

“Anti-warriors”: A Conscientious Objector Panel Discussion

**Jim Skelly, Ron McMahan, Jon Huyler, Will Kirkland,
John Kent, and Paul Rogers**

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Jim Skelly (Director of the Baker Institute for Peace & Conflict Studies), Ron McMahan (Baker Senior Fellow), Jon Huyler, Will Kirkland, John Kent, and Paul Rogers are all former naval officers who collaborated in the Concerned Officers Movement and in subsequent anti-war efforts.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, each of these men decided to become a conscientious objector. In this panel presentation, the six former officers discuss their journey toward the decision and reflect upon Juniata alumnus J. Glenn Gray’s book *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle*.

Jim Skelly: We were all on active military service as U.S. Navy officers during the Vietnam War, when we all said “no,” and sought our way out of the service in protest, through various avenues. Years later, we have now met several times to discuss these events and their context, and our experiences in this regard have enlightened us as to our motivations and to the challenges we now face, and they have given us even greater insight into the nature of war and the dilemmas of soldiers. Tonight we’re going to each give our reflections on J. Glenn Gray’s book *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle*.¹ Some of us were regular U.S. Navy officers; some of us were Naval Reserve officers. Two people here were U.S. Naval Academy graduates and have had rather diverse experiences, both within the service and subsequently over the last several decades.

The first person who is going to present his views on Gray’s work is Ron McMahan. He was born in Boulder, Colorado, in 1946. He has a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Colorado in physics and then did a PhD in sociology at the University of Colorado in 1978. He entered the navy in 1969, and he served part of that year at Da Nang in Vietnam. He was aboard a ship called the USS *Cleveland*, where he was the top-secret control officer and communications officer. He decided to become a conscientious objector while on active military service. He made that decision in September of 1970 and was discharged from the navy in December, just before Christmas 1970. His rank was lieutenant, junior grade.

Ron McMahan: Thanks, Jim, and thank you all for coming. As Jim said, we’ve all been getting together. We’ve known each other for forty-some years now, and our lives have crisscrossed over that

time. In recent years we've begun to spend, first of all, time just sort of getting to know each other better and again. We share a lot of experiences, and what ultimately has come of this is a little deeper reflection, I think, on the part of each of us as to what it meant to have gone through the Vietnam era and to have made a certain set of choices. We were coming out here for this workshop, and when Jim explained that J. Glenn Gray was an alumnus and that some of the students were going to have read the book, he suggested we all take a look at it. And I must admit, after I came back from Vietnam, got back into graduate school, and was a teaching assistant in a course on the sociology of war, I read this book, and it made little or no impact on me at the time – which is, in itself, kind of interesting, because that war and the resistance to that war were such profound things. When I read it this time, it had what I can only say has been a cathartic impact. Maybe it's just because I've had more time to think about it and reflect on it, and maybe it's just that I didn't pay enough attention the first time through.

I'll take the liberty, if not everyone has read it, and read a couple of sentences that he writes in the beginning about what it means to remember war, and what it means to try to forget – because these are points that I reflected on myself. It's on page 23, in the dead center of the page:

So often in the war I felt an utter dissociation from what had gone before in my life; since then I have experienced an absence of continuity between those years and what I have become...Yet the effort to assimilate those intense war memories to the rest of my experience is difficult and even frightening. Why attempt it? Why not continue to forget? ...There is a popular belief that the men who knew war at firsthand, talk little or not at all about it.²

And he goes on to talk about the fact that those who do talk about it are “suspected of wanting to magnify their egos,” (which I don't think is anyone on this panel), or “being professional legionnaires,” again:

Besides, people are tired of war; one can hear the refrain in a thousand living rooms. They want to read about it as fiction, and so transmute war into art, or have it as history, in memoirs of generals and statesmen...We may become refugees in an inner sense unless we remember to some purpose. Surely the menace of new and more frightful wars is not entirely unrelated to our failure to understand those recently fought. If we could gain only a modicum of greater wisdom concerning what manner of men we are, what effect might it not have on future events?³

Following experiences in Vietnam, and then later in the navy, and then ultimately going through becoming a conscientious objector, making those decisions, one spends a tremendous amount of time in self-reflection. But then – as Gray says – one tends to forget.

