

WATCHING BRIEF 19-7: SOCIAL DEFENCE - UPDATE

As Quakers we seek a world without war. We seek a sustainable and just community. We have a vision of an Australia that upholds human rights and builds peace internationally, with particular focus on our region. In our approach to government we will promote the importance of dialogue, of listening and of seeking that of God in every person. We aim to work for justice and to take away the occasion for war.

August 2019

This is an update on WB 17-1 which outlined the nature and background of social defence. A book has now been published by Jergen Johansen and Brian Martin on the subject, and this Brief covers their analysis and ideas about how a nonviolent approach to defence could work in our world. The book is available on-line as a free download at <https://www.bmartin.cc/pubs/19sd/> . For printed copies, use this link: http://www.lulu.com/spotlight/johansen_jorgen

Introduction

In the book, Social Defence is described as “nonviolent community resistance to repression and aggression, as an alternative to military forces”. It has also been called nonviolent defence, civilian-based defence, and defence by civil resistance. It is inspired by examples over the years of unarmed civilians struggling against oppressive governments. The following points are made about this approach:

- With suitable planning and training, people could be prepared to resist aggression without weapons.
- The aim of defence should be to protect a way of life rather than territory.
- The advent of nuclear weapons, with their capacity for mass destruction, undermines any moral purpose in ‘defence’.
- Without weapons being used for defence, conquering a country would require significant cooperation from the population, and if that is not present, an invader would have little chance of succeeding.
- A country with no weapons is not a threat to any other country.
- Arms races are less likely when the ‘enemy’ is not armed.
- The existence of military forces increases the potential for their use to repress people in their own country.

The authors point out that citizen interest in social defence was quite high in the 1980s as part of the anti-nuclear movement, but dwindled after the end of the 'Cold War' between USA and USSR. Most governments have shown no interest in nonviolent alternatives to military defence. Their aim is to reignite awareness of the basics of social defence. They use a scenario of a future use of nonviolent methods to thwart an attack.

The Downsides of Military Systems

The positive elements of military systems include deterring enemies, helping in civil disasters, and developing skills and disciplines in soldiers. There are many committed, caring and intelligent soldiers willing to risk their lives. The problems arise from the systems in which they operate. Questions that need to be asked are – what is being defended, and does the military system offer the best approach? Military weapons are effective for destroying targets but not effective for protecting civilians or the environment. Noble intentions are undercut by 'collateral damage'. Remote-controlled weapons add further to suffering and death, and raise the prospect of war crimes. The cost of military forces and weapons are increasing, and the emphasis on funding military research infects other areas of research. Misunderstandings and mistakes are not uncommon in military battles.

The military systems, as tools for repression, impede the building of a democratic society, through the use of violence and threats. Even where government is not controlled by the military, military means that spread to police, prisons, and intelligence agencies, can undermine social networks and reduce respect for human rights. Other parts of society become prone to the command and control model, even where the military itself is not present. The veneration of soldiers and military leaders adds to the perception that theirs is the greatest contribution to society.

Most conflicts are resolved through cooperation, compromise, diplomacy and harmony, but the prevailing emphasis on the use of violence creates the opposite assumption. Peaceful ways to handle conflicts are neither reported nor recognized sufficiently. Anthems use militaristic slogans and martial music. The threat of 'enemies' is used as a pretext for increased armaments. Even the use of the term 'just war' presupposes only military options.

Ideas about Social Defence

- Social defence is possible.
- Social defence is defence of society or community.
- Social defence can challenge state monopoly over violence.
- Social defence can be organized hierarchically or via networks.
- Social defence can be introduced by governments or social movements.
- Armed resistance is usually detrimental to nonviolent resistance.
- Planning and training are crucial to social defence.
- Social defence should be organised to defend the centre of gravity.
- Communication systems are crucial to social defence.
- Dealing with propaganda and disinformation is vital.
- Information about threats should be collected and analysed.

- A key focus for persuasion is the armed forces of the aggressor.
- Skill development is crucial.
- Technological systems should be designed for social defence.
- Transitioning to social defence is a social change process.

Trends in Thinking about Defence

After the Cold War ended, there was an assumption that spending on military defence would decline. However the reverse happened, owing to the strength of the military-industrial complex, and the search for new justifications for its expansion. Terrorism by non-state actors became the new rationale, while state terrorism did the most damage.

Conscription for military service has declined in most areas of the world. But the absence of alternative options for training in social defence means that there is greater reliance of a professional military force that is less influenced by alternative ideas of defence. Technological developments raise the threat of dangerous new weapons such as killer robots, but have potential in terms of communications methods that could help social defence strategies.

Nonviolent action has become more widely recognized within social movements around the world. This challenges governments to respond more carefully in their use of force, and is an encouraging sign for the emergence of social defence. The Internet is a means for both social movements and governments to enhance their capacity to act and respond. The main reason for the slow progress towards social defence remains “the belief in the superiority of violence and the necessity for military defence”. Social defence is radical – it can be used to empower people to challenge oppressive governments and unfair policies.

Other social movements have something to offer social defence – feminism can offer an emphasis on values including caring, empathy and human connection; the environment movement can offer self-reliance and campaigning skills; the labour movement can offer devolved power models and mutual support; business groups can offer corporate social responsibility policies; young people can be on the front line; faith based movements can offer belief and solidarity; the peace movement can give greater attention to alternatives to the military; and the global justice movement can contribute cooperative decision-making, mutual help and nonviolent action.

Raising Awareness: Questions for Discussion

1. Imagine that the government declares martial law and arrests anyone who seems like a threat. What would we do to resist without using violence? This question is an example of a good starting point for getting people thinking about such a scenario and how they can use their skills and knowledge to respond. Joining a group can make it seem more possible to develop a nonviolent approach, can allow sharing of aims and methods, and build a movement.

2. What can be learned from what others say and do? Answering this question can help identify whom to rely on, different ways in which people approach challenges, what skills are available, and how the internet could be used. An exercise in

emergency preparedness would complement this awareness, and help people become used to tasking responsibility in a crisis.

3. How can people in other countries and cultures become part of the movement? This may require learning other languages, making links across borders, seeking dialogue with potential aggressors, fraternising with soldiers and police.

4. How can we transition from military defence to social defence? Plans will be needed to – change military production to production for human needs, alternative jobs for military personnel, build the capacity for nonviolent deterrence and resistance, changing factories from military-oriented work to civilian needs.

5. What can be done in the face of a ruthless enemy? It is hard to determine ahead what the outcome of any confrontation will be. Sometimes small acts of ‘sabotage’ can disable machinery or weapons and limit the harm; sometimes people on the side of the aggressor can be persuaded to desert or behave less violently. Social defence can be seen as a long-term strategy of preparing to resist aggression and repression, thereby reducing the chances of violence.

6. Can the military play a role in social defence? There may be a place for unarmed military force in relation to rescue, civic action (e.g. construction), or ‘colossal action’ (e.g. major building of renewable energy systems).

A Quaker Reflection

From Advices & Queries (Religious Society of Friends in Australia 2008)

We are called to live “in the virtue of that life and power that takes away the occasion of all wars”. Do you faithfully maintain the testimony that war and preparation for war are inconsistent with the spirit of Christ? Search out whatever in your own way of life may contain the seeds of war. Stand firm in our testimony, even when others commit or prepare to commit acts of violence, yet always remember that they too are children of God.

QPLC will seek ways to promote greater understanding of social defence in the overall context of achieving a peaceful world.

Canberra
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