

Preface

1959: Willmoore Il Magnifico

On the Saturday evening of May 2, 1959, the weather in Palo Alto was clear, but the wind was blowing with a bit of a chill. As the sun started to set over the Pacific, an expectant crowd gathered at Stanford University's Memorial Hall. This building provided the largest indoor venue on campus and could seat more than seventeen hundred persons. Tonight the Hall was too small. All seats were filled by 7:00 p.m. though the performance was scheduled to start at 7:30. Organizers set up loudspeakers on the lawn and within adjoining buildings to broadcast the event to the overflow crowd. According to one observer, attendees were "hanging from the rafters." And, no, Wilbert Harrison had not shown up to play his current hit "Kansas City." Rather two popular professors, a pacifist and a "warmonger," were debating the morality of war. Student interest in questions of war and peace remained high as the Cold War still cast an ominous shadow.¹

In one corner stood Mulford Sibley, a University of Minnesota political scientist. He had served the previous year as a visiting professor at Stanford and had won a devoted following among students. Sibley, a Quaker and socialist, was the foremost advocate of pacifism in American academia. He had braved the wrath of the US government during World War II as a conscientious objector. At the height of the Cold War, Sibley continued to argue against war and military preparedness. In the other corner stood Willmoore Kendall, the "well-known Fascist beast" from Yale. Kendall was a veteran of World War II and Korea. He had held a high position in the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), helped professionalize American principles of psychological warfare, and was a senior editor at *National Review*. Kendall, a Catholic, was finishing up his own visiting professorship at Stanford. He had replaced Sibley and had also won the hearts and minds of many students.²

Though the two men's political principles could hardly have been further apart, they were old friends, having grown up together in 1920s Oklahoma. As a boy Sibley had attended the Methodist Church in the small Oklahoma town of Miami, pastored by Reverend Willmoore Kendall, Sr., father of his opponent in tonight's debate. Both men had also received degrees from the University of Oklahoma. Later they crossed professional paths at the University of Illinois where Mulford Sibley got a job teaching political science as Willmoore Kendall was finishing up his doctorate. As evidenced this spring evening, both men were learned, both skilled at disputation, and both possessed strong convictions. Each spoke for 40 minutes, then got 5 minutes to respond to the other. Afterward both speakers took questions from the audience.³

Kendall—fifty years old, with a “brindled” military-style crew cut—went first. He noted his social connections to Sibley, suggesting that his dad's example may have inspired his opponent's political views. Kendall pronounced that—together with Sibley and the audience—his object was to seek truth and not to make an oratorical display. Yet, as Kendall proceeded with his speech, he pulled no rhetorical punches. Sibley, he said, could never *win* a debate on this subject because Western civilization, the civilization to which he, Sibley, and the audience belonged, had rejected pacifism for millennia. From Moses onward, said Kendall, the West had often considered but always rejected pacifist arguments. However this event might turn out, no totting up of debater's points would alter this aversion to pacifism. The West *obviously* would not adopt the pacifist proposal, “the mere thought of which strikes terror into the heart.”⁴

Kendall then declared that pacifists were barbarians, heretics, and parasites. They were barbarians because they refused to defend their civilization from “enemies from beyond the gates of our Civilization.” By refusing to fight, the pacifists were prepared to allow their own civilization to fall and barbarism to triumph. Pacifists were also heretics, that is, “enemies within the gates.” Most accepted the Christian roots of Western civilization but put a radical twist on Christian principles which undermined their society's well-being. Pacifism, Kendall argued, “insinuates itself into the body politic as a higher expression of Christian selflessness, [but] is marked throughout by irresponsibility and callous indifference towards the wants and needs and rights of the pacifists' fellow-men.” The pacifist was a parasite. He lives “*off* our Civilization” and benefits from “the [martial] commitments it imposes upon others.” The pacifist thus “consumes the produce of fields that he does not help to till.”⁵

This aversion to pacifism—while instinctual and traditional—was also rational. Here Kendall delved deep. Drawing upon Aquinas, he argued that pacifism meant ontological rejection of society itself, for it denied the “recourse to arms, even by legally constituted states attempting to defend

their just interests.” Citing Lincoln he maintained that “no state voluntarily wills its own dissolution.” Thus, as society was formed to promote human flourishing through establishing a legal order, those who refused to defend society were enemies to human welfare, for they advocated national suicide. Claiming to promote human dignity, then, pacifists were in fact antisocial anarchists who willed “the nothingness of civil society.”⁶

Kendall then detailed Augustine’s just war theory, which, he claimed, demonstrated how Christians might wage war to defend the social goods of civilization while restraining the violent passions of war to uphold ideals of peacefulness and justice. Indeed, this tradition often required the use of force—including military action—as a positive Christian duty, “the *law of Christian love itself*,” to protect the weak from their oppressors. To help the oppressed and to preserve the goods of one’s own civilization, nations sometimes had to go to war. Historically, for example, that meant that war had been required to defend the West against Islamic invasion. In the twentieth century, upholders of this tradition possessed a moral duty to battle “the disciplined hordes of World Communism” and to defeat “the abomination known as Nazism.”⁷ In fact, by refusing to submit to evil, by confronting and vanquishing the evildoer, heroic resistance might help bring that evildoer to embrace the goods of civility and peace.