We had been through a lot of things together. I went back to graduate school two or three years after doing anti-war work, and just sort of put it out of my mind. I got on with being a sociologist. And then I remember, once, in the early 1980s, waking up in the middle of the night, kind of in perspiration, with images flashing in my head. And at that time I developed this thought, “Okay, I better think about what went on then.” And so I developed a picture for myself and for others around me, a brief picture of some of the “highlights”: what it was, what some of the big points were that carried you through these times. And then you find that you are turning into that old legionnaire. When people ask you about the

experience you have a series of stories, and you kind of crank them out, and people say, “Boy, was that a wonderful thing.” Just like when soldiers come home now, “Thank you for your service, but I don’t think I really want to hear about it. But thank you for your service, and your patriotism,” and all of that stuff. With us, it was, “Thank you for doing what you did,” and “It was an act of conscience, and isn’t that great.”

What happened to me, when I read this book a month ago or so, is that after twenty-some more years, I began to develop much clearer snapshots of memories. Memories of events, but more importantly, I think, memories of the thought processes. Instead of just seeing images and remembering details of what was going on, I find myself now at this age able to think just a little bit more about what was going on in my mind, how was it that I was coming to these realizations. One of the reasons that we’re here and that I want to hear what everybody else here is thinking, is because I think it’s now important to share what bits and pieces we can share, but also to understand that there’s an entirely new generation, as Gray discusses, who are going to be confronting exactly the same fundamental issues of conscience that we have all faced. How it is that you make sense of this, and how you make sense of the world that we made, and that you’re making for yourself, is going to be of great importance. So as we move on I’m sure that you’ll hear much more detail about our experiences, but I just wanted to share with you the impact that something like this book can have, so many years later.

Skelly: Thanks Ron. I should point out that Ron – I meant to give some evidence of what kind of work my colleagues are doing today – Ron is an ethnographer, but also a successful entrepreneurial capitalist, and we don’t hold it against him.

Next I’d like Paul Rogers to speak. Paul was born in Denver, Colorado – we’re overrepresented by Colorado – in 1948. He went through the Reserve Officers Training Corps, the ROTC program at University of Notre Dame, and graduated in 1970 with a BBA, which is business, isn’t it?

Paul Rogers: It is!

Skelly: Paul was commissioned in the summer of 1970 and served on the ship the USS *Constellation*, CVA 64. Why that’s important is that the *Constellation* was the ship that many of us coalesced around. Richard Nixon was shifting from a ground war to an air war in Vietnam. The soldiers on the ground were starting to refuse to fight, point of fact, and so there was a big shift toward an air war at this particular period. We started a campaign, modeled on the Mississippi Freedom Vote – which suggested that people didn’t get to vote about many of the things that were central to their lives – and in this case, we held a vote in the city of San Diego where the *Constellation* was based, and we held it at the same time as the mayoral campaign. About 45,000 people voted in this election, this mini freedom vote, and by about five to one for the USS *Constellation* to “Stay Home for Peace.” It still sailed, but it sailed

only after nine of its sailors took sanctuary in the Catholic church in San Diego called Christ the King Church. It was a big event, and it made consistent national news.

Paul was one of the people who had unique access during this campaign. You know, aircraft carriers have about 5,000 men on them, in addition to about 100 aircraft, generally speaking. Believe it or not, Paul had a very elevated position as the toilets officer. As I understand it, and now this is just a rumor, he even managed to put a sticker in the captain's bathroom that said, "Connie Stay Home for Peace!" In his current life he says he's retired but he's also a landlord, he's been a financial adviser, and he lives in a beautiful part of Colorado called Durango.

Rogers: Thank you, Jim. First of all I'd like to say how incredibly honored and grateful I am to be here tonight, and to share our experience with all of you. I wonder, off hand, how many of you in this audience remember Mr. Rogers? I'm not him.

I actually read this book around 1970 the first time through. Like Jim and Ron were saying, we all were officers in the navy, we all in one way or another resisted the Vietnam War. Our lives at that time didn't end with just that one period, that one statement, that one unified effort to do what we felt was the right thing to do. Our lives continued on, and when I was discharged, after we tried to stop this big ship from sailing to Vietnam that I was stationed on, I continued to be a political activist for many, many years.

One of the activities that I partook of in 1970 happened to be at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs. Glenn Gray was the one that founded the philosophy department at Colorado College, which is in Colorado Springs. Colorado Springs is a huge, huge military installation, basically. It's got the Air Force Academy, it's got Fort Carson, and it's got an air force base. We were involved at that time, in the early 1970s, with going to the Air Force Academy and trying to convince other cadets to open their minds to the possibility that maybe the decisions that they were making about war and about their careers needed to be rethought. One of the things that we did was we passed out the Declaration of Independence to Air Force Academy cadets. We were arrested for doing this. We didn't put "Declaration of Independence" on the paper that we were passing out at the Air Force Academy-Notre Dame football game, so, by gosh, the military police came in there and rounded us up and arrested us. Before they could think about it, the Air Force Academy published this big thing: "People Arrested for Passing Out Subversive Literature at Air Force Academy-Notre Dame Football Game." And somebody from higher up tried to stop it from getting in the press; they said, "Oh, God. Put the squash on this!" It didn't work. The press says, "Subversive Literature, also known as..."

