky James was plagued by ill health and financial difficulties for the rest of his short life; Robertson James drifted aimlessly, an alcoholic with a violent temper. Meanwhile Henry and William James, by Grant's standard the "stay-at-home traitors," achieved enduring international reputations, Henry as a towering presence in letters, William often identified as the founder of modern psychology.

Over a century ago, in our most eloquent argument for pacifism, William James challenged us to find "the moral equivalent of war." His essay is a masterpiece of rhetoric, a monument of late Victorian prose grounded in the pragmatism he espoused.

"Pacifists ought to enter more deeply into the esthetical and ethical point of view of their opponents," James writes, then makes an argument for war that Dick Cheney might admire. "[T]he martial virtues... are absolute and permanent human goods," he observes, bluntly acknowledging the attraction—indeed, as society is currently structured, the *necessity* of war. As biologists have demonstrated that the growing tree requires wind and storm to strengthen its trunk, people require challenge to fulfill our greatest destinies—to achieve beauty. "Militarism is the great preserver of our ideals of hardihood, and human life with no use for hardihood would be contemptible," James writes. "I do not believe that peace either ought to be or will be permanent on this globe unless the states pacifically organized preserve some of the old elements of army-discipline." The great flaw of pacifism,

he observes, is its inability to provide a rival to war as a test of the faculties and stimulus for the imagination. "War is the romance of history," he writes, and it will not end until we find or create a story as or more compelling. The pacifist challenge, then, becomes the creation of "the moral equivalent of war"—an ethic that "will speak to men as universally as war does, and yet will be as compatible with their spiritual selves as war has proved itself to be incompatible."

In the course of a decade James reworked the essay, and at different points he proposes different "moral equivalents." In an earlier version, incorporated into his magisterial *Varieties of Religious Experience*, he writes,

> *I have often thought that in the old monkish poverty-worship...there might be something like that moral equivalent of war for which we are seeking....when one sees the way in which wealth-getting enters as an ideal into the very bone and marrow of our generation, one wonders whether a revival of the belief that poverty is a worthy religious vocation may not be the 'transformation of military courage,' and the spiritual reform which our time stands most in need of.*
>
> *Among English-speaking peoples especially do the praises of poverty need once more to be boldly sung....Think of the strength which personal indifference to poverty would give us if we were devoted to unpopular causes...while we lived, we would imperturbably bear witness to the spirit, and our example would help set free our generation.*

A decade later, possibly in acknowledgment of the unlikelihood of Americans voluntarily embracing "poverty-worship," James proposed a "conscription of the whole youthful population to form for a certain number of years a part of the army enlisted against *Nature*..."—anticipating by a century the possibility of a collective national and international commitment to cleaning up our environment.

In his first campaign President Obama suggested such a service agency, though the idea was quickly dropped. And yet, writing from twenty-five years' experience teaching college students, I can report their intensifying longing for beauty—their urgent desire to find meaning in their lives beyond an ever-greater market share, their search to be of use to someone other than themselves. Might we teach them to be in service to peace? Might we teach, as the Buddha and Jesus taught, that the meaning they seek and the power they must obey lies not without but within?

Whether James would consider America as a "state pacifically organized" is open for debate. We have constructed an economy that *requires* the ceaseless preparation for and waging of war, an economy James described with unnerving prescience: "... the intensely sharp competitive *preparation* for war by the nations is *the real war,* permanent, unceasing... When the time of development is ripe the war must come, reason or no reason, for the justifications pleaded are invariably fictitious." In his time the "fictitious justification" was the sinking of the battleship U.S.S. Maine in Havana harbor; in our time it was weapons of mass destruction in Baghdad.

The metaphor of war has so thoroughly permeated our public dialogue that we live in it as fish live in water. There is the endless war in Afghanistan and the endless war on terrorism, of course, but also the war on poverty, the war on cancer, the war on drugs, the cyber war between the U.S. and China. Former Vice President Cheney asks of President Obama, "Why doesn't he want to admit we're at war?" and the President rises to the bait—both men choosing to overlook that no president of either party has sought the constitutionally required declaration by Congress.

When your living is tied to sin, you tend toward a liberal view on the subject, an observation that helps explain our former Vice President's unremitting warmongering. As our economy has become dependent on the manufacture and sale of weapons and as we have made military service the only affordable option for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds seeking to improve their lot, pacifism, once a regular feature of our national political debate, has fallen from unpopularity to invisibility. In the ongoing debate over the budget deficit, no one points out its primary cause: the trillion-plus dollars spent in Iraq and Afghanistan. Instead we vilify care for children and the aged and infirm as "entitlements."

Adopting military terminology, William James proposes an "army" enlisted "against *Nature*," but the most important recent scientific advance may be the rediscovery of the terrible consequences of fighting *against* something of which we are an integral part. The great news of the moment is that we have the possibility of enlisting an army not *against* but *for* Nature; an army (if it must be named that) enlisted to heal; a context

in which to practice "the martial virtues," founded in an appeal to our higher selves. People will seek beauty, people *must* seek beauty, whether in taking up the gun or by reclaiming strip-mined Appalachia; the choice is ours.

