

The Case for Conscientious Objection

By [Andrew Young](#)

Andrew Young is a senior history major at Kentucky Wesleyan College in Owensboro, Kentucky, where he won the Powell Peace Award in 2004.

In George W. Bush's America, few are willing to call themselves conscientious objectors. Often, when I tell someone I am one, they ask how I could oppose any resort to war. The answer is less complex than one might think. In fact, my objection to war rests mostly on principles upon which most Americans agree. Americans who believe in the sanctity of human life and that it should only be taken when the full reason has been disclosed should tolerate, if not adopt, conscientious objection.

Unlike most, I reject just war doctrine. War kills civilians and forces young men who might be friends under normal circumstances to kill each other. I think most of us can agree that, for these reasons and others, war is an atrocity. I would venture to say that most would also agree that, if war must be undertaken, the public and those who fight must know exactly why they are killing.

But this is never the case. Governments lie about reasons for war. For example, George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, and Donald Rumsfeld claimed to be invading Iraq to liberate the Iraqi people, but a review of their careers suggests they cared little about human rights. In a [2000 debate with Al Gore](#), George W. Bush praised the Clinton administration for not pursuing a humanitarian intervention in Rwanda. During the 1990s, while CEO of Halliburton, Dick Cheney [lobbied against](#) sanctions on countries that violate human rights. Not surprisingly, Halliburton wanted to do business with these nations. [A Project for a New American Century](#), a document Cheney helped write in 2000 argues that America should attack Iraq to begin a "Pax Americana," in which America will maintain hegemony by controlling oil supplies. Curiously, the Bush administration never told Americans about this motive for war. After September 11, Donald Rumsfeld [supported an attack on Iraq](#) not because he believed Saddam Hussein was involved in the 9/11 attacks, but because there were "more targets" in Iraq than Afghanistan.

Most consider World War II the very definition of a just war, but America's entry into it involved lies as well. Franklin Roosevelt wanted us involved, but the American people did not, so he resorted to manipulation to bring us into the war. Even Henry Kissinger, a fan of FDR, concedes this in his book [Diplomacy](#). Kissinger writes that FDR's methods were "devious in tactic," and, most

importantly, "less than frank in explaining the intricacies of particular events."

If we agree that war is only justified when the people and participants know exactly why they are killing, then we must also agree that there is no such thing as a just war. A thorough look at history proves that governments never tell their people exactly why they must kill; the rhetoric never matches the record. I believe, and I think most people do as well, that forcing one man to take another's life without telling him the whole story is unjust.

Some have asked me how I could oppose a war to topple a brutal dictator who gassed his own people. First, as already mentioned, wars have little to do with liberation; those who championed human rights in the run-up to the Iraq War did so out of convenience, not sincerity. Second, even if we give government the benefit of the doubt, how "humanitarian" is war? The civilians and conscripted soldiers killed during intervention will certainly not be "liberated," nor will the soldiers who will have to live with the fact that they killed them. And wars produce significant numbers of civilian casualties. The "liberation" of Iraq has killed at least [15,000](#). *[Ed. Note: this is a very conservative estimate, based on incidents reported in international newspapers. Other studies put the figure over 100,000.]*

Most Americans believe in the sanctity of human life. Many evangelical Christians, for example, voted for George W. Bush because he promotes a "culture of life," opposing abortion, assisted-suicide laws, and government funding of research on new stem-cell lines. However, Americans enthusiastically support presidents who lead them to war, which denies the sanctity of human life by dehumanizing the enemy. During Vietnam, for example, soldiers killed "Charlies," not people. In the war on terrorism, "Charlies" have been replaced by "terrorists" and "evildoers." Before one of my friends went to Iraq, another friend told him to "kill some towelheads for me." In war, the human beings on the other side are not seen as human; they are given labels that deny their humanity so that soldiers can justify killing them. It is ironic that those who preach about the importance of protecting life are often the most vociferous advocates of a system that denigrates and destroys human life. If Americans truly believe in the sanctity of human life, they should oppose war.

War also denies the sanctity of human life because wartime leaders, determined to win at all costs, show little respect for the lives of their own citizens. Napoleon led his armies on a futile march through Russia that killed hundreds of thousands; Hitler followed a similar path during World War II. And, despite uninformed arguments to the contrary, American leaders have also wasted the lives of their own citizens. For example, two American presidents, Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, continued the Vietnam War even when they knew it could not be won; they

wanted an "honorable" exit, so they allowed thousands of their own citizens to die for a lost cause. Some offer similar arguments for staying in Iraq, saying it would be "humiliating" for the United States to "cut and run." Apparently, they would rather let young men die for a lost cause than suffer the embarrassment of admitting a mistake.

In recent wars, American leaders have decided on "acceptable" casualty figures for specific wars, believing they will lose public support if casualties reach a certain point. I doubt the families of killed soldiers view their losses as "acceptable." This practice treats human life as an expendable asset. Leaders care little about the individual lives lost; they only fear that Americans will eventually stop allowing the government to utilize their children as cannon fodder.

At home, our government takes pains to avoid executing innocent people; Americans would expect no less. Many states, for example, have mandatory appeals for death penalty cases and have reviewed old cases using DNA technology. However, the US government does not apply these standards when deciding to go to war, which kills far more innocent people than capital punishment. For example, numerous experts have shown that the Bush administration manipulated the intelligence it used to make the case for war in Iraq. A thorough examination of history, which I encourage, will show that American presidents decide on war, then search for evidence to justify it. Therefore, even those who support capital punishment should oppose war, since war kills far more innocents, often with little evidence to justify it.

War violates principles most Americans hold dearly. It forces people to kill under false pretenses and denies the sanctity of human life. Governments, ours included, show reckless and wanton disregard for the lives of their own citizens during war, even though they always claim that war serves the public interest. It never does. Americans should oppose war at every opportunity and vow never to participate in it.

Of all the positions for which I have argued, conscientious objection has been the most controversial. Most dismiss the idea as unpatriotic, but it is rational if one thinks deeply about war. Unfortunately, few Americans are willing to do that. Instead, they ignore the history of America's wars. Until Americans reconsider their views on war, as George Santayana would say, history will repeat itself.