When I read J. Glenn Gray's book – he was a very kind, very human person, and very well-known in Colorado Springs – when we read this book, some of the people that I was working with that knew him wanted to get this book as part of the curriculum. For where? The Air Force Academy. Here's

an institution that was afraid of the Declaration of Independence, and then what we wanted to do was to have this book as part of the curriculum for the freshman class coming in. And I'm going to leave that one hanging up for a while and not give you the answer as to whether or not that was allowed or not allowed. I hope that during the course of our next three days, we have an ongoing dialogue, because we're up here to learn from you, and maybe you can learn something from our experience.

The book meant a lot to me, pretty much because of the way my life went. I did a lot of political activity and ended up living on an Indian reservation in southwest Colorado and spent much of my life being an accountant for an Indian tribe. It was the only way I could fit in, you know? So, page 237:

This separation of man from nature, as a consequence of our too-exclusive interest in power is in part responsible for the total wars of our century. More than we ever realize, we have transferred our exploitative attitudes from nature to man. In total war, men become so much material, and civilian populations, like soldiers, have to be ravaged and subdued. Distinctions between innocent and guilty, the permissible and the prohibited, become extinguished. Men and machines approach each other more nearly. The most painful impressions of World War II for me, as I have said, were the ruthless trampling down of the works of nature and the innocent products of human art. Try as I might, I cannot but recoil, even in memory, from the destructive fury of a modern army directed upon the things of nature and her creatures, all untainted by any partisanship. The butchering of each other was almost easier to endure than the violation of animals, crops, farms, homes, bridges, and all the other things that bind man to his natural environment and help to provide him with a spiritual home.⁴

Like I said, previously much of my life was influenced by working with and being a part of a tribal community in southwest Colorado. There's a certain affinity, I think, that tribal people have, or maybe all indigenous people have, to this planet that we live on. One of the things all of them would probably agree to is that we need the earth, the earth doesn't need us. Again, I am just incredibly grateful to be here. I hope that all of you will get a chance to share some of your own thoughts and feelings about this book with us. And that's a wrap!

Skelly: Thanks, Paul. I should note, too, that Paul went into the navy at the lowest rank of officer, ensign, and managed to come out with the lowest rank as well, and actually – as he said here in something he sent to me – he set the record for the lowest score on performance evaluation. I think he was proud of this.

Our next panelist and friend is John Kent. John Kent was born in 1946. He went to the United States Naval Academy, where he received a Bachelor of Science in physics and mathematics, and graduated from there in 1968. While he was at the Naval Academy, he was an All-American in wrestling, so he didn't really fit the profile of someone who was going to be opposed to war because when he was commissioned he became a jet fighter pilot, a TOPGUN kind of guy. He spent the summer of 1967 in Vietnam, and that had a profound effect upon him. He applied for discharge as a conscientious objector in October of 1970 and was discharged in March of 1971. His rank upon discharge was lieutenant junior

grade. I should note, too, that John – more than any of the rest of us – became, politically, very, very committed. And just as we have a capitalist on the panel, we have a communist on the panel, too.

Rogers: Two!

Skelly: Two communists?

Rogers: Capitalists.

Skelly: Oh, two capitalists. Yes. Sorry. I didn't want to leave you out! But only one real communist, John Kent, please.

McMahan: I'm a real communist!

John Kent: This book... I love it when somebody's willing to dig into the tough questions. And this guy was one who did it. I mean, how do you stop war? You know, it's a massive question. And it's really important that the human race do it before we annihilate the planet, either through war or destroying the environment or both. And he really wrestled with it, deeply, I thought, in this book. You know, I think he actually pointed in the right direction. I don't think he answered the question, and maybe we can push it a little further tonight. I was really glad to see it because not that many people are willing to even entertain that question, which is really distressing given the state of the world. But first I want to talk about just some of my personal reactions to it, and then I want to get into what my thoughts are on his thinking about how to end war.

First of all, I want to respond to his reaction to the bombing in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He called it a "terrorist bombing," which I completely agree with, and he issued a searing indictment. He said, basically, the next atomic bomb dropped in anger will probably fall on my own country and we will have deserved it. If you think about that for a minute, that's very, very heavy for an American to say: that if this country gets bombed, it deserves it. And I think he was right on the money.

