

# Conscientious Objection

## From Spiritual Refusal of War to Holistic Resistance Against Systemic Violence

### I. Conceptual Foundations of Conscientious Objection

Conscientious Objection (CO) represents a fundamental mechanism by which an individual maintains fidelity to moral, ethical, or religious principles when faced with compulsory state action, historically centered on military conscription. Defining CO requires acknowledging both the strict legal parameters imposed by governments and the broader ethical imperative that transcends national law.

#### I.A. Defining Conscientious Objection (CO)

At its core, a conscientious objector is an individual claiming the right to refuse military service or the bearing of arms due to freedom of conscience or deep-seated moral or religious convictions.<sup>1</sup> International standards recognize this right, noting that an individual's objection must stem from genuine belief, whether religious or moral/ethical, and cannot be based on mere politics, expediency, or self-interest.<sup>2</sup> The integrity of the claim is often judged by the objector's demonstrated pattern of life; specifically, the beliefs must have demonstrably influenced how the individual lives their life prior to making the claim.<sup>2</sup>

This requirement—that personal conscience must govern practical actions—is crucial, as it sets the historical and ethical precedent for why conscientious objection eventually expanded its scope. If a genuine moral or religious conviction is supposed to shape one's entire existence, then an objection to violence must logically extend to violence embedded within economic or legal systems, not just military conflict. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights supports this right, and international bodies, such as the UN Human Rights Commission, formally recognized the right to conscientious objection in 1987.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore,

this recognition extends even to those already performing military service who may subsequently develop such objections.<sup>1</sup>

## **I.B. Conscience Beyond the Battlefield: Holistic Objection to Harm**

While military service remains the most recognized context, the principle of conscientious objection also applies robustly in professional ethics, particularly in fields like medicine. Medical professionals sometimes claim CO status regarding certain procedures (such as abortion or lethal injection) that they deem morally unacceptable.<sup>3</sup> This context provides significant insight into the nature of deep-seated moral resistance.

The objection in a professional setting is not merely a negative refusal, but often stems from a positive precept or moral obligation in the mind of the objector—a duty to adhere to a specific standard of moral living and professional practice.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the CO is not simply refusing to provide care, but refusing to treat the patient in a way that violates their core values.<sup>4</sup> They seek exemption not only from performing the act they consider immoral, but also from facilitating the patient's ability to obtain that act, ensuring their complicity remains minimal.<sup>3</sup> Critics frequently frame this resistance as a denial or refusal of care, but proponents emphasize that it is better understood as "compliance with the obligations of moral living".<sup>4</sup> This reframing is essential for understanding the transition to holistic conscientious objection, which similarly focuses on the positive duty to construct justice and support systems (see Section VI), rather than simple negation.

## **II. The Quaker Peace Testimony: Theological and Historical Foundation (1651–1917)**

The concept of conscientious objection finds one of its most rigorous and historically tested expressions in the Quaker tradition, rooted in a spiritual stance known as the Peace Testimony. This testimony established CO not as a mere political stance, but as a commitment to an ontological state of being that inherently precludes violence.

### **II.A. The Foundational Doctrine: Spiritual Peace**

The theological core of the Peace Testimony was articulated by George Fox in 1651. When offered a commission in the army, Fox famously stated that he "knew whence all wars arose, even from the lusts" and proclaimed that he lived "in the virtue of that life and power that took away the occasion of all wars".<sup>5</sup> This declaration established that true peace is not merely the cessation of fighting; it is a spiritual state achieved by rooting out the primal causes of conflict: lust, aggression, and greed.<sup>5</sup> The refusal of military service thus became an outward affirmation of an inner, comprehensive state of peace.

The theological identification of "lusts" as the origin of war provides the crucial foundational justification for the contemporary expansion of conscientious objection. If the root causes of war are underlying greed and a lust for power, then modern structures like capitalism, colonialism, and white supremacy—which are fundamentally rooted in these same vices—become legitimate targets for the Peace Testimony. The later objection to these systemic structures is therefore seen as the necessary modern application of the 1651 declaration.

