



NEITHER
VICTIMS
NOR
EXECUTIONERS

BY
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PREFACE BY ROBERT PICKUS

Preface —

Only he who has measured the
dominion of (violence) and
knows how not to respect it,
is capable of love and justice.

SIMONE WEIL, *The Iliad*

WE CAN COUNT on injustice in human affairs; on privilege, exploitation, and violence. Violence, which in its ability to turn a living man into a thing, inflicts the final unalterable injustice.

But we can count, too, on men and on social movements to challenge, and by challenging to limit, this grim reality. In one era a revived religious or political tradition, in another a movement of the oppressed, but in every time, some men will affirm dignity and brotherhood and the superiority of the human person over all the political, economic and social mechanisms which oppress him.*

There is a special tragic moment in history when such men and such movements lose their bearings; when the spirit and goal that characterized them fundamentally alters; when an accurate statement of their spiritual health would be Nietzsche: "I have forgotten why ever I began."

Something like that has happened to the anti-war movement in America.

*See Ignazio Silone's eloquent statement in *The God That Failed*.

In the shadow of Hiroshima, we had in America a clear goal and a moral commitment to sustain it. The goal was to end war. The moral commitment was the refusal to legitimize murder. "Not," as Camus put it, "a world in which murder no longer exists (we are not so crazy as that!), but rather one in which it is no longer legitimate." We had passed, it seemed, a time in which political abstractions could obscure the person opposing us, submerge that MAN in some abstraction, and thereby open the way for mass violence. We knew, it appeared, that once we abandoned responsibility to that individual human being in the name of Freedom, Justice, or Patriotism, it was just an accident of history whether we dropped the bomb or were hit; whether we became the victim or the executioner.

This moral commitment led us to a political task: the construction of world institutions able to counter the threat of war. In that day, the Tennessee State Legislature opposed all war and passed resolutions on World Federalism.

Today, it is not just the mainstream of American politics that has learned Dr. Strangelove's lesson of how to stop worrying and love — or at least ignore — the bomb. The peace movement itself has become one of the prime carriers of new justifications for violence.

Dominated by passionate opposition to U.S. policy in Vietnam, the present anti-war movement contains an incredible admixture of good and evil. For the first time since the period just after World War II (with the possible exception of the campaign against nuclear tests in the early '60s), millions of Americans are questioning or challenging the use of national military power. But many are doing so in a context that will not aid, but make it more difficult to build the institutions and understandings essential to end war.

At best the anti-Vietnam-war movement has forced our government to limit its reliance on military power and to accept some of the risks involved in achieving a negotiated settlement of the war; at its worst, it has substituted for a genuine anti-war movement, a movement to withdraw American power from world politics. While opposition to American military power can be a part of an anti-war movement, it cannot alone constitute such a movement, for by definition an anti-war movement must concern itself with the use of military power by all states and political forces.

At its best the Vietnam anti-war movement has been an impressive and heartening demonstration of moral opposition to war; at its worst it has corrupted this commitment to human brotherhood into its opposite: justifications of hatred and violence against America, replacing official justifications of violence by America.

At its best the anti-Vietnam-war movement has torn to shreds a self-righteous and ignorant anti-communism that so seriously damaged the possibilities of American leadership toward a world without war; at its worst, present currents simply replace the Communist villain with a one-eyed castigation of the American polity and American violence. Such an approach accepts no responsibility for developing policies to forestall the threat of mass violence from other sources and demonstrates no appreciation of human values most hopefully expressed in our governmental tradition.

At its best the present anti-war movement has opened the channels of public discussion and has asserted the citizen's responsibility to refuse to cooperate with policies he feels to be fundamentally immoral. It has exposed the half-truths and untruths of official propaganda. At its worst, the anti-war movement has simply substituted its own half-truths and untruths and has seriously threatened the framework of law and representative institutions that makes non-violent change possible.

The currents moving in today's anti-war movement are complex. Generous and humane values launched profound opposition to the war in Vietnam and these values continue to sustain it. But it is clear that key leadership and many of the major themes of that opposition are now obstacles that must, themselves, be overcome. If we are ever to replace the morality and politics that justify war.

Close observers of the peace movement are no longer shocked when a rifle target superimposed on a picture of Hubert Humphrey is featured in the newspaper for 'peace' protesters at the Chicago Democratic Convention, or when Americans described in the press as "anti-war" leaders, shout "We are all Viet Cong!" at a meeting with N.L.F. representatives in Bratislava, or sign "victory!" to letters to military leaders in Hanoi.

