

A question of pacifism

After my last column, I was rightly criticized by many people, including Bill Freese and Suresh Mehta in the next week's S&B, for attacking the blind followers of the anti-registration movement without seriously addressing the arguments offered by their leaders. I am indeed sorry that there has been so much silly anti-registration activity that I felt the need to address a general mentality before I could be free to face the more serious arguments against registration. Yet Freese and Mehta thoughtfully offered a classic example of the thoughtlessness now abounding: They implied that the Soviets were somehow less evil in their actions simply because the Afghans had been given nearly two full years to learn to despise their Soviet-backed government before the invasion occurred. I still have no interest in responding to arguments that can be refuted by simply rewording them. However, there remains a very serious and important argument against registration, which I shall now address: it is the question of pacifism.

Most people seem to define pacifism as total opposition to war, but the authors of my dictionary were more insightful. Pacifism, they say, is "the principle or policy of establishing and maintaining universal peace or such relations among all nations that all differences may be adjusted without recourse to war." It is a principle that has, in its broadest expression, made me a vegetarian for eight years. In its more straightforward expression, it forced me into the Vietnam protests, and would lead me into the streets again tomorrow were the President to call for a draft to combat the Russians in Afghanistan. But such a draft is not the issue today; President Carter has declared himself wholeheartedly opposed to it, as have most advocates of increased preparedness. The issue today is registration for a possible future draft, and the relation between that issue and pacifism is more subtle than might be imagined.

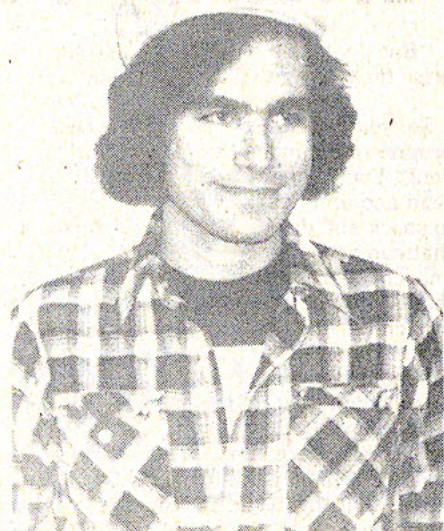
Advocating draft registration while opposing the draft is clearly, perhaps entirely, a symbolic gesture. (The argument about quick mobilization is probably spurious in this nuclear era, but I, for one, haven't the technical expertise to be certain.) Its effects, then, both positive and negative, will be largely psychological, and we should be especially interested in the effects on the Russian and American psyches. As a pacifist, I must ask not

only whether or not an action will turn minds away from war, but whether it will turn minds towards true and universal peace.

Looking at the Russians, I would first point out the uselessness of arguments about whether or not "the Russians are expansionistic." Without a doubt there are sizable factions within the Politburo that are and that are not expansionistic. Since pacifists must be wary of expansionism, which generally means war, and since a power struggle is inevitable in the Soviets' near future, our primary desire must be to see the position of the Soviet warmongers (who are no less real than the American warmongers) made less credible within the Kremlin. Since the expansionists' hands would be strengthened by a general feeling that the Americans will never again resist them militarily, we might do well to send a signal that this is not the case. (Whether or not we should actually be willing to resist militarily is an entirely different question. To those who cannot conceive any time when not going to war would contribute less to universal peace and more to the violence, suffering, and evil in the world than the actual war itself, I would be happy to recommend a few books about the effects of American reluctance to enter World War II.) If American draft registration can have any meaning for the Soviets, it is surely as such a signal. The need to send this message is surely great enough to warrant the risk that it will not be noticed, which is the greatest risk that it entails.

Draft registration is a symbol of the readiness of society to protect its deepest values.

The effects of draft registration on the American psyche is of a rather different nature. With the exception of the corporate bosses who have such a large (though by no means universally effective) voice in American politics, the violence in most American souls



since Vietnam has not been of a militaristic nature. Rather it is the physically violent crimes in the cities and the morally violent crimes of the embezzlers and the tax evaders that most impede the establishment of true peace in America today. It has, unfortunately, become a truism that many of our greatest cultural problems could never exist in any but a democratic society. Such problems are most successfully battled by those who retain an awareness of the essential fragility of human freedom (and of the essential distinction between the fragile and the illusory). If anything can rejuvenate America, it is the simple knowledge that the goal of maintaining and nurturing freedom and peace in the universe is worthwhile.

Draft registration is a symbol of the readiness of a society to protect its deepest values. It is more than an amusing oddity that the country most frequently mentioned by pacifists for its military restraint, Switzerland, has had compulsory military service for centuries. It points rather to a fundamental truth of human nature: Every man has a line beyond which he will not passively be pushed, and the clear demarcation of that boundary decreases the likelihood that it will ever be reached. Even the most dogmatic of pacifists must see that for the majority of Americans such a line exists, and hence must, first and foremost, strive to steer us away from that moment when most Americans, rightly or wrongly, could see no adequate response to the Russian crossing of the line short of (possibly total) warfare. If we are unable as a nation to make it clear to the Russians exactly where that line is—and I am as critical of President Carter's line as the next guy—we can, by the gesture of registration, at least indicate a consensus that, for better or worse, whether in Arabia or Ontario, such a line exists. Only a clear indication that the line exists might make the Russians a little more wary of crossing it.

Scarlet and Black,