

Conscientious Objection: Is This for You?

Moses Brown School, Nov. 17, 2025

Definition:

Definition: A conscientious objector is a person who, by deeply held moral, ethical, or religious beliefs, opposes personal participation in any and all war.

OPENING SIMULATION: WELCOME TO BOOT CAMP (w/ apologies)

Bomb the vil- lage; kill
 ♯C ♯C ♯D ♯E
 the Throw some na- square.
 ♯C ♯C ♯C ♯C
 peo- in the
 ♯A ♯A ♯B
 ple. palm
 ♯G ♯G

Here's the whole cadence:

Bomb the village; kill the people,
Do it on a Sunday morning,
Ring the bell inside the school house,
Lock and load with your 2-40, →

Throw some napalm in the square.
Kill them on their way to prayer.
Watch those kiddies gather round.
Mow those mother f'ers down.

The Three Basic Criteria for Conscientious Objection:

1. The CO must be *conscientiously opposed to participating in any war and all war.*

Opposition is not political or selective. It is against any and all war. No 'just' war.

2. The objection must be based upon *moral, ethical, or religious belief*.

The old law's *belief in a Supreme Being* was changed to *religious training and belief*, then interpreted even more broadly by federal courts.

3. The claim must be *sincere or deeply held*; or play a significant role in one's life.

Not only must this position be sincere, but it must be proven or documented as well.

Who Is NOT a Conscientious Objector

A person whose objection to war is selective, sociological, political, or merely a personal code is not a CO. The courts deem these beliefs as "not deeply held" and an objection that "rests solely upon consideration of policy, pragmatism, or expediency." The Supreme Court, *Gillette v. U.S.* (1971), affirmed this by excluding "persons who object solely to participation in a particular war." Examples are: (1) selective or political objectors who refuse to fight in an 'unjust' war, but will for a 'just' war, (2) tax resisters who object to paying tax dollars for war, (3) nuclear pacifists against developing or using nuclear weapons, and (4) draft non-cooperators who do not register or comply with orders.

Two Types of COs: Class 1-A-O and Class 1-O (sometimes Roman numeral I used instead of 1)
In the military: Class 1-A-O claims exemption ONLY

In the military: Class 1-A-O claims exemption **ONLY** from training and service as a combatant in the Armed Forces. Though inducted, the individual is exempt from training, carrying, and using a weapon. This CO might serve as a medic, chaplain, or in other noncombatant functions.

Not in the military: Class 1-O claims exemption from ALL training and services in the military. This CO would NOT be inducted into the military, would stay a civilian, and would perform two years of civilian alternative service, i.e., in a mental hospital, schools for handicapped, rehabilitation, etc.

U.S. # 1 (1)

Worksheet Form 22: Claim for Conscientious Objector

Adapted from Selective Service System Form 22 or Form 150; Also in *Workshop Journal*

1. If you are claiming conscientious objection, check EITHER Class 1-A-O or Class 1-O.

- ☐ 1. Class 1-A-O: I claim exemption ONLY from training and service as a combatant member of the Armed Forces. [This person is inducted into the military but does not train with, carry, or use a weapon.] **OR**
- ☐ 2. Class 1-O: I claim exemption from ALL training and service as a member of the Armed Forces. [This person remains a civilian and does alternative service instead.]

Explain your choice:

Then, describe your beliefs which are the reasons for you claiming conscientious objection to combatant military training and service or to all military training and service:

2. Describe how and when you acquired your beliefs. Your answer may include such information as the influence of family members or other persons; training, if applicable; your personal experiences; membership in organizations; books/readings which influenced you:

3. Explain what most clearly shows that your beliefs are deeply held. You may wish to include a description of how your beliefs affect the way you live.

TWO FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS (Religious, Ethical, and Moral):

Abrahamic Scripture vs. Military Enlistment Document

1. Can you kill, or be part of killing, another human being?

You shall not kill; Love your neighbor; Take no life which Allah hath made sacred; Turn off evil with good.

Many laws, regulations, and military customs will govern my conduct and require me to do things a civilian does not have to do. Section 9.

2. Can you subordinate your obedience to God and place it in the hands of another, i.e., a commanding officer?

You shall have no other gods before me; No one can serve two masters; Therefore serve ye Me, (and Me alone)!; So invoke not anyone along with Allah.

*I will be required to obey all lawful orders and perform all assigned duties... Laws and regulations... may change without notice to me... **REGARDLESS** of the provisions of this... document. 9a(1) & 9b.*

See Appendix, Abrahamic Scripture on Peace, God's Law, & Personal Conviction

SUPREME COURT CLARIFICATIONS (which could change):

U.S. v. Seeger (1965): Religious training and belief expanded as parallel to Supreme Being
 The Court set three criteria and kept *religious training and belief* as a single concept:
 (1) within *religious training and belief*... would come all sincere religious beliefs which are based upon a power or being, or upon faith, to which all else is subordinate or upon which all else is ultimately dependent;
 (2) a sincere and meaningful belief which occupies in the life of its possessor a place parallel to that filled by the God of those admittedly qualifying for the exemption comes within the statutory definition; and
 (3) does the claimed belief occupy the same place in the life of the objector as an orthodox belief in God holds in the life of one clearly qualified for exemption?
 They affirmed no essentially a political, sociological, or philosophical view or a merely personal code.

