

EDITORIAL

U.S. Health Professionals Oppose War

Walter J. Lear

Thousands of U.S. physicians, nurses and other health professionals have opposed the several U.S. imperialist wars of the twentieth century. They were distressed by the violent deaths and the serious and multiple injuries to both body and mind inflicted on the people engaged in these wars. They recognized that the victims were combatants and civilian, both in the countries attacked by the U.S. - devastatingly - and in this country -to a lesser but still agonizing extent. War destroyed not only people in the countries that were attacked, but also housing, agriculture, industry and the basic systems and infrastructures essential for healthy and humane living conditions. Both in the United States and abroad the state of war brought a curtailment of human rights and the waste of huge amounts of money that could have been better spent for proper food, education, health care and improvements of the quality of life.

The motivation of these health professionals to oppose these wars was frequently based on one or more of their religious, moral, legal and political beliefs as well as their humanitarian concerns. Among the key individuals in this movement were several physicians and nurses. They expressed their anti-war positions in a variety of ways including for a few, non-violent actions which led to arrests, convictions and time in prison.

World War I

World War I provoked a modest-sized, but nonetheless militant anti-war movement. Among the anti-war movement they were shocked and enraged

when Woodrow Wilson after election as President, broke his pre-election promise to keep the U.S. out of the European war.

William J. Robinson (1867-1936) was a New York City general practitioner well-known for his prolific writings, his vigorous advocacy of sexual enlightenment and birth control, and his independent radical politics. In 1903 he founded his principal journal, *Medical Critic and Guide*, which he edited and published until his death. Simultaneously he edited a number of other professional and popular journals. He wrote over thirty books, almost all dealing with marriage, abortion, venereal diseases and other aspects of "sexology."

Robinson fought U.S. participation in World War I with his strongest resource— his journalistic expertise. The following quotes are from the first issue of *A Voice in the Wilderness* (September 1917) his quixotic, mainly self-written and self-financed anti-war journal which he published for two years. In his impassioned and acrimonious style he expresses the main theme of the journal—his abhorrence of war and his conviction that wars were undertaken primarily for the benefit of national leaders and capitalists and were a calamity for the people.

We are living in truly terrible times: The murder and mutilation of the world's manhood, of the physically best specimens of the nations, the destruction of the material resources of the world, the burning of villages and cities, the actual dying of hunger of millions of children, the indescribable anguish of those left at home, the mothers, fathers, wives, sweethearts, brothers, sisters—all these things are sufficient to break the hearts of the most indifferent, most callous, most unimaginative.

But there are other horrors. The sowing of

Submitted: June 11, 2007; Accepted: June 21, 2007

From: The US Health Left History Collection
206 N. 35th St. Philadelphia, PA 19104

Conflict of Interest: none declared

Corresponding Author: Walter J. Lear

Email: wjlear@critpath.org

hatred; the deliberate poisoning of the minds of a nation against its "enemies"; the successful attempt to make each belligerent nation believe that it is fighting for self-defense, for justice, for liberty, for democracy, and that its war is therefore a holy war, while its "enemy" nations are fighting an aggressive war, a war for autocracy, for world domination, for the enslavement of little nations, and that their war is therefore an unholy war; the deliberate, systematic manufacture of brutal falsehoods, the shameless ridiculing of everything humanitarian, of everything that is kind, gentle and peaceful; the regarding of war not as something essentially vicious and evil tho occasionally unavoidable, but as something essentially good and noble in itself; the fostering and fanning of the vilest passions; the glorification of the most brutal instincts; the trampling upon our most essential rights and liberties acquired by centuries of struggle; the roughshod riding of the autocrats and rowdies over everything that is humane and decent; the justification of every invasion, even if distinctly contrary to the organic law of the land; the clubbing and imprisoning of everybody who dares to express his honest convictions—these moral injuries, these wounds inflicted upon us by a chauvinistically frenzied but powerful minority, will be harder and will take longer to recover from than the purely material losses.