One of the reasons I think that is because in 1976, a few years after all of us had been together – by the way, I think it's important to state that it wasn't our experience in war that brought us together, it was our experience in resisting war. In other words, we all came together as the five of us in the Concerned Officers Movement, and then Will [Kirkland] joined us a little later in the campaign to stop the aircraft carrier the USS *Constellation*. We were fighting like hell to stop that war, and it was that that bonded us. You know, a year or two years of really intense times, and we have been brothers ever since because of that. It fused us together in a way that you... I don't even have the same relationship with my real brother, my biological brother. We didn't have that same kind of experience. Every time we see each other, the six of us are like, it's like you haven't been apart, you know? And it was because of that fighting, for something just and honest and real. To fight against war.

So I was a member of Vietnam Veterans Against the War, and in 1976 I went to Hiroshima for a peace conference. And they have this memorial museum there that I want to try and describe because it

just knocked me out. If you've ever been to one of these natural history museums, like in New York or Los Angeles, where they have these dioramas of beautiful animals, cheetahs leaping off limbs and elephants bellowing and things like that, well, imagine a diorama with human beings behind the glass that have just been hit by an atomic blast. The skin is peeling off them, the women are screaming, the people are looking desperately for somewhere to run and there's nowhere to go, because they know it's over. And you just look at this thing and you think, "What kind of human beings would do that to a whole city?" You see these dioramas, and then you get to this place where they have this concrete step that was actually sitting in front of a courthouse, and you look at it, and you realize that there is this shadow of a human being on the concrete step. His shadow was blasted into the concrete by the flash from the nuclear bomb going off and you can just see the shape. Who knows what happened to him – he was probably just incinerated instantly. Something like that makes you understand much more deeply why Gray said what he said, that if this country gets bombed it deserves it.

Another section of that book that really struck me was his story about the hermit. All of us, I'm sure, went through a similar experience. He describes (and I hope all of you have read this book) how he goes up to the top of this hill, and he finds this hermit that doesn't know what's going on down there. There are shells, you know, all this booming going on, and the hermit asks, "What's happening?" And Gray is at a loss to tell him. He says he realizes that the leaders and thinkers that want us following them lose their stature, become puny in your thinking, as you recognize their wisdom is almost grossly inadequate for the occasion. In other words, I think that all of us that resisted started to recognize that our leaders were just grossly inadequate and fundamentally wrong, not just incompetent. They were leading us in the wrong direction. And that was a really important moment, I think, for Gray and I think for all of us. Maybe others can comment on that.

I want to tell one incident that happened when I was actually in the military getting trained, where I had a similar experience. I was at a classroom; it was either at Miramar – as Jim said, I was being trained in the TOPGUN squadron for fighter pilots in Vietnam – either there or in Beeville, Texas, where I took my first jet training. I was in a classroom full of pilots – we were pilots at this point and now we were getting trained in flying jets – and a lieutenant commander who had just returned from Vietnam was our instructor. And he was telling war stories, trying to loosen everybody up before getting into the meat of the class. And he started telling this story, a big grin on his face, that he was out on a bombing mission over North Vietnam and dropped his bombs and sent his missiles into the target, and then he started heading back to the carrier and he realized he had one more missile left on his wing. You can't go back and try to land on an aircraft carrier with ammunition hanging on your wing; it's likely to be a pretty dangerous situation. So normally what you would do is you go out and, friendly for the environment, you drop it in the ocean. But he decided he didn't want to do that, and he took his plane and he started

cruising around the countryside of Vietnam until he found a peasant on a bicycle. These were heat-seeking missiles. That's what they used in those days, and he took his missile and fired it at this peasant. Of course it zoomed right in on the heat and blew this guy into smithereens. He was telling this as a joke, as "Ha, ha. Isn't this funny?" And I thought it was outrageous, but what was even more outrageous was that the entire room was laughing. Gray told a story similar to that in the book, somewhere else, where he talked about a person being shot as he was running away, everybody laughing. That's what it turns you into. This kind of war – an unjust war, I call it, because I differentiate between just and unjust wars – what it turns you into is a monster like that where you actually laugh at these kind of things being done to humans.

Another thing he talked about in this book that I thought was very important was this fact about how they train you – and again, I would differentiate in this – in an unjust war they train you not to think. They do not want you to think about the war. They want you to just do it. And now in current training they have this thing that's called "reflexive trigger pulling." They have actually reduced it to the moment of firing. They discovered that a lot of people start to question right when they're about to fire the gun. They're training people to fire weapons without thinking, too. In other words, they've taken it all the way down, not just on the macro level, but to the moment-by-moment in battle. And Gray referred to that, he talked about people frequently saying, "When I raised my right hand and I took the oath, I freed myself of the consequences of what I do. And anybody who is fighting war has to fight that tooth and nail." We want you to think: What are you doing and why are you doing it?