Welsh v. U.S. (1970): Does not need to be religious; moral and ethical is sufficient

Welsh crossed out *religious*. His case was based on *moral and ethical* grounds. The Court agreed, emphasizing the importance of **depth and fervency of beliefs**. They included these litmus tests:
 (1) if an individual deeply and sincerely holds beliefs which are purely ethical or moral in source and content... occupy... a place **parallel** to that filled by... God;
 (2) exempts from military service all those whose consciences, spurred by deeply held moral, ethical, or religious beliefs, would give them no rest or peace if they allowed themselves to become a part of an instrument of war; and
 (3) the belief upon which conscientious objection is based must be the primary controlling force in the man's life.

WAYS TO DOCUMENT A CO CLAIM, INCLUDING "TRI-FOLDING"

The Selective Service registration process offers no way to make a conscientious objection claim. That can only be done if and only when a draft is reinstated and a person gets an induction notice. That creates a "Catch-22." Sincerity is a main CO criterion, yet making a claim only after getting drafted would raise doubts to a local board about the CO's sincerity. In lieu of this, a CO can be creative and proactive with other types of documentation. Here are some suggestions:

1. Use the Selective Service Registration Form and Change of Information Card

The *Selective Service Registration Form* has no place to indicate a CO claim. It can, however, be written on a printed copy. For details, see the Handout, *Sample Selective Service Registration Form*. Then after registering, Selective Service sends back a *Change of Information Form*. See the Handout, *Change of Information Form and Reply*, to use a nifty way to get dated documentation back from Selective Service demonstrating your attempt to apply for conscientious objection.

2. Write a CO Letter to Your Faith, School, or Support Community

Writing a *CO Letter* is challenging but is also at the heart of expressing a personal claim for conscientious objection. See *A Template Letter Documenting a CO Claim*, *Two Sample CO Letters*, *Sending Documentation to Independent Agencies*, and the *Workshop Journal* for helpful suggestions. Women currently do not register but might in the future, so writing a letter is crucial for them as well.

3. Keep and Update a CO Folder (LIKE ADDING THIS HANDOUT)

- ✓ Keep a journal with entries about your beliefs, the influences that affect you, how your values run against participation in war, etc. Use the *Workshop Journal* as a start.

- ✓ Read peace literature, such as from Mohandas Gandhi, Dorothy Day, M. L. King, Jr., Mother Teresa, Henry David Thoreau, Elise Boulding, Kenneth Boulding, Thomas Merton, Leo Tolstoy, Ang Sang Suu Kee, Dalai Lama, and many others.
- ✓ Document participation in religious services, retreats, CO workshops, educational sessions, demonstrations, peace/humanitarian organizations, and rallies that influenced your beliefs.
- ✓ Show ways you spread your convictions against war to others, either formally in presentations at school, to your support or faith community, or informally in private discussions.
- ✓ Describe how you naturally handle conflict, including specific incidents or actual situations.
- ✓ Include correspondence from Selective Service, other groups and repositories about your claim.

5. Remember to "Tri-fold" Important Documents

To "tri-fold," photocopy a letter, form, worksheet, or other document, put the printed part inside, fold it in thirds as if to fit into a $4\frac{1}{8} \times 9\frac{1}{2}$ sized envelope, and staple it shut at the bottom. On the outside, self-address it, put a stamp on it, and send it through the U.S. mail. When it comes back, check to see if the postmark **date showing when it was done** is legible. If so, keep it unopened in your CO folder. If not, resend. As a rule of thumb, all important documents should be "tri-folded." It's an expensive way to document. Other methods include notarization and/or sending by U.S. Postal certified, return-receipt.

WRITING A CO LETTER

Articulating beliefs can be daunting and using words to describe deep, inner convictions can seem trite. However, draft board members cannot debate or dispute sincere, personal expressions of those truths that come from your experience. Being honest is most important, and that is different and distinctive for each person. No letter need conform to universal or academic principles. It only has to be an expression of your deeply held personal beliefs. No one can refute those, especially if expressed honestly and sincerely. Freely use this template, and remember the three CO criteria.

1. The CO must be *conscientiously opposed to participating in any war and all war*.
 2. The objection must be based upon *moral, ethical, or religious belief*.
 3. The claim must be *sincere or deeply held*, or play a significant role in one's life.
- ✓ Use the template below to organize your ideas and include key legal language.

Dear _____ (fill in the name of your faith, support, or school community):

Although required to give my consent to Selective Service Registration in order to get a driver's license, my official date for that registration is when I turn 18. On the SS registration form, I will indicate my claim as a conscientious objector. Although the form does not ask for this information specifically, in the event of a future draft I want to record my convictions. This letter, written before that time, articulates my beliefs as a conscientious objector, and I ask that you serve witness to it.

While my beliefs continue to crystallize, I can state the following:

1. I have a deep, firm, and fixed belief against personal participation in war of any form.
Expand on this in a few sentences or even a few paragraphs explaining why.
2. This conviction is based upon my moral, ethical, and religious training and beliefs.
Elaborate on these convictions and beliefs, documenting the kind of training you received, especially within your support/faith community and/or family household.
3. I sincerely feel...

Your claim must be sincere and deeply held, not just a way to get out of military service. Write a few sentences or paragraphs to substantiate your sincerity, such as "I was raised not to harm others," "No person has the right to take another's life," "I do not act violently towards others and am known among my friends for acting in this manner," "I seek solutions that respect the rights of all others," or "There is that of God in everyone." Talk about how these beliefs play a significant role in your life. Give some real-life examples that illustrate these for you.

I thank you for your willingness to stand with me in witness of my beliefs.

Sincerely (Name and Date)