The formal codification of this doctrine occurred in 1660, when early Friends declared to King Charles II, "We utterly deny all outward wars and strife and fighting with outward weapons, for any end, or under any pretense whatsoever".<sup>5</sup> This absolute prohibition on military engagement established a long tradition of civil disobedience, often resulting in persecution for Quakers who refused military service or political oaths.<sup>5</sup>

## **II.B. Early Witness and Moral Power**

The history of early CO demonstrates that the moral witness of the objector, often achieved through great suffering, could function as a non-violent political power. During the Civil War (1861–1865), for example, Seth Laughlin, a North Carolina Friend, was forcibly conscripted and endured severe torture, including being suspended by his thumbs and sentenced to be executed by a firing squad.<sup>5</sup> Laughlin's response was to pray for his executioners, an act of such unwavering moral conviction that the firing squad refused the order to fire.<sup>5</sup>

This instance exemplifies how an individual's steadfast non-cooperation can exert a profound moral pressure on the mechanisms of state violence. Laughlin's experience, however, also highlighted a critical internal conflict for the Quaker community: young men were torn between maintaining the absolute peace testimony and supporting the ethical struggle against slavery.<sup>5</sup> This early tension foreshadowed the larger paradox that would eventually drive the movement toward holistic objection in the modern era.

## **III. Historical Evolution of Resistance Tactics (1861–1970s)**

The history of conscientious objection in the United States, particularly among Quaker communities, reveals a pattern of escalating ethical resistance against the mechanisms of conscription. As the state developed more sophisticated systems for managing dissent, objectors responded by moving from refusing combat duty to refusing the entire conscription apparatus.

### **III.A. WWI: The Conflict over Non-Combatant Service**

World War I forced many young men to formally adopt the position of conscientious objection. The state responded by providing specific legal categories for noncombatant service.<sup>5</sup> Recognizing the need to support objectors and channel their peace efforts, the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) was founded in 1917, primarily to give COs opportunities to aid civilian victims as an alternative to military engagement.<sup>5</sup>

However, this alternative service immediately created a philosophical conflict. Absolutist COs, such as Merlin Chamness of Iowa, refused work orders at Camp Pike, Arkansas, believing that even non-combatant duties could still aid the "military machine".<sup>5</sup> Chamness's refusal resulted in brutal beatings and confinement in a dark dungeon, illustrating the severe persecution faced by those who refused to accept the state's compromise.<sup>5</sup> While others, like Arthur Standing and Jesse Standing, were eventually furloughed to the AFSC for reconstruction work in France, the choice between principled refusal and grudging compromise became a defining ethical struggle.<sup>5</sup>

### **III.B. The Radical Step: Refusal to Register**

Following the experience of WWI, the next escalation of resistance targeted the legitimacy of conscription itself. During World War II and the ensuing peacetime draft, many Friends participated in Civilian Public Service (CPS) camps, performing alternative "work of national

importance" under civilian direction.<sup>5</sup>

However, the most radical philosophical departure was the refusal to cooperate with the preliminary phase of conscription: mandatory registration. Don Laughlin and Harold Burnham, teachers at Scattergood School, refused to register under the Selective Service Act of 1948.<sup>5</sup> Laughlin articulated that he believed participation in the military program violated God's laws, and he could not participate, "even to the extent of registering".<sup>5</sup> This refusal was a critical step, moving beyond the objection to physical service (which could be addressed by CPS) to an objection to the very state apparatus of conscription. By refusing to register, they directly challenged the state's fundamental right to maintain a registry of potential draftees.<sup>5</sup> For their non-cooperation, they were sentenced to 18 months in federal prison.<sup>5</sup>

### **III.C. The Vietnam-Era Critique: CO Status as Co-optation**

The escalation culminated during the Vietnam War with a trenchant philosophical critique of conscientious objector status itself. The 1968 "Epistle to Friends Concerning Military Conscription" argued that accepting CO status, or participating in civilian service mandated by the conscription system, rendered one "part of the power which forces our brothers into the military and into war".<sup>5</sup>

