

Amnesty: its effect on war, exiles, resisters, and us

By DEE KNIGHT

A new spectre is haunting North America. It is the spectre of amnesty. But what, you may well ask, is a spectre? And, now that I mention it, what's amnesty?

A spectre is a shadow, and to me the word connotes a kind of shadowy cloud — of impending doom sometimes, or more appropriate in this case, of confusion. Because that's the situation with amnesty. What it means, and to whom, is causing great confusion and some argument. When it will happen, and what it will do to the lives of thousands of people, and to the future foreign and domestic policies of the U.S. government — all of this is even more confusing.

Canadians who have been generally sympathetic to the draft resisters and military deserters who have found their way here, may want to know if we all are getting ready to pack up and leave. The answer is a complex one. It's the other side of the troubles of those of us who have had to try and answer the American tv and newspaper reporters' perennial question: "How many guys do you think will go back if and when there's an amnesty?"

The first part of the answer is that this isn't the point of amnesty as far as war resisters in Canada are concerned. The point is ending the war and changing the causes of it in American society. There are probably more war resisters subject to prosecution living underground, or already in jail, in military stockades, or just wandering around without their legal rights as citizens, still in America than there are in Canada.

The second part of the answer is that a vindication of war resisters could go far towards making middle America understand where the real causes of the war are to be found. Such an amnesty would show that America is willing to face up to the problems which its government leaders have caused during the war years. It could provide the climate in which their opposition to government war policies launched them on.

It is also possible — judging from the words of President Nixon and Pentagon officials — that a premature amnesty, forced on American policy makers by massive pressure, would make the continued fielding of armed conscripts for imperial wars impossible or very difficult. If this proved true, many people around

the world would be interested in fighting for it. The problem is that the only way to find out if it is true is to try.

After these considerations the other question can be seen in perspective. OK, Donald Draft Dodger and Dennis Deserter, tell us straight — would you or wouldn't you go back if there's an amnesty that's satisfactory to you? Well, Johnny Canuck (with all due respect, of course), yes and no, I guess.

What I mean to say is some would and some wouldn't. Most who wouldn't probably would go temporarily for visits and other purposes. The fact is after living here for two to five years, especially in view of the hostility war resisters have gotten from their families and others in the States, we have tended to grow roots in Canada. To use a cliché, we're becoming new Canadians, if we can make the grade, that is.

This brings up the next point in a reality which is complex and difficult, sometimes bordering on the tragic. Some war resisters who have chosen Canada as a refuge will not be able to make the grade as citizens. Some of us — and nobody knows how many even if they would tell — can't even make the grade as immigrants.

This should be no surprise to anyone who understands how the immigration system is set up in this and all other western countries. The idea is to get the kind of immigrant you need to sustain the economic growth of the country. In times of economic expansion, you're willing to take quite a few people who qualify mainly for unskilled or semi-skilled work — just as Canada did throughout the sixties — and as America did fifty years ago.

But when times get tough and there's high unemployment, especially in the unskilled and semi-skilled classes of work — times like the present — then you don't want this kind of immigrant. Working-class immigrants and aspirants to immigration to Canada — among whom there are a lot of war resisters, especially deserters — are finding it a lot tougher here in Canada.

For these people, and for people here who can't get their minds off the need to organize for social change in America (instead of applying their energies here), amnesty is important personally. And it is important to the men and women underground in the U.S., in jail, in

the stockades, and all the rest whose legal rights are denied because of the war, even including those still in uniform against their will — which means most enlisted men and draftees.

The question of amnesty seems to be of importance to America as a whole. Senator Taft and congressman Koch seem to understand this well. Thus the need to prepare bills that will appear to grant amnesty for war resisters while not really doing it. They have presented complementary bills in each house of Congress which, by not including deserters and attaching the provision that draft resisters must serve three years alternate service, guarantee that few war resisters will actually regain their rights as citizens.

This appears to be in line with the Pentagon's policy, as stated by deputy assistant secretary of defence major-general Leo Benade, at the recent hearings on amnesty conducted by senator Ted Kennedy.

"With amnesty at this time, some military members might be influenced to desert the service, safe in the knowledge that punishment or continued military service would be avoided," said the general.

The policy is clarified by president Richard Nixon who said recently "we always, under our system, provide amnesty. I for one would be very liberal with regard to amnesty, but not while there are Americans in Vietnam fighting to serve their country."

The idea seems to be that amnesty will be fine as long as it does not interfere with the continuation of the foreign policies and demands which got America into Vietnam in the first place, and which, for all the apparent changes, seem to be keeping her there. Thus if the President and the Pentagon can just shift the work of killing from ground troops to computers, helicopters and bombers, an amnesty will be fine.

But having to talk about amnesty at all may in the end be the undoing of Nixon and his deceitful schemes of gradual withdrawal. Other people interested in amnesty are also interested in a withdrawal that is more than gradual.

Most important of these groups are GI's themselves. More and more are in open resistance to the government's war policies and the military machine which tries to carry them out. Few GI's want to be the last man to die in Vietnam. They want no part of Nixon's gradual withdrawal plans. GI's are now forcefully calling for complete and unconditional amnesty for all war resisters, whether they are in or out of the military. This demand is part of the GI resistance aim of an early demobilization of the imperial military and its replacement with a completely new more democratically controlled and operated national defense organ.

Another vocal group supporting universal unconditional amnesty are the veterans of military duty, especially those who saw duty in Indochina. Organized in a number of groups across the nation and locally, all have called for the same kind of amnesty as the GI resistance.

Finally, peace movement groups across the country have begun to mobilize support for universal, unconditional, early amnesty for all war resisters — bringing the message especially to the new class of voters between 18 and 21 as well as to the generation which has borne the burden of the war. The effort will be to pressure any political candidate in this election year to support a universal, unconditional and early amnesty as part of a rapid and total withdrawal of American military involvement in Vietnam and a restructuring of American society towards the aims of peace and justice.

This new kind of amnesty movement — or, if you will, movement amnesty — has already sparked movement by the most active non-candidate in history, senator Kennedy, whose hearings last month showed a depth of coherent support for unconditional amnesty for all war resisters. Support came from mothers of men who had died in Indochina combat, as well as mothers of Nixon's darling prisoners of war. The POW mother apparently has come to understand that Nixon's the one who is keeping her son and the other POW's prisoner by continuing the escalation of the war.

A new bill calling for such a universal, unconditional amnesty is now in preparation by left-liberals in Washington, under the guidance of a broad front of radical and left-liberal supporters. There is no telling how long such a bill will take to surface, or whether, when it does, it stands a chance of success.

In the election year of 1972, it could depend on the people themselves. More especially, it depends on the strength and good leadership of GI's in resistance, veterans of the war, and the other war resisters both stateside and abroad, who like it or not, must pay attention to the workings of those with power. Our only pressure source of countervailing force is the people themselves.

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War resisters from all over Canada and the U.S. converged on Washington to demonstrate against war. Photo by David Lloyd — Varsity