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## **Confronting a Paradox: Pacifism and Military History**

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When I set out to write this piece, it was intended to be a response to Colonel James Boling's rejoinder to earlier articles by Earl Catagnus and Jason Smith. For those who have not read those articles, the debate has revolved around the importance of actual military service for a military historian. Smith believes that it is not necessary, while Catagnus and Boling, both veterans, argue that having served is beneficial, providing them special insight into combat that a civilian cannot have. That was my starting point; yet I finished in an unintended place.

Like Smith, I have never served in the armed forces, nor will I ever serve in the armed forces, and I believe that this does not affect my work as a military historian. Unlike Smith, I did not have a childhood filled with toy armadas under my command, nor toy soldiers, toy guns, etc. My parents felt that such playthings led to a glorification of violence. They did, however, strongly encourage my interest in the Civil War, which was sparked as a preteen when my mother took me to see the movie *Glory*. One of the first books on the Civil War that my parents purchased for me was a volume of Matthew Brady's battlefield photographs. They made me take a long, hard look at the images of the battlefield dead. They hoped to drive home the point that while it is well and good to read about the courageous stand of the 20th Maine at the Battle of Gettysburg or the genius of "Stonewall" Jackson in the Valley Campaign of 1862, there were real consequences to these actions. Casualties of war were more than just statistics in a book.

Thus from a young age I was conscious of the realities of violence. This awareness matured as I did. During my freshman year in high school I was involved in a fist fight. It left me feeling empty and weak and I have never struck a person in anger since. From my decision to not participate in violent acts grew a conviction that violence was wrong, and if violence was wrong on a personal level, it came to make sense that violence was wrong on any level. Experiences between 2000 and 2001 both strengthened and validated my growing pacifism. In no particular order, a reevaluation of my religious convictions, reading Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* and Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, losing too many close friends in a series of unfortunate accidents, and the events of September 11, 2001, convinced me that life was too precious to be wasted and that violence accomplished nothing more than further violence. Any lingering doubts I may have had regarding pacifism disappeared with the United States' preemptive strike on Iraq in 2003.

There are a few things that I would like to make clear before I continue. While I consider myself to be a firm pacifist, I do not have anything against those who serve in the armed forces. My sister was an Army medic for six years. My brother-in-law is a veteran of Operation Desert Storm and I lost a cousin in the same conflict. Additionally, my maternal grandfather served as a Seabee in World War II, of which he was very proud – a pride that I share, though I am equally proud of my paternal grandfather, a conscientious objector, who, when drafted, served as a nurse in Hawaii. I find the conviction and sense of honor and duty with which many soldiers live their lives admirable. Nonetheless, on a personal level I disdain violence.

Perhaps it is odd then that I came to study military history. When I entered graduate school I believed that by studying the armed conflicts of the past, I might be able to one day have an impact on the avoidance of armed conflict in the future. Maybe that is naïve of me, but Alfred Thayer Mahan proved to all the potential impact of an historian on larger society. Peace is the goal that I am not prepared to give up.

I do not think that being a pacifist completely defines me as an historian. There is more to my historical pursuits than that. In a similar vein, I do not think that Earl Catagnus and James Boling are solely defined by their experience as soldiers. Yet as much as Catagnus admits that he imposes his “twenty-first century Marine Corps experience across time and space” and finds himself unable to “break completely from this mental trap,” I often find my pacifism creeping into my studies. I do not always fight it. I cannot study, nor do I want to study, the War of 1812, First World War, or Vietnam without reflecting on how unnecessary those wars were. Is this problematic for a military historian? Maybe, but personally I do not believe that it is, otherwise I would have long ago changed the focus of my studies. Education in military history allows for a more erudite critique. To put it another way, being a pacifist educated in military history allows me, I believe, to make a stronger, more structured argument against the necessity of war.

If being a pacifist has affected my work as a military historian, though, studying military history has forced me to temper my pacifistic views. While I continue to maintain a personal commitment to nonviolence, I have also been forced to concede, if only to myself, that the total avoidance of armed conflict is impossible. Historian Reginald Stuart once described Thomas Jefferson as a “half-way pacifist” because he firmly believed that diplomacy should be thoroughly exhausted before the United States entered into war. “Three-quarters pacifist” might be the term that best applies to my views: diplomacy should be exhausted, once it has been if violence can still be avoided without placing the American people in imminent danger, the U.S. should exercise the proper restraint; preemption is never justified; imperialism, expansionism, or the defense of “American interests” is not just cause for the use of deadly force; spreading democracy through the barrel of a gun is tyranny. Despite the fact that over the course of the last few years my pacifism has become milder, there are still only two American wars to which I can reconcile my conscience as an American citizen. But I have also come to accept that there are people in this world who only understand force and it is occasionally necessary to employ force against those same people.

To return to the original question – does military service make for a more effective military historian? It does not. Intelligence, hard work, and tenacity make for a more

effective military historian. Are there advantages to being a military historian with military experience? Perhaps, but not because of any special “insider status” that goes with being a soldier and it is no more advantageous than being a pacifist and a military historian. The personal convictions that each of us brings to the field influences our scholarship and allows for a greater diversity. The greater the diversity, the more nuanced the debate; the more nuanced the debate, the richer the field.