This perspective maintained that the traditional CO path served to "co-opt people opposed to war" by providing a legal loophole that diffused dissent and deflected criticism away from the Selective Service System.<sup>5</sup> Jeff Kisling, a student at Scattergood, embodied this resistance. In 1969, he viewed CO status as the "safe alternative" that compromised his integrity. He returned his draft cards, refusing to acknowledge he was performing alternative service, and instead insisted he was working for peace on his own terms.<sup>5</sup> Kisling faced a felony conviction and imprisonment for draft resistance, but his resistance affirmed the necessity of uncompromised moral witness.<sup>5</sup>

Kisling's action provided a significant link between anti-war activism and the later push for holistic resistance. He observed that refusing to fight in a foreign war was inherently an act of refusing to be an agent of colonialism, asking: "What could be more 'colonial' than participating in the military might of this country against other countries and peoples?".<sup>5</sup> This statement explicitly connected military opposition to the expansion of U.S. empire, setting the stage for the modern concept of holistic objection.

The progression of CO resistance can be summarized as an ever-deepening rejection of state accommodation, driven by the realization that state-sanctioned alternatives dilute the moral and political effectiveness of the objection. The following table illustrates this crucial historical

trajectory:

### Historical Progression of Conscientious Objection Resistance

<b>Era/Conflict</b>	<b>Primary Resistance Tactic</b>	<b>Key Individuals/Examples</b>	<b>Consequence/Evolution</b>
Civil War (1860s)	Refusal of combat duty, endured torture	Seth Laughlin	Led to severe persecution; highlighted conflict between peace and abolition. <sup>5</sup>
WWI (1910s)	Refusal of non-combatant work orders	Merlin Chamness	Defined "absolutist COs" who faced severe persecution despite non-combatant service categories. <sup>5</sup>
WWII & Peacetime Draft (1940s)	Refusal to register for conscription	Don Laughlin, Harold Burnham	Marked the radical step of refusing the state apparatus itself. <sup>5</sup>
Vietnam Era (1960s)	Refusal of CO status and alternative service	Jeff Kisling	Challenged CO status as a tool for co-opting dissent and compromising integrity. <sup>5</sup>

## IV. The U.S. Legal Framework for Conscientious Objector Status

Despite the historical and ethical imperative to refuse cooperation with the state apparatus, the contemporary legal reality in the United States requires engagement with the Selective Service System (SSS). This creates a fundamental tension between legal compliance and

ethical integrity for modern objectors.

## **IV.A. Current Selective Service Requirements**

Federal law mandates that nearly all male U.S. citizens and immigrants (including legal permanent residents, refugees, and undocumented immigrants) between the ages of 18 and 25 must register with the SSS.<sup>8</sup> The SSS functions as a national registry designed to collect demographic information (address, Social Security Number, email) that the Department of Defense would use to rapidly mobilize personnel in case a national emergency draft is authorized by the President and Congress.<sup>7</sup> The system also maintains a network of civilian "draft boards" tasked with determining classifications, including CO status, during a mobilization.<sup>7</sup>

The consequence for non-compliance with the registration requirement is significant: individuals who fail to register cannot receive federal financial aid for college or be employed by the federal government.<sup>10</sup>

## **IV.B. Claiming CO Status in a Drafted Scenario**

The process for claiming CO status highlights the bureaucratic mechanism used to manage dissent. All conscientious objectors are legally required to register with the SSS.<sup>2</sup> Crucially, when an individual registers, there is no option on the form to declare CO status, nor is anything written on the card saved, as the physical card is destroyed once the data is entered into the system.<sup>10</sup>

A man may only claim CO classification *after* he has been notified that he is found qualified for military service during a national draft.<sup>2</sup> At that point, he must appear before his local draft board to explain his beliefs. The burden of proof rests entirely on the registrant, who must provide written documentation detailing how he arrived at his beliefs and how those convictions have consistently influenced his life.<sup>2</sup> The system operates by decoupling mandatory compliance (registration) from classification (CO status granted only upon induction). This separation ensures the state maintains its essential registry while simultaneously filtering out claims based on sudden political motivation, favoring only those who can demonstrate a deeply integrated, consistent moral life history.