You know there's the famous poem "The Charge of the Light Brigade" by Tennyson. "Theirs not to reason why / Theirs but to do and die / Into the valley of Death / Rode the six hundred." That really describes what they want. They want an unthinking army.

Now, I want to talk a little bit about his thoughts on moving beyond war, because I thought that was the crux of the book. He has this quote from Nietzsche which I'd never heard of – I was quite surprised, frankly. The heart of it is that he says that nations, at the height of their military power, will renounce war for the good of humanity. Gray says that he thinks that exceedingly unlikely, but he wants to try and fight for that. And I would say more than exceedingly unlikely, I think it's a vanishing possibility that you're going to be able to talk everybody out of war, at the height of the power of some nation, to just stop fighting. I mean, we have maniacs like Dick Cheney in positions of power. All they have to do is push a button and we have war. We have lots of people like that, not just a few. We have huge countries with massive amounts of weapons, with people in power that are run by greed and corporations and systems that care less about the masses of people in the world. They're interested in their own profits and power and they're not going to be giving it up just like that, I don't think.

I would take it a step further, and there's a quote from Clausewitz, which is fairly famous, where he talks about how "War is merely the continuation of policy by other means." It's an extension of what's already going on. They take their social systems, their economic systems, and they just extend them into a war to continue the same policies. To me, that's what has to transform – the systems themselves. You can't talk about breaking swords in a powerful country unless that country has a whole different approach to the world. An approach that's not based on dog-eat-dog, not based on capitalism, that's based on people working together, trying to create a new world together, building a new humanity. If you don't have a society like that, that is fighting to do that, then you're not going to be able to break the sword. One of the really important things about when we were all together, in the early '70s, was there was really a lot of ferment and debate about how to move forward. I really think that's lacking these days. There is not enough wrangling over, "What are we going to do?" Especially the controversial ideas are not being thrown around and debated. People do not engage these deep questions and try to wrangle with them. It is vitally important that that is done. There's a line in one of Bob Dylan's songs that I love about revolution being "in the air." That was the way it was in the sixties and seventies. We were all with non-violent revolutionaries, anarchist revolutionaries, communist revolutionaries, socialist revolutionaries, black revolutionaries, Chicano revolutionaries... Everybody talked about some sort of revolution, some sort of new society. Where is that discussion? I have one idea, but I want to hear others! I want to know what others are thinking.

Before I finish I want to do one more thing. This is a very, well, I'm sure it's going to be a controversial quote. But I'm going to throw it out there, in the spirit of what I was just talking about: controversy. Let's have a debate. Let's figure it out. What's the way forward? This was a person that was quoted a lot in the sixties and seventies, and I'm talking about Mao Tse-tung. Probably a name that you don't hear that often, or if you do, you hear it in vain or slandered. What he said about war is interesting. He said,

War, this monster of mutual slaughter among men, will be finally eliminated by the progress of human society, and in the not so distant future too. But there is only one way to eliminate it, and that is to oppose war with war... When human society advances to the point where classes and states are eliminated, there will be no more wars... that will be the era of perpetual peace for mankind.⁵

So I'm just going to throw that out there and I hope we can discuss.

Skelly: Thank you, John. Our discussions are always lively when we're together! Our next panelist is John Huyler. John was born in Hawaii in 1945, educated at Princeton University where he achieved a Bachelor of Arts in philosophy in 1967, and then later at Harvard University where he received a Masters in Public Administration from the Kennedy School of Government. He entered the navy in the summer of 1967. He was an aviator and flight instructor. He applied

for discharge as a conscientious objector in October 1970, and, being the cleverest of all of us, managed to get out within three months. John, I must say, achieved a great notoriety during the effort to keep the USS *Constellation* from sailing to Vietnam by flying repeatedly over the city of San Diego in a light plane with an enormous banner that said “Constellation Stay Home for Peace.” Instead of Coca-Cola on those banners, it was Huyler flying this banner saying, “Constellation Stay Home for Peace.” John, please.

John Huyler: Thank you, Jim. If there’s one word I would like you to remember from what I say tonight, but not correlate with me, the word is “functionary.” And I will come back to it. Sitting here looking out at you, I’m reminded of my daughter, who is a junior in college, and so it’s a particular pleasure to be here, and because I had my fiftieth high school reunion last June, I can spin forward three months and realize that fifty years ago today, this week, I was starting as a freshman in college. And it was over the course of that career in college, and getting an education, that this word “functionary” became important to me, and I’ll come back to it in a way that might surprise you. I was exposed to a lot of good professors. I had people like Jim doing things like this on Thursday nights – not Friday nights, that was smart – and I had a lot of good books that formed my intellectual development and which really helped me become who I am. I am grateful for those, and I recommend this book to you. To those of you who have read it, I commend it to you. There’s a lot of good literature and a lot of good professors out there and I’m glad you’re getting started with this, if you’re just starting, or continuing if you are.