The advent of nuclear weapons, said Kendall, did not change this moral calculus. God, said Kendall, had “made it *our* business . . . to protect justice, and law, and liberty, and this out of love for our neighbor.” Indeed, Kendall argued, the United States, to promote justice, ought to have used its atomic monopoly in 1946 to demand that the communist regime of the USSR stop oppressing its people. It is always “our” job, that is, we the people of the West, to fulfill this moral obligation and “to use the means at our disposal in order to preserve justice in the situations in which ‘we’ are involved.” If God has willed “the destruction of the planet in an atomic *Götterdämmerung*,” this moral obligation still remains. Even in a thermonuclear world, therefore, the people of the West must perform “our duty to strike down the Soviet aggressor . . . to prevent him from doing the wrong he is doing”—as previously the West had done against the Nazis.⁸

Sibley, aged forty-seven and with thinning curly brown hair, then stood up. A lifelong socialist, he wore his trademark red tie as a symbol of solidarity with the working class. Saluting the audience as “orthodox, heretics, and friends,” he proceeded to deliver his speech. He was unyielding in his defense of pacifism; that is, he claimed to oppose *all* wars. Still, Sibley focused on the contemporary “age of violence.” Indeed, said he, the “central faith of American foreign policy today seems to be in the threat of mass violence.” Yet Sibley also acknowledged the warlike activities of the Soviet Union, China, and India. None passed pacifist muster. He argued that human values

were not absolute but dependent on historical context and that a hierarchy among such values was inevitable. Sibley drew a distinction between force—which was sometimes legitimate and necessary—and war which was never permissible.⁹

Human agreement on “social and political ideals” was, he claimed, more widespread than commonly acknowledged. All sides in the Cold War, for example, claimed to support freedom, equality, brotherhood, progress, and peace. Sibley suggested the existence of a force “continuum” from “nonviolent” civil disobedience to “increasingly violent” forms of force culminating in “the institutional practices which we sum up under the word war.” The evils that war lets loose, said Sibley, including deaths of noncombatants, “contradict the kinds of ends (freedom and destruction of tyranny) for which war is usually proclaimed.” The “character of a future war,” with likely use of atomic weapons, would bring death and destruction to a catastrophic new level. Meanwhile preparations for war undermined peaceful economic development which might make war less likely.¹⁰

War was “immoral,” Sibley argued, “because it involves organized and deliberate . . . killing of human beings.” And “the prohibition of killing, would seem to be as close as we can come to a moral absolute in this sub-angelic world.” In this light, distinctions between “aggressive” and “defensive” wars had little meaning, for both sides waged war in the same murderous fashion. Also, there were no actual criteria to distinguish an aggressive war from a defensive war. Even when war achieved positive results, as with eliminating Nazi power, these come “at such a cost and with such enormously evil by-products that its positive attainments are far more than counter balanced by its evil.”¹¹

For nations who accepted that there was no such thing as a good war, Sibley counseled unilateral disarmament (if multilateral disarmament proved impossible). Funds saved from war preparations could be used for education, for “nonviolent resistance,” and for helping the “underdeveloped” world. And if “worst came to worst,” said Sibley, the people of such a nation “would agree with Socrates that . . . it is better to suffer injustice than to commit it.” Thus, nonviolent people might find themselves enslaved, but such results could also occur when a country fought and lost a war. In any case, occupation of a nonviolent nation by a hostile force “would still be preferable . . . to a war.” Tyranny might triumph but “with *relatively* little loss of human life.” Individuals ought therefore to engage in an “open conspiracy” against “war making governments everywhere.”¹²

As regards Christianity and pacifism, Sibley noted that he did not “regard [himself] as a Christian.” He maintained that the connection between pacifism and Christianity was not clear but then argued that the earliest Christians had opposed war, as such, on religious grounds. He admitted that after

the early Christian period, pacifists were few because “historical so-called Christianity . . . held war to be legitimate under certain circumstances.” The “nonkilling” ethos of the New Testament was nevertheless incompatible with war “despite the efforts of men like Athanasius, St. Augustine, and Luther to prove the contrary.” Whatever Christianity might say about it, concluded Sibley, “pacifism is the only practical politics in our day.”¹³