## IV.C. Practical Requirements for Preparation

Given that classification is contingent on proving consistency over time, individuals who anticipate filing for CO status must immediately begin creating a verifiable paper trail.<sup>10</sup>

The methodology for establishing this documentation must be precise: one should write a dated letter to their religious organization or community stating their convictions, including when, where, and how those beliefs were established. To ensure the date and content are incontrovertible, the letter should be mailed to oneself via Certified Mail and kept strictly unopened. The dates on the sealed envelope provide legally sound evidence of the consistency of the belief prior to the draft announcement.<sup>10</sup> This legal requirement stands in stark contrast to the historical ethical position of Don Laughlin, necessitating a critical choice for contemporary objectors: cooperate legally by registering and documenting, or adhere to the historical ethical absolute by refusing all cooperation and facing potential felony charges.<sup>5</sup>

Peace organizations, such as the AFSC, actively campaign to end the Selective Service requirement for everyone, arguing that any expansion, such as proposals to include women, represents a step backward toward militarism.<sup>7</sup>

## V. The Evolution to Systemic Resistance: Holistic Conscientious Objection

The most profound contemporary evolution of the CO concept is its expansion from opposing individual participation in war to a **holistic conscientious objection** against interconnected systems of structural violence. This evolution was spurred by recognizing an internal contradiction within the history of the traditional Peace Testimony.

### V.A. Recognizing the Historical Paradox

Historical analysis of Quaker practice indicates the presence of "two different and contradictory peace testimonies".<sup>5</sup> Traditionally, Quakers maintained a rigorous commitment to refusing military service in European and American conflicts—the "white wars." Yet, this

same community often remained complicit in, and even benefited from, the systemic violence directed against Indigenous peoples, profiting from colonial expansion and empire.<sup>5</sup>

This contradiction—resisting one form of violence while profiting from another—demanded an ethical correction and forced the community to expand the scope of its resistance to structural issues.<sup>5</sup> The realization of historical complicity became the moral driver for the expansion of CO, reframing the contemporary movement as an act of ethical reckoning and potential spiritual reparation for past structural benefits.

## V.B. Defining Holistic Conscientious Objection

Holistic conscientious objection mandates a rejection of what is identified as "Christian Colonial Capitalist Violence"—a composite system of oppression.<sup>5</sup> The objective is to resist this entire interlocking system with the same spiritual intensity that traditional objectors applied to refusing military service.<sup>5</sup>

This systemic objection leads to the "New CO" framework, proposed to integrate core decolonial commitments—LANDBACK, Mutual Aid, and Abolition—into the familiar Quaker language of peace and resistance.<sup>5</sup> The scope of resistance thus extends far beyond the draft board. The modern "Epistle to Friends Regarding Community, Mutual Aid and LANDBACK" explicitly mirrors the historical anti-conscription language, stating: "We conscientiously object to and resist capitalism and white supremacy".<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, this holistic objection extends to refusing to grant legitimacy to the unjust system itself, often manifesting as a refusal of traditional political engagement, such as voting. This mirrors the integrity of the traditional CO who refused to cooperate with the conscription mechanism, regardless of the consequences.<sup>5</sup> This new framework requires dismantling the foundational systems of harm, functioning as a structural approach to peace-building that moves beyond individual refusal.

The following comparative analysis details the critical differences between the historical and holistic models of conscientious objection:

### Distinction Between Traditional and Holistic Conscientious Objection

Feature	Traditional Conscientious Objection (Military)	Holistic Conscientious Objection (Systemic)
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<b>Focus of Refusal</b>	Participation in military service, war, and direct armed conflict (anti-war). <sup>5</sup>	The entire interlocking system of "Christian Colonial Capitalist Violence". <sup>5</sup>
<b>Historical Driver</b>	Rooted in spiritual refusal of violence (George Fox). <sup>5</sup>	Driven by recognizing historical structural complicity in colonialism and empire. <sup>5</sup>
<b>Targets of Resistance</b>	The Selective Service System and the Department of Defense.[8]	Domestic instruments of state violence (Police, Prisons) and economic exploitation. <sup>5</sup>
<b>Modern Commitments</b>	Alternative civilian service (if legally accepted). <sup>5</sup>	Abolition (as the necessary expression of peace), LANDBACK, and Mutual Aid. <sup>5</sup>

## VI. The Contemporary Practice of Peace: Abolition, Decolonization, and Mutual Aid

Holistic CO requires tangible commitments that move beyond the negative act of refusal into the positive act of construction—building new, just structures in place of the old oppressive ones. This represents a philosophical shift from achieving "Negative Peace" (absence of conflict) to actively establishing "Positive Peace" (presence of justice).

