

Herman Keizer, Jr.
Chaplain (Colonel) USA retired
6875 Dale Hollow Drive
Caledonia, MI 49316

December 27, 2009

The President of the United States of America
The White House
Washington, DC

Subject: Your Articulation of the “Just War” Tradition

Dear President Obama,

Congratulations on your award of the Nobel Prize for Peace. I served 40 years in the United States Army, 34 of them as an Army Chaplain, so I hope this letter will be read by you and not just one of your staffers. I have been there and know how that works, so I ask your staff to do me the honor of presenting this letter to you.

First, your speeches at West Point and in Oslo were among the best speeches you have given. They clearly faced the realities of the world in which we live. These speeches stand in a long line of theologians and ethicists who created a community of ethical discourse on the moral justification for the use of military power. This body of discourse is known as the “Just War” tradition. I was pleased to hear that you stand in that tradition.

Second, this tradition is taught, along with the rules of Land Warfare, to every person who wears the uniform of a Service in our Armed Forces, beginning in Basic training to the War Colleges. Yet, we do not honor the conscience of those we train to be discriminating about these moral issues. The Department of Defense Directive on Conscientious Objection only acknowledges the conscience of those who object to all wars and not those who object to a specific conflict.

Third, had you been drafted during the Viet Nam conflict and had objected to participation in that war using the “Just War” criteria and had filed for Conscientious Status, you would have been denied that status because you were objecting to a particular war. If ordered to fight anyway and if you refused that order you would have been tried in a Courts Martial for disobeying an order and your Conscientious reasons would have had no relevance in the trail. Sir, this is the dilemma faced by every soldier who holds to the “Just War” tradition. In my 34 years as a chaplain, I have seen injustice done to many soldiers who did not object to war, but objected to Viet Nam and now Iraq.

Fourth, I have briefed the Department of Defense at the Under-Secretary level twice urging them to change the current Directive. The Department of Defense thinks this is in the “too hard to do” box. A coalition of us have drafted legislation (attached) and briefed Senator Leven and Representative Ehlers on this legislation. Their staffers recommended giving the Department one more chance to change the Directive. I briefed the Acting Under-Secretary for Personnel and Readiness on this matter on 2 September 2009.

Finally, I believe that you were sincere in both your West Point and Oslo speeches, therefore, I appeal to you as the Commander in Chief to order the Department of Defense to change the current Directive to include selective conscientious objection, so that we may honor the consciences of these men and women in uniform also. I would be happy to discuss this with you or one of your staff members.

With Deepest Respect,

Herman Keizer, Jr.