When Jim started introducing us, he said this is an unusual group. I think you’ve seen that already. We are an unusual group, and one of the things that this book, *The Warriors*, points out is that the battlefield and the military experience provide for many people a kind of camaraderie. I will assert that being part of a movement to change in society what you deeply believe needs changing provides a better, more lasting, and certainly more morally justifiable type of camaraderie, so I encourage each of you to do the activism that may, fifty years from now, find you on a panel being asked to reminisce about the past!

I want to read two things from this book, and the first is just basically about war, because the book is about war, and it’s from page 131: “The basic aim of a nation at war in establishing an image of the enemy is to distinguish as sharply as possible the act of killing from the act of murder by making the former into one deserving of all honor and praise.”⁶

So, by making killing in an act of war deserving of “all honor and praise,” what does that have to do with being a functionary? I went to a good university and studied philosophy. And when it became my turn to stand and take the oath of becoming a military officer, I had read these books, and the war in Vietnam had gone from not being recognized before the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution (which took place

when I was a freshman), to its height in terms of the commitment of American soldiers on the ground. And during that time my thinking had evolved. I wrote a thesis on civil disobedience, and then I was asked to stand and raise my hand and say that I would support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic, and that I took this oath without mental reservation or purpose of evasion. I went to my commanding officer and I said, “Sir. You know as well as I that I cannot take that oath, because I have nothing but mental reservation at this point.” And he said, “Just stand there.” So I was dressed in my dress whites – go figure, navy officers have a sword, it’s a little bit of an anachronism – and every other person in the circle that was being commissioned raised their sword and took the oath and I just stood there. And they made me an officer anyway!

I was not going to be a functionary. At that point in time I already realized that I would not take another human life, but I managed to figure out the system by thinking, “Well, if I go be a pilot, maybe the war will be over in a year and a half.” We’re talking from June 1967 to a year and a half after that, which happens to be October 1968. And, bingo, when that date arrived the war was not over. I decided, “Well, I could be a flight instructor.” So I went and I was a flight instructor, and I was in some ways a functionary, but I was always doing what I thought was the least combatant, the least murderous thing that I could do. And I finally got a set of terminal orders, as they are called, to a noncombatant squadron. So I’d ended up psyching out the system, quite literally, and now I’ll refer you to another quote.

For those of you who haven’t read the book, the author was in the intelligence service, and his job was to interrogate people, among other things, and he went from Northern Africa to Italy. At the top of page 180:

In 1944 and 1945 I had to listen to Fascist and Nazi police and party functionaries exclaim with nauseating regularity when they were captured: “My conscience is clear!”...I became convinced in the end that most of these men knew no general regrets for what they had done. As functionaries, guilt was for them, in any case, an empty word...

I was amazed how many American civilian soldiers appeared to put great weight on taking the oath of the soldier. Frequently, I heard the remark: “When I raised my right hand and took that oath, I freed myself of the consequences for what I do.”⁷

Functionary. Several years later, after I had met Ron McMahan in a court, where he had successfully sued the secretary of defense, I went to a weekend session on nonviolence conducted by Will Kirkland, on my right. I saw a movie called *Faces*. The movie *Faces* is a black and white film that depicts the faces of Vietnamese kids during bombing raids. And my skin crawls as I tell you this story. I saw those faces and I realized at that moment that if I was any way responsible for the terror of any one of those faces, that I couldn’t look at myself in the mirror anymore, and that whole education that I’d gotten and those books that I’d read were irrelevant. So I had managed to dodge it, in terms of not actually going to war. However, at that moment I became a conscientious objector and I realized that by being a cog, by

having been a functionary, even a non-combatant functionary in that machine, I couldn't live with myself anymore. So I went back after the weekend and refused to fly.

Skelly: Thanks, John. John always has a profound effect upon me. He did the first time I met him, I have to say. I should say about John, too, that currently he's professionally involved in conflict resolution and mediation and has been for a very long time.

Our next panelist is Will Kirkland. Will was born in New York in 1943. He, too, like John Kent, was a United States Naval Academy graduate, where he had a Bachelor of Science awarded in 1965. He subsequently went to San Francisco State University from which he received an MA in 1982. He entered the navy in 1965 and served on a supply ship for two years, and then an ocean-going tug, until October of 1967. He refused to give orders in October 1967, was processed for that, and was discharged from the navy about six months later. His rank upon discharge was as a lieutenant junior grade. Will is well known, especially on the West Coast, as a writer, poet, and quite excellent blogger, and we can provide you with the internet address of his blog, I hope, before the evening is over.

