

**A WRINKLE IN THE LONG GRAY LINE: When Conscience and Convention Collided**

*Poorly shod and poorly clad, they march away [to war] beneath his banners, oftentimes with no better arms than a sickle or a sharpened hoe, or a maul they made themselves by lashing a stone to a stick with strips of hide. Brothers march with brothers, sons with fathers, friends with friends. They've heard the songs and stories, so they go off with eager hearts, dreaming of the wonders they will see, of the wealth and glory they will win. War seems a fine adventure, the greatest most of them will ever know.*

**Septon Meribald in "A Feast for Crows," Book 4, *Game of Thrones*, p. 533.**

**PROLOGUE**

When Russia launched a full-scale attack on Ukraine on February 24, 2022, many, including, I believe, Vladimir Putin, thought this would be a short battle that Russia would wrap up in a week. However, I thought to myself that this was a fantasy, and I was right. More than five months later, there is no end in sight to the war. From news reports, the war is a daily slog with Russia claiming it controls the far eastern part of Ukraine, and Ukraine claiming it is closing in on retaking Kherson, a city in the south of Ukraine that was the first city Russia captured.

Meanwhile, Russia has implemented brutal terror campaign against Ukraine civilians, including children, reminiscent of similar "ethnic cleansing" type operations in Kosovo, Rwanda and Somalia, not to mention Germany's holocaust in World War II. And Russia has raised the specter of using nuclear weapons.

Worldwide, the war has increased food shortages because both Ukraine and Russia are major producers and exporters of grain. Russia has effectively blockaded Ukraine ports while

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sanctions on Russia's economy make shippers and even insurers reluctant to ship Russian grain. Even a spark of hope that was raised earlier this week of a deal arranged by Turkey and the UN with Russia and Ukraine designed to allow both countries to export grain may have been short-lived after Russia immediately hit the Ukraine port of Odessa with missiles aimed at civilian targets the day after the grain export deal was announced.

While the US is not directly involved in the Ukraine war, that war has taken a toll here as sanctions on Russia have raised the price of oil (until recently) causing fuel inflation here and around the world. The US is spending heavily on the war, arming Ukraine with more sophisticated and lethal long-range weapons. Perhaps the only people benefitting from the war are the defense contractors who are producing the artillery and rockets we are shipping to Ukraine.

And recently, Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan led China to protest the visit by carrying out military exercises close to Taiwan. This sequence of events has raised tensions between the U.S. and China, the two most powerful countries in the world. If China decides to annex Taiwan by military force, will that lead to another war, and will the U.S. feel compelled to directly assist Taiwan?

Countries never seem to learn. The USSR invaded Afghanistan and ended up bogged down for years in an unsuccessful struggle that raised Osama bin Laden's influence (with the help of the US). The sad tales of the French and the US in Vietnam should have been a warning to Russia, not to mention the disastrous US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. All these military operations beg the question, now that we started this mess: How do we end it?

It brings to mind the Uncle Remus story about Br'er Rabbit and the tar baby, sometimes wrongly described as racist. It isn't. It is a story of resistance, derived from African-American

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folk tales, with Br'er Rabbit being the alter ego of enslaved African-Americans. As usual, Br'er Rabbit was running circles around the physically dominant Brer Fox, and Br'er Fox came up with a plan to end Br'er Rabbit's mischief. Brer Fox found some tar and turpentine, and created a doll shaped from the tar, put clothes on it and placed it in the middle of the road. Br'er Rabbit bopped along the road while Br'er Fox "lay low" in a nearby ditch. When the tar baby ignored Br'er Rabbit's greeting, Brer Rabbit decided to teach the tar baby a lesson. He started punching and kicking the tar baby and soon was stuck tight as Br'er Fox rose gleefully from the ditch, finally in control of Br'er Rabbit. Ultimately, Brer Rabbit escaped, convincing Br'er Fox that the worst he could do to Br'er Rabbit was to throw him in the briar patch, where Br'er Rabbit, at the end of story, gleefully shouts he was "born and bred."