One can understand why many, especially the young, taking counsel only from their own anguish at the actions of their government in Vietnam, follow such leadership.

But we must count the cost. What was set in motion by our powers of love and indignation now reinforces what we set out to resist. New just war theories bulwark old rationales for violence. When the Vietnam war ends, it will become apparent that in a world still dominated by the threat and fact of war, we have, in fact, no peace movement.

As in the peace movement, so in the civil rights movement. What rested originally on a fundamental assertion of the dignity of the human person has become transformed into its opposite by familiar justifications for abandoning such a moral commitment to the exigencies of the struggle for power.

Far from challenging American society, some Black Power leaders parody it. Determined to challenge the most shameful evil in American history, they repeat it in a new form. They too refuse to see the human being. There is only "whitey." "Violence is as American as cherry pie" say these contemporary exemplars of that ominous truth. Caught in the rhetoric and fact of violence, as pitiless in its demands on those that use it as it is on those that suffer under it, they play their parts in a familiar play, simply demanding changed roles.

One cannot equate the 15 policemen and 50 demonstrators injured in the latest "confrontation" with the bombed and mortared thousands in Vietnam. The violence is not equal. But in one sense, violence in cause movements is worse. The enormity that is governmental violence is the disease. When the very movements designed to challenge this violence adopt the same values, the instruments for gaining sanity and health are themselves corrupted.

There is then "no foundation, all the way down the line."

The failure to hold to the values which undergird opposition to war makes the anti-war movement vulnerable to confusion, and worse, corruption. We are living such a failure. Its consequences now blight the promise of American politics. At a time of heightened and widely felt political concern among the young, the intellectuals, the religious community, we are experiencing the growth of a military, nationalist and repressive Right, incapable, in its straitened human concern, of meeting the rising and hopeful demand for change.

The movements which could reverse such developments instead help strengthen them; the original idealism of the anti-war movement takes on a fundamentally different character. Che Guevara and Frantz Fanon are its heroes and Revolution becomes another word for war.

It is appropriate at such a time to republish NEITHER VICTIMS NOR EXECUTIONERS; appropriate too that the publisher be an organization devoted to work for an end to war, through all the season of crisis and unconcern that must lead to that end — or to a nuclear holocaust.

Camus' essay first appeared in the fall of 1946, in COMBAT, the newspaper of the French Resistance which he helped edit during the Nazi occupation and for a short time after the war. Reprinting it now, twenty-two years later, is a political act. For in it Camus does more than eloquently state a value position. He also demonstrates a method for achieving agreement on values. He appeals to intelligence. "Sincerity," he says, "is not in itself a virtue: some kinds are so confused, they are worse than lies." One has only to live in Berkeley, read the underground press, or watch passion and ignorance combine to turn an anti-war innocent into a draft board bomber, to appreciate the importance of Camus' commitment to reason. In a time when norms of reason and intelligence are abandoned, not simply in cause movements but in the University, returning to this commitment is the first step toward reconstructing the foundations of a sound anti-war movement.

5

I have never agreed with those standard English Department texts that treat Camus as the modern who "needs to believe and cannot," whose courage lies in his refusal to sink back into older forms of belief or to give up the search for meaning. "NEITHER VICTIMS NOR EXECUTIONERS" is not a statement of predicament; it is a statement of faith. In it Camus addressed directly the rationale for revolutionary violence that moved in his time; and set against it understandings that armour a man against the invitation to outrage that lives at the center of most contemporary politics. Camus was not part of the strand in the pacifist tradition that counsels a withdrawal from politics in the interest of a personal purity. His was a political statement. One addressed precisely to the political tragedy that unfolds as elements in the present anti-war movement ally themselves with and are absorbed in currents committed to revolutionary violence.

The currents justifying violence have grown apace. They have met no significant challenge rooted in the values from which the anti-war movement has grown. Now, when much of even the pacifist movement has signed up in the revolutionary battalions,* Camus' statement is of extraordinary importance.

In NEITHER VICTIMS NOR EXECUTIONERS, Camus charts, with utmost simplicity, the ground on which a genuinely anti-war movement must stand. It is ground which many in the current "peace" movement have abandoned. Until it is regained, we can choose only among opposing armies, which are either frankly murderous, or professing, with varying degrees of fraud, to be for peace.

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*Alfred Hassler of the Fellowship of Reconciliation and Mulford Sibley of the War Resisters' League are two articulate exceptions. See Hassler's editorials in FELLOWSHIP and Sibley's "Revolution and Violence."

The Camus essay is available for 95 cents from the World Without War Council, 1730 Grove Street, Berkeley, CA. 94709.