Did we go to war to make the world safe for democracy or safe from democracy?

Yes, we the few who remain true to the ideals of liberty, truth and humanity, cannot help a feeling of despair. But while despairing we must not hold our arms and do nothing. We must not sulk and grieve in our tents. We must not let the forces of darkness and cruelty run over the world unopposed. We must not be silent, even tho our voice be a voice in the wilderness. If we are to be destroyed, let us be destroyed fighting, with our boots on.

James P. Warbasse (1866-1957) was not only a well regarded New York City surgeon but a

founder and leader of the American cooperative movement including the Rochdale Institute and the Cooperative League of the United States. He was on the Executive Committee of the American Union Against Militarism. Because of his pacifist views he was expelled from his county medical society. Alice Hamilton was another of the activist physicians of this period who were anti-war.

Lavinia Dock, Margaret Sanger and Lillian Wald, founders of the field of public health nursing, were also prominent in the movement opposed to U.S. participation in World War I. They considered the elimination of violence between people and nations to be an integral and essential aspect of public health nursing. Dock focused on establishing professional nursing organizations which would be "a moral force on all the great social questions of the day"; she thought healing soldiers was "giving moral support to war which every human being should refuse to give. Does it not make war more tolerable, more possible and, by mitigating, keep it bolstered up and alive?" Sanger asserted that war and birth control were inherently incompatible as the U.S. "obsession" with war blinded the people from seeing the health value of birth control and fostered the disparaging and delimiting definition of women as "breeders."

Wald believed that a major role of public health nursing was treating personal ills by correcting social ills; she helped found and served as president of the American Union Against Militarism. Right after the U.S. declared war, Dock and Wald were among 1500 women who marched down New York City's Fifth Avenue in a Women's Peace Parade.¹

Emma Goldman trained as a nurse and midwife. But during this period she was a leading anarchist, a founder of the No-Conscription League and a vigorous and public advocate of draft resistance. For this latter activity she was tried and convicted of conspiracy under the Espionage Act. She was sentenced to two years in prison and, on release from prison, she was deported.

There follows a few excerpts from her statement to the jury in her anti-conscription trial.²

It is organized violence on top which creates individual violence at the bottom. It is the accumulated indignation against organized wrong, organized crime, organized injustice which drives the political offender to his act. To condemn him means to be blind to the causes which make him. I can no more do that, nor have I the right to, than the physician who would condemn the patient for his disease. The honest, earnest, sincere physician does not only prescribe medicine, he tries to find out the cause of the disease. You and I and all of us who remain indifferent to the crimes of poverty, war and human degradation, are equally responsible for the act committed by the political offender.

Whatever your verdict, gentlemen, it cannot possibly affect the rising tide of discontent in this country against the war which despite all boasts is a war of conquest and military power. Neither can it affect the ever increasing opposition to conscription which is a military and industrial yoke placed on the necks of the American people. Least of all will your verdict affect those to whom human life is sacred, and who will not become a party to world slaughter. Your verdict can only adds to the opinion of the world as to whether or not justice and liberty are a living force in this country or a mere shadow of the past. ...It must be decided sooner or later whether we are justified in telling people that we will give them democracy in Europe, when we have no democracy here. Shall free speech and free assemblage, shall criticism and opinion be destroyed? Shall it be trampled underfoot by any detective or policeman, anyone who decides upon it? Or shall free speech and free assemblage continue to be the heritage of the American people?

