

# No Conscience Left Behind

**Stephen Funk**

*Stephen Funk was the first conscientious objector imprisoned for refusing to fight in the Iraq War. A military jury acquitted Funk, a Marine, of “desertion” on September 6, 2003—only to then convict him of the lesser charge of “unauthorized absence” (aka AWOL). He served six months in the military prison at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. When he returned home to Oakland, California in March 2004, his community presented him with an “Anti-War Hero” plaque in recognition of his courageous stand against an unjust war. Funk wrote the following statement the summer before his conviction.*

I am Stephen Funk, a U. S. Marine Corps reservist who has refused to be involved with this war. I declared myself a conscientious objector in April 2003, and have been working to spread knowledge of conscientious objection as a legal option out of the military. I also went public to try to dissuade young people from making the same mistake I did, by getting them more information. American youth are especially vulnerable to enlistment, since the No Child Left Behind Act was passed and military spending on deceptive advertising has increased sharply.

Challenging the war from my position was extremely difficult and I am very proud of my public stance.

I was born and raised in Seattle, where I joined protests against globalization at the WTO. I have always considered myself an activist and I stand with the oppressed peoples of the world. Since high school I have worked with several campaigns for the disadvantaged, for political prisoners, and for peace and justice in our communities.

I moved to Los Angeles for college, where I protested for socioeconomic justice at the Democratic National Convention. I left Los Angeles because I felt the school I attended was too politically apathetic, and moved to the Bay Area in hopes of attending UC Berkeley. Despite all this, I was persuaded to join the Marines. I was out of school for the first time, depressed from the confusion and lack of direction in my life. A recruiter was able to sell me on what I might learn in basic training. Leadership, teamwork, discipline, and, most importantly, a sense of direction and



Stephen Funk addresses protesters on second anniversary of the start of the Iraq War. Photo by Charles Jenks

along with the program.”

I had figured out that war itself was immoral and could not be justified. Yet everyone told me it was futile to try to get out. We were trained to be subordinate in our thoughts, words, and actions. It’s hard to go up against all that, even when you know you are right. In February my San Jose-based unit was called up to support the attack on Iraq. I could no longer just obey.

For the next six weeks I kept in contact with my command, explaining why I had not yet reported. I completed my conscientious objector paperwork that I had started earlier, and I attended anti-war protests with hundreds of thousands of others.

In the face of this unjust war, based on deception by our leaders, I could not remain silent. Having a chance to do some good, but playing it safe instead, would have been true cowardice. On April 1, after a press conference in front of my base, I turned myself in. I spoke out so that others in the military

belonging were what convinced me. It was a decision I made when I was 19 and in a clouded state of mind.

The boot camp experience quickly snapped me back into reality, but by that time it seemed too late to do anything. The purpose of military training is to churn out non-thinking killing machines. All humans have a natural aversion to killing, and being forced to shout out “Kill, Kill, Kill” everyday is a major stress on the mind, body, and soul. One must go through a transformation in order to accommodate the unnatural way of life that the military teaches. I, however, resisted, and as a result my moral convictions against violence grew stronger. A marksmanship

would realize that they also have a choice and a duty to resist immoral and illegitimate orders. You don't have to be a cog in the machinery of war. Everyone has the unconquerable power of free will. I wanted those who may be thinking about enlisting to hear and learn from my experiences.

Under media attention, the military initially claimed my application for discharge would be handled quickly and fairly, and that I would likely receive only non-judicial punishment for my unauthorized absence. Now that public scrutiny has died down, the military says that I deserve to be convicted. I feel I am being punished simply for practicing my First Amendment rights, and they are seeking an unfit punishment to dissuade others from becoming conscientious objectors.

On base, I've been harassed a few times. Some people have told me I'm a traitor, a coward, and unpatriotic. I have also had a few death threats. However, I have also received tremendous positive feedback, even from some of the enlisted people. As my commanding officer explained to the press, "The Marine Corps understands there are service members opposed to the war." I am certainly not alone.

In writing my application for discharge, I was completely honest about who I am. Part of that meant acknowledging that I am gay. I believe that homosexuals should be able to serve if they choose, and that "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" is an awful policy that only helps the military perpetuate anti-gay sentiment among its ranks. However, I am not an advocate for gay inclusion in the military because I personally do not support military action.

I am proud to be a part of the war resisters' movement and have been in touch with refuseniks from Israel, Greece, and Palestine, and others worldwide. My case pales in comparison to some of the things being brought against international refuseniks. We need to show these brave young men and women that their acts of defiance are appreciated and honored.

*S7*

Photo of Stephen in preceding collage by Jeff Paterson of Not in Our Name (NION).