### VI.A. Abolition as the Necessary Expression of Peace

In the holistic framework, **Abolition**—specifically, the dismantling of the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC)—is reframed as "the necessary expression of the testimony of Peace".<sup>5</sup> This commitment focuses on rejecting domestic instruments of state violence, such as police and prisons, which function to enforce the colonial order.<sup>5</sup>

This stance is reinforced by the critique that the PIC "normalizes and reproduces violence rather than ending it," making its elimination a prerequisite for achieving true peace and justice.<sup>11</sup> Conceptual analysis suggests that the true opposite of violence is not simply non-violence, but **power**, understood as the human ability "to act in concert".<sup>12</sup> Therefore, abolitionist work—which demands collective organizing and communal action—is seen as an act of generating power in concert against systemic violence, fulfilling the ancient mandate to take away the occasion for all wars.

## VI.B. Mutual Aid and Constructing Positive Peace

**Mutual Aid** is central to the New CO framework, establishing social and economic relations based on reciprocity and collective power.<sup>11</sup> This practice empowers communities to meet essential needs like housing, healthcare, and food, asserting a communal, reciprocal structure in direct refusal of the capitalist system's demand for individualism and competition.<sup>5</sup>

Mutual aid is specifically premised on solidarity, rejecting hierarchy, authoritarianism, and "saviorism".<sup>11</sup> By demonstrating alternatives, it actively exposes the failures of the current system.<sup>11</sup> As an act of conscientious objection, it provides the positive framework for replacement, moving the Peace Testimony into the realm of economic and social justice.

## VI.C. LANDBACK and Decolonial Integrity

The commitment to **LANDBACK** provides the necessary decolonial integrity for the holistic objection.<sup>5</sup> This commitment serves as the practical application of refusing to be an agent of colonialism, as articulated by the Vietnam-era resisters.<sup>5</sup> Engagement with LANDBACK ensures that the objection to systemic violence is not merely theoretical but translates into material actions that address the foundational violence of colonial acquisition.<sup>5</sup> These decolonial commitments are explicitly linked within the modern epistles, reinforcing that peace cannot be divorced from spatial and historical justice.<sup>5</sup>

## VII. Conclusion

Conscientious objection has evolved from a spiritual, individual refusal of warfare into a robust, legally contested, and philosophically expansive commitment to dismantling structural violence. The analysis demonstrates a continuous trajectory of ethical escalation, driven by a principled refusal to be co-opted or complicit in state violence, culminating in the contemporary concept of Holistic CO.

The enduring challenge for the conscientious objector lies in navigating the tension between legal compliance and moral integrity. While historical precedent validates the absolute refusal of the state apparatus (e.g., refusing to register), current U.S. law forces compliance with registration, demanding that individuals expend considerable effort to document a "verifiable paper trail" proving consistency of belief prior to any draft mobilization.<sup>2</sup> This tension ensures that genuine conscientious objection remains a difficult and often penalized act of fidelity.

The emergence of Holistic Conscientious Objection marks a sophisticated maturation of the Peace Testimony. By recognizing the critical historical paradox of resisting war while supporting colonialism, the movement has established a compelling mandate for action. The linkage of peace to Abolition, LANDBACK, and Mutual Aid reframes the act of conscientious objection as a collective, constructive effort to establish justice and collective power, rejecting the interlocking systems of oppression. Ultimately, the concept has transitioned from a primarily negative moral imperative (refusing to kill) to a positive, structural imperative (actively building a world where the occasion for violence has been systematically removed).

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