The War in Vietnam

The 1963-1975 protest by U.S. citizens of the "undeclared" military participation in the civil war in Vietnam was unique in its character, size and duration. It took many forms including the non-violent ones customary for public political movements. But it also took special forms relevant to its historical context—draft resistance, military

property destruction and Buddhist-style immolations. Contrary to considerable contemporary and subsequent descriptions, this anti-war movement was "not inspired or led by foreign powers... not anti-American, rather it was a movement arising from profound patriotism... not a movement of the young although young people gave it energy and some of its leaders... not a movement of cowards...or licentious counterculturals... not a violent movement... not a monolithic organization following the dictates of one party line. [It was a movement] representative of America's diversity."³

Activist health professionals were already mobilized by their participation in the Civil Rights Movement. Their organization was called the Medical Committee for Human Rights (MCHR). MCHR's formal entry into the anti-Vietnam war movement was the unanimous adoption of a resolution at its 1967 convention opposing "this senseless and self-defeating war" as "the problems of Vietnam cannot be solved by military force." MCHR requested of the U.S. government "unilateral, immediate cessation of hostilities... negotiations with all belligerents" and "arrangements for internationally supervised free elections" that would "recognize the right of the Vietnamese people to determine their own identity." The American Public Health Association and other professional health organizations had similar "peace" policies and activities. Health professionals in Boston, Chicago, New York City, San Francisco and elsewhere provided energy, money, leadership and impressive credentials to lobbying, petitions, rallies and marches. A special function of anti-war physicians in many cities was draft counseling and examinations.

One of the most extensively involved (and publicized) anti-war physicians was the pediatrician Benjamin Spock, the famous "Dr. Spock." He was arrested for civil disobedience in several of the many anti-war demonstrations he participated in. His part in 1968 anti-draft activities resulted in his indictment for counseling and abetting resistance to the draft. After a notable trial and conviction, he was given a two year prison sentence which on appeal was rescinded. At the press conference immediately after the trial, Spock, ("a towering personification of

wrath" as noted by Jessica Mitford) shouted to the nation these final words: "Wake up America! Wake up before it is too late! Do something now!"⁴

The anti-war activities of two nurses, Susan Schnall and Jane Kennedy, were particularly notable for their creativity and daring. Susan Schnall was a MCHR chairwoman. In 1968 while wearing her Navy uniform she distributed anti-war leaflets from an airplane over military installations in the San Francisco area. She was court-martialed and discharged. Later she helped organize and staff a militarism education coffee-house adjacent to the Fort Sam Houston Army Medical Center in San Antonio, Texas.

In 1969 Jane Kennedy, a MCHR vice-chairwoman, and seven other pacifists, broke into the offices of local draft boards in Indianapolis destroying hundreds of draft files. They also entered the Dow Chemical Research Center in Midland, Michigan, destroying tapes and processing cards for military scientific research. After publicly claiming responsibility for these activities, the eight were arrested, convicted and sentenced to five year prison terms. While imprisoned Jane launched campaigns to improve prison health services and living conditions.

Howard Levy, a dermatologist, was drafted into the Army in 1967. A short time later he refused to obey an order to train Green Berets (Special Services Aidmen headed for Vietnam) in dermatological skills. He understood that these skills would be used as part of the Aidmen's official function to curry favor and coerce desired behavior from the "enemy" not simply as ethically proper health service. He was charged with willful disobedience and promotion of disaffection and disloyalty among the enlisted men. He was court-martialed. At his news-worthy trial; his defense argued that the political use of medicine jeopardized the internationally approved tradition of the noncombatant status of medicine. Nonetheless, he was given a dishonorable discharge and sentenced to three years of hard labor at Leavenworth military prison.