Wars are like the tar baby. Once they start, countries start kicking and punching, increasing military aid, sending more troops, building more weapons and suddenly realize they are stuck. But so far, no one has found a briar patch to escape to. Pride, nationalist fervor, public opinion, fear of looking weak, etc. become overriding concerns even as the original rationale for the war fades away. Witness Russia in Ukraine, which originally made clear its desire to make Ukraine part of Russia, and now seems to focus only on two eastern provinces it has been fighting in for nearly a decade; or the US in Afghanistan, which after twenty years accomplished little, yet its exit proved harrowing and deadly.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The August 6, 1970, front page of *The New York Times* contained a startling headline:

"West Pointer Seeks Discharge as Conscientious Objector."<sup>1</sup> It was startling because a

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/1970/08/06/archives/west-pointer-seeks-discharge-as-a-conscientious-objector-west-point.html>

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conscientious objector, by law, had to be opposed to all wars. On the other hand, a West Point cadet was training to be an officer in the United States Army, which has a mission to engage in war on behalf of the United States. So how could that West Point cadet—me—be opposed to participating in war?

In 1970, I had just finished junior, or “cow,” year, class of ’71, in the top 10% of the class academically and viewed as average militarily. I was in the “boarder’s ward,” where cadets who were leaving due to either choice or academic failure stayed for a few days while being processed out, and ate their last meals at the hospital. I was not being discharged for violating the Cadet Honor Code—a cadet shall not lie, cheat or steal, or tolerate those who do. I was not being discharged for disciplinary reasons. But I was quarantined from other cadets because I had arrived, over my three years at West Point, at deeply held religious beliefs that war is wrong. These beliefs led me to be the first West Point cadet, and to date the only West Point cadet, to seek conscientious objector status.

My soon-to-be first-class (senior) classmates were either touring Army bases or running Beast Barracks, the training program for “plebes,” or incoming freshmen. Plebe is derived from the Latin “plebeian,” for the lowest class of humans, only slightly below dogs. I alone among the nearly 4,000 cadets was sorting mail, by order of the Commandant of Cadets, fraternizing for 8 hours a day with enlisted men and living by myself in a barracks that during the previous school year had housed about 400 to 500 cadets. Because I publicly opposed war—the version at that time being the Vietnam War—the West Point administration treated me as a military pariah, possibly contagious, who needed to be isolated from the other cadets and incoming plebes. I could not eat in the cadet mess hall and was consigned to eating at the hospital with cadets who were quitting or had flunked out. West Point officers apparently were concerned that I could

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transmit my anti-war views by osmosis to new cadets or my classmates who were training them. An internal West Point memo in June 1970 discussed how to make sure I had “minimal contact” with Beast Barracks and new cadets. In fact, they made sure I had no contact.

On the one hand, West Point and the Army claimed my beliefs were not sincere, and therefore, I did not meet rigorous standards for being a conscientious objector. On the other hand, although my beliefs allegedly were not sincere and there was no dispute that I ranked in the middle of my class in military aptitude, I had no aptitude for military service merely because I, apparently insincerely, claimed conscientious objector status. And, as West Point graduate Lucien Truscott IV pointed out in a *Village Voice* article, although West Point said my beliefs were insincere, there was no effort to claim I had violated the Cadet Honor Code by lying.<sup>2</sup>

So, as artist and musician David Byrne has said, “How did I get here?” This question is still relevant today. Just think about the controversy over whether the recent withdrawal from Afghanistan after 20 years of war there has been a success or a failure, or whether the outcome of that war justified the \$2.3 *trillion* cost and the loss of more than 6,000 lives of United States’ service members and contractors. So let me try to explain how a seventeen-year-old who grew up in a military town came face to face over three intense years with his religious upbringing when confronted with teaching other young men that the spirit of the bayonet was “to kill.”

This is my story of how fifty years ago, as a West Point cadet, I took a stand against war. I had hoped that my stand, which made headlines, might influence how our country views war.

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<sup>2</sup> Interestingly enough, West Point and its honor code were again in the news in 2020. Retired Major General Paul Eaton graduated from West Point in 1972, commanded the army infantry center, and trained Iraqi troops. He criticized Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and acting Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, both of whom graduated from West Point in 1986: “What is wrong with West Point class of ‘86? Who mentored you? What happened to the West Point honor code in your class? America is very badly served by these men.”

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Given the uncertainty in which we live, I firmly believe this story is still relevant. I hope this story opens some hearts and minds to the moral and ethical irrationality of war.