Sitting at the Titan II control desk, turning the key, I grasped for a moment the boredom and dread and responsibility of the soldier's life that formed Bob, our guide. The point of his roping a random tourist into the act was not, finally, to demonstrate the quaint lights of the Titan II console. It was to underscore our collective complicity, to share the burden of the evil implicit in the project, to remind us that we wrote the checks that made it possible.

Now "evil" is a strong word, but to justify its use let us consider World War II, the "good" war: More than sixty million dead, the great majority of them civilians—trauma on a scale that defies comprehension. The economies of Europe, the U.S.S.R., and Japan laid waste. The introduction of nuclear arms to the world. America (and through us, the world) permanently militarized—and this was the *good* war. The liberation of the concentration camps might have justified suffering on this scale, but though the Allies knew of the camps they never invoked their liberation as justification, even as America turned away Jews seeking asylum. Meanwhile both Axis and Allied church leaders preached the "just" war, arguing that God blessed their atrocities while condemning those of their opponents.

"The war against war is going to be no holiday excursion or camping party," James writes. Such a "war," if we took it seriously, would require a moral fortitude compared to which the leap into battle is literally child's play. It would require us, citizens of the empire of this particular historical moment, to commit ourselves to real, enduring progress: to grow up, put away childish things, get wiser, believe in and build a

better world. It would require us to choose not our baser but our better instincts. It would require us to seek beauty in life rather than in death.

You will tell me very reasonably that this is nice in the abstract but hopeless in the execution, and you will be very reasonably correct; but reason unaided is not sufficient to the challenge of extracting us from a mess in which reason is so deeply complicit. That a world without war is an unattainable ideal I do not doubt, but with equal conviction I know that without an ideal as Polaris for our decisions we are lost.

Do immutable flaws in human nature require us to accept war as a given? Or is it possible to progress? In the way that we moved from struck flint to light switch, may we move toward

...both Axis and Allied church leaders preached the "just" war, arguing that God blessed their atrocities while condemning those of their opponents.

a world in which war is, if not eliminated, at least shorn of its allure? Instead we are engaged in an experiment to prove that military training can dehumanize women as effectively as men.

Maybe the impulse that leads the neighborhood bully to demolish the sand castle must periodically have its way; maybe many small wars relieve the pressure of some atavistic need to destroy what we have built. I am more prepared to accept that logic than the Thomist notion that some wars are just, some violence righteous.

But mercy is a virtue reserved to the powerful. Had we responded to 9/11 by spending the trillions devoted to wars in Afghanistan and Iraq on humanitarian and environmental

projects, abroad and at home, might we now feel more rather than less safe?

The brilliance of terrorism is that it has lured us off base, goaded us into abandoning our finest qualities and ideals—our native generosity and our founding principles, equal justice before law and the right to habeas corpus among them. In place of generosity we build and fuel our war economy. In doing so we bring to pass the terrorists' fantasy and goal: we become like them.

We already know what we need to do to diminish war and to heal our broken relationship to the planet. Our wise ones have been delivering the message for thousands of years. Every great wisdom tradition teaches that the true "war"—if it must be so named—is not exterior but interior, not with each other but within our hearts. Our failure is not of technology but of imagination—our incapacity or unwillingness to imagine a world in which we might cultivate "martial" virtues through pacific paths.

A seasoned warrior inadvertently makes my point. On the penultimate page of his Iraq war memoir *One Bullet Away* Marine Corps Captain Nathaniel Fick writes that he was not proud of what he did: "shooting kids, cowering in terror behind a berm, dropping artillery on people's homes." But he ends his book:

> *The good didn't feel as good as the bad felt bad...I hope life improves for the people of Afghanistan and Iraq, but that's not why we did it. We fought for each other.*
>
> *I am proud.*

Perhaps my pacifism is a naïve remnant of a time when the world held fewer people and the resources needed to feed and clothe and house them seemed inexhaustible. Maybe the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights were convenient covers for greed, and our *bourgeois* revolution rooted in our forefathers' desire to get rich unfettered by royal taxes more than in their commitment to liberty and justice. Perhaps we are more jaded but more honest to temper our aspirations for government as an instrument of human dignity, settling instead for its facilitating the making and spending of money—in which case a gun is the most useful of tools. Perhaps, as ancient tribes believed, history is circular and there is no redemption from our essentially corrupt natures. Perhaps, as unregulated capitalism requires, nothing is sacred, most particularly the lives of the poor. Every creature and concept carries a price tag, and beauty is a commodity to be purchased with blood or money.

But civilization's primary project is to offer our Nathaniel Ficks ways of seeking beauty. Consider our blocks of blighted urban housing, or deteriorating parks, or the understaffed classrooms of inner-city and rural schools; consider the improvements in prosperity brought about by basic literacy and preventive medicine programs; consider my students' longing for meaning and purpose, an outlet for their burning desire to use their talents.

Driving past the vacant steel mills of Charleston, West Virginia, I imagined them equipped with translucent roofs and transformed into vast greenhouses, employing hundreds in raising hardy winter greens for delivery to East Coast cities, reducing our petroleum footprint and providing healthy food and self-respect-generating employment. In barely two years the U.S. constructed its Titan Missile sites. What might we achieve if our leaders motivated us not to destroy the Earth but to heal it? ■