Will Kirkland: Hi, you guys. I know 1963 is a long time in the past, fifty years. When we were your age, the beginning of WWI was fifty years before us. We knew nothing. I mean WWII was already old to us, much less WWI, so Vietnam is a long time in the past. I hope we can bring it to life a little bit for you today.

I got out, as Jim said, processed through big Nurse Ratched at the naval mental hospital. They finally honorably discharged me if I said that I would never blame the navy for my mental disease. I stayed in San Diego for a while doing theater work and draft resistance work, and went up to the Institute for the Study of Nonviolence, where I worked for four years. And that's where I first read *The Warriors*. And I have to say, like Ron, I was sort of nonplussed. It wasn't tough enough for me. I was angry. There was a war going on, I'd shown *Faces* to people, and so I put it aside and finished four years at the Institute, and then I went on and did three years with César Chávez, organizing farm workers. When the invasion of Iraq came around, despite my advanced age I joined other people and spent at least a year and a half in the streets doing things and started a blog. And all that time I kept asking myself, "Why is it that it is so difficult for most people to say 'no' to things?" First to ask themselves if what they're doing or are about to do makes sense, or is right, and if they even ask that, why is it so hard to resist? Not just the dropping of the bombs, but during the Iraq war, how is it that people could let themselves abuse and torture others? Why weren't lines being drawn?

So my question, constantly, to myself, was, "How do I help people see lines, see what they might be able to do?" The smallest step, the next step. And when we were brought back to *The Warriors*, I read it again with really a revived interest. I'm a reader who does this kind of thing, can you see? [Shows marked-up book.] That's how I read, and it really helped me, because J. Glenn Gray was a pretty quiet

sort of fellow but he was asking some really good questions. For me the heart of it is his chapter “The Ache of Guilt,” because this is the chapter where he gets into the questions of conscience. And though he talks about the sensitive soldier, he’s really talking about himself and trying to articulate where he began to see the lines he could no longer cross over. I have a different edition than you all, so it’s in the middle, but it’s short:

The primary realization is the same in all cases [when conscience begins to speak to you]: there’s a line that a man dare not cross, deeds he dare not commit, regardless of orders and the hopelessness of the situation, for such deeds would destroy something in him that he values more than life itself...Conscience within him is a voice long before it is a power...⁸

And when we began talking about this, I understood that was true for all of us. We didn’t suddenly one day wake up and say “no more.” As John said, we each went through a series of steps. When I went to the Naval Academy I was seventeen years old. I was already having doubts about it, and the reason I was there was because my dad had gone, and I was the first son of his class to go. There was a lot of pressure on me. And I stood there, in our first ranks in our civilian clothes, and we raised our right hands, and I, like John, thought to myself, “What am I gonna do?” And so I raised it, and I decided that this oath was to the Constitution, not to my superior officers, and that when push came to shove, I would decide whether I was fulfilling the oath to the Constitution. So that was my first little line. My second line, there were some others, but the most significant one was that on graduation, I was sort of near the top of the class and could’ve requested anything: to be a flyer, to go in the Marine Corps, to be on a ship of the line. I requested a supply ship, as in John’s case, as the least harmful thing I could do. So I was in and out of the coast, off the coast of Vietnam, supplying other ships.

My next little line was never to put a foot on Vietnamese soil until the war was over. Many of us could go off and go have drinks and stuff. I never did that. I then asked to be assigned to a tugboat in San Diego figuring, like John, “Well, that’s two years I’m out of here [Vietnam].” By the way, I love the ocean, and I love ship driving, and all back full and right hard rudder, I love that stuff. But I figured with a tugboat, I’m out of there. Within six months they ordered us to put an anti-aircraft gun on the bow and take a tow across the Pacific up to Saigon. I was the executive officer, the vice principal as it were. Well, I was pretty much alone. There was no movement at that time in my life. I had not read any Gandhi; I didn’t know anything. But I went to my commanding officer, I’m a good boy, and I said, “I will carry out all your orders, but I will give none.” So he considered that for about five minutes and sent me up to shrinksville. And that was how I finally left and then proceeded to spend the next years doing what I did.