The 1991 Gulf War

The 1991 Gulf War provoked over 200 military personnel including one physician, to

become conscientious objectors, disobeying military orders and requiring military reprisals. Yolanda Huet-Vaughn, a Kansas City family practitioner and mother of three children, was a captain in the U.S. Army Medical Corps Reserve and was called to active duty service in December 1990. After refusing to serve she was classified as a "deserter", court-martialed and sentenced to thirty months in prison. Excerpts from her eloquent explanatory statement follow:⁵

I am refusing orders to be an accomplice in what I consider an immoral, inhumane and unconstitutional act, namely an offensive military mobilization in the Middle East. My oath as a citizen-soldier to defend the Constitution, my oath as a physician to preserve life and prevent disease, and my responsibility as a human being to the preservation of this planet, would be violated if I cooperate with Operation Desert Shield. I had hoped that we as people had learned the lessons of Vietnam—50,000 Americans dead and hundreds of thousands of civilians dead—and environmental disaster. What we face in the Middle East is death and destruction on a grander scale. ... The majority of casualties will be civilians, as 57 percent of the population of Iraq and Kuwait are concentrated in urban centers. Of this civilian population, 47 percent are children under the age of fifteen. ... As a mother I am keenly aware of the long-term medical and environmental consequences that may occur in the Middle East region and which may indeed have a global impact if war breaks out.

From a medical point of view, the public has been misled concerning the catastrophic nature of wounds and injuries that will befall combatants and civilians. Are we as Americans willing to live through the evening news tallies of dead and wounded Americans knowing in advance that this war was avoidable? As a doctor I know that where there can be no medical cure, prevention is the only remedy. I therefore commit my medical knowledge and training to the effort to avert war by refusing orders to participate in Operation Desert Shield. ... I urge our political

and military leaders to acknowledge the severity of these medical and environmental consequences in committing themselves to diplomatic solutions. I consider myself a patriot and have taken these actions in support of American troops who have been deployed in the Gulf region, in support of the American people, and in support of the children both here and in the Middle East who have no voice. I hope that in some small way my act of conscience will help promote peaceful resolution of the Gulf crisis.

Lessons learned

These anti-war health professionals in their consideration of war use a disease model—they emphasize finding the cause and eliminating it. Deeply committed to the health and well-being of the people of this country and throughout the world, they identify the cause of war more or less explicitly whether 1917 or 1991, as the quest of the powerful and wealthy for more power and more wealth. Obviously eliminating that cause is a daunting task.

Barry Levy and Victor Sidel in their timely book *War and Public Health* include in their final chapter a summary of the roles health professionals can play in preventing war and its consequences; their summary is a fitting and excellent conclusion to the lessons that emerge from the stories reported here:⁶

- Participating in surveillance and documentation of the health effects of war and of the factors that may cause war.
- Developing and implementing education and awareness-raising programs on the health effects of war.

- Advocating policies and promoting actions to prevent war and its health consequences.
- Working directly in actions to prevent war and its consequences.

Perhaps because I am an activist, I believe the greatest need is for the last two recommendations. Many, many more U.S health professionals should be vigorously fighting the unhealthy and immoral obsession of the U.S. with war.

References:

1. Temkin, E. "Nurses and the Prevention of War: Public Health Nurses and the Peace Movement in World War I" in *War and Public Health* edited by Barry E. Levy and Victor W. Sidel, American Public Health Association, Washington, DC, 2006 pp. 350-59.
2. "Emma Goldman, Address to the Jury in U.S. v. Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman (July 9, 1917)" in Zinn, H. Amove, A. (eds.), *Voices of a People's History of the United States*, Seven Stories Press, New York, 2004, pp. 292-94.
3. Zaroulis N, Sullivan G. *Who Spoke Up: American Protest Against the War in Vietnam, 1963-1975*, Doubleday Press, Garden City, 1984 pp. xii-xiii.
4. Mitford, J. *The trial of Dr. Spock, the Rev. William Sloane Coffin Jr, Michael Goodman and Marcus Raskin*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1969, p. 272.
5. "Yolanda Huet-Vaughn, Statement Refusing to Serve in the 1991 Gulf War (January9, 1991" in Zinn, H. Amove, A. (eds.), *Voices of a People's History of the United States*, Seven Stories Press, New York, 2004, pp.555-57.
6. Levy, BE, Sidel VW. (eds) *War and Public Health* American Public Health Association, Washington, DC 2006 pp. 388.