There was one other thing in here that I thought was pretty relevant to the discussion of how you yourselves, how we ourselves, help others, how we see those lines across which we should not go. Glenn Gray tells a wonderful little story of his disobedience in the military. The U.S. Army moved into Alsace-Lorraine and picked up Alsatian young men who were helping them a lot, but who in fact had been

deserters from the German army. His superior officers said they had to be put in the brig. And Glenn Gray and his fellow officers refused, to the point of likely court martial: “I had determined that a line could be drawn between personal rights and military demands. Though I knew that sheer good fortune had prevented the normal consequences for disobedience from falling on me, I felt, nevertheless, immensely strengthened for a possible second refusal.”⁹

So, one step at a time, you do what you can do, constantly querying yourself. And you do the best you can. I think one of the things you can do is, before you set yourself in situations that are likely to ask this, you ask the questions before you get there, “Is this really what I should be doing? Are there other ways to be doing those sorts of things?” One of the wonderful books I can recommend to you is called *Beautiful Souls*.¹⁰ It contains a story about resistance by Israeli soldiers working in the occupied territories, another about a young Swiss man who helped forge passports for Jewish refugees against Swiss government orders, and a couple of stories about whistleblowers.

I think there’s a lot we can do. I think J. Glenn Gray helps us to think about the pretty difficult things, because it disrupts your life. All the paths we had set out, we took radical turns from them. We’ve all lived pretty good lives despite it, but it’s not easy, and I would never push somebody into it, but I’d say, “It’s you you’ve got to live with... make your decisions, they’re important ones.”

Thanks a lot.

Skelly: It’s my turn. And I’m going to keep it reasonably brief. You know, every time we get together, and we have serious conversations about these kinds of issues, I’m struck by the deep, human solidarity we feel. We all took our decisions individually, forty years ago, and we felt, I think, to a greater or a lesser extent, depending on our individual circumstances, alone. And it seems incredibly difficult, when you think about it, to take the kinds of decisions that some of us took. But it had such force for us as individuals, we had to speak. We couldn’t go along anymore. And the thing that I think every one of us has realized is that once we said no, we found a degree of solidarity with other people, some of it manifest here, that is unlike anything you get in, shall we say, “simple,” “normal” relations between people. There is a bond that soldiers generally feel, and which we certainly feel as anti-warriors.

I’ll say a couple of things about myself. I was born in New York City on a day where something really profound happened, and it was not my birth. It was the birth of the atomic bomb. I was born one hour after the drop of the test bomb in Alamogordo, New Mexico. In a funny sort of way I’ve always felt that the bomb shadowed my life. One of the things that was said after the bomb was dropped, said profoundly by Albert Einstein, was that what was required with the advent of nuclear weapons was that humans develop a new mode of thought. He didn’t mean just new thoughts, which is what many people interpreted his comment to mean. He meant new ways of thinking. And that requires a depth of analysis

and a commitment to understanding human communication that is difficult to achieve, because we get so familiar with our ways of communicating that we think that's the best we can do.

I have to tell you, too, I resent some of these guys. I resent them because (Ron knows what I'm going to say here), three of them, Kent, Huyler, and McMahan, applied for conscientious objector status and within a couple of months, they were out. And the reason they were out was that because every one of them studied the flaws in *my* case, which lasted a year. They hired the same lawyer, some of them, and said, "What was wrong with Skelly's case? Let's figure that out." And so they did that, of course.

McMahan: We were more righteous.

Skelly: That's right. We've had a lot of laughs over the years, I have to tell you. I want to read you one short passage from J. Glenn Gray, and then let's open it up a bit. This passage is in the last chapter on page 229, and it has, it seems to me, great relevance for the current moment. It has relevance for today.

The reason a nation that seeks to be just must abhor being hated and feared is not very different. To hate and fear are evil and damaging to our inner life, but being hated and feared are still more destructive of our higher impulses and potentialities. Nothing corrupts our soul more surely and more subtly than the consciousness of others who fear and hate us. Such is our human nature that we cannot possess power that others dread without becoming like the image of their fear and hate. To possess dread power does not corrupt us overnight; our features may remain benign for years. But inevitably the awareness that others tremble or grow enraged at sight of us poisons the mind and makes us, individuals or nations, in the end into aggressive pariahs, distrustful, capricious, and empty.¹¹

J. Glenn Gray was warning us. This was written before we ever said no, and we should be awake to it.

NOTES

1. J. Glenn Gray, *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle* (Nebraska: First Bison Books, 1998).
2. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 23-24.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 237-238.
5. Mao Tse-tung, "Problems of Strategy in China's Revolutionary War," *Selected Works, Vol. I* (Elmsford, NY: Pergamon Press, 1965), pp. 182-183.
6. Gray, *The Warriors*, pp. 131-132.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 180-181.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 186-187.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 192-193.
10. Eyal Press, *Beautiful Souls: The Courage and Conscience of Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times* (New York: Picador, 2013).
11. Gray, *The Warriors*, p. 229.