Sibley next proceeded with a rejoinder to Kendall’s talk. He claimed Kendall contradicted himself by claiming that Western civilization would never accept pacifism while fretting about pacifist popularity. Sibley then argued that the present ought not be bound by “the short-sightedness and obtuseness of our ancestors.” He argued that pacifists were not irresponsible because they were championing the values they held most dear and were not parasites because war itself contradicted Western values. Contra Kendall, he argued that the just war theory was false because modern “war . . . will always give rise to greater disorder than order.” Any ends achieved would be “at a price more than counterbalancing the gains.” Western civilization would “have likely reached a higher level more rapidly” if Charles Martel had not resisted the more advanced civilization of Muslim invaders. Sibley closed by suggesting repudiation “of war as a method of resisting tyranny” and urging development of “efficacious and moral means of defense.”¹⁴

Kendall then rose to offer his own rebuttal. Sibley, he said, had told “us that enslavement—*our* enslavement—was preferable . . . to a war fought for the purpose of repelling and crushing the invader.” Slavery would not be so bad, Sibley claimed, because most people would survive. Tyrannies do not last forever and could be resisted nonviolently. Kendall then argued, contradicting Sibley, that future wars would not necessarily go nuclear. Meanwhile, our “quasi-pacifist *inhibitions*” had left “millions of Russians . . . in Communist prison camps.” Similar inhibitions had prevented the United States from helping “German and Eastern European Jews whom the Nazis slaughtered by the millions.” Sibley, he added, would “cheerfully bid us to ‘achieve’ political freedom by delivering ourselves into slavery.” Finally, Kendall asked how “that old complex of errors that learned men call ‘historic Christianity’” had misrepresented its teachings for so long until corrected by Mulford Sibley.¹⁵

As the two men exchanged one highbrow haymaker after another, the crowd got caught up in the excitement. “The hall,” said one observer, “sounded like the last quarter of a football game between Stanford and California.” Fifty years later graduate student Tom Schrock still recalled the “spectacular” Kendall-Sibley debate. In the question and answer period which followed their speeches, neither professor retreated. Asked how he would save democracy should the Soviets nuke Palo Alto, Kendall responded that he would retaliate in kind. Queried about what he would do if the Soviets demanded capitulation or war, Sibley replied that he would surrender then

begin a nonviolent resistance campaign when Russian troops arrived. As spirited defenders of their respective positions, then, Sibley (as proto-hippy peacenik) was sublime and Kendall (as homegrown Dr. Strangelove) magnificent. "Mulford," said Willmoore as they left the stage, "this was a great show. We'll have to take it on the road."¹⁶

Who won the debate? On one level that depended on whether one thought it better to be red or better to be dead. On another level, the real winners of the debate were the audience members who witnessed its powerful back and forth. Student organizers of the event were surprised by its popularity and praised both participants. It was all too rare, they said, for students to see "the drama" of well-prepared scholars expressing their ideas—powerfully, boldly, and without apology—on a subject of such great consequence. Even after paying Sibley's airfare and offering a similar fee for Kendall to donate to anticommunist Tibetans, the Breakers Club, which had sponsored the event, generated a tidy profit from the overflow crowd. Requests almost immediately arose for transcripts of the respective speeches. Using Kendall's contacts, organizers contracted with the Swallow Press in Denver. When published later that year, the debate proceedings sold rather briskly, especially on the Stanford campus, and talk arose of a second edition. Sibley and Kendall got a bit peeved with one another that evening, but both soon got over it, and in the coming years they would meet on other stages to debate different controversies.¹⁷

Both scholars were, in distinctive and diametrically opposed ways, too hot for Stanford to handle. In 1958, when the university political science department had declined to offer Sibley a permanent position, students had protested. When the department made a similar decision with Kendall for this following year, a different set of student demonstrators carried signs to object.¹⁸ Sibley soon returned to Minnesota where, though something of a gadfly, he served out a long and distinguished career, never wavering in his pacifism and retiring in 1981. Meanwhile, Kendall, who had hoped to get a full-time job at Stanford, headed off for a two-year research sabbatical at the University of Madrid.

Though disappointed at Stanford's decision, Kendall had had a fruitful year in Palo Alto. Faced with large classes, he had shelved his own uniquely effective Socratic teaching style. Thereby, he had honed his effectiveness and increased his self-confidence as a speaker. His carefully prepared lectures were so popular that his classes became standing room only, as nonenrolled students crowded in to hear. Kendall had also participated in a series of public debates prior to the confrontation with Sibley. Taking the conservative side on a variety of controversial issues, many of these appearances had been well attended and successful. In December 1958, at one of these events, he met local librarian and ex-Marine Nellie Cooper, who first agreed to serve as

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his research assistant—following him to Spain—and who later became his wife. As the Spring Semester wound down, Kendall received a telegram of congratulations from former student William F. Buckley, Jr., for a “a year of splendid achievements.”¹⁰

During the debate itself, Kendall uttered a telling aside, a throwaway line, referencing his own family background. “My father,” said the conservative political theorist, “like Professor Sibley, was a persuasive man, and strongly held Professor Sibley’s present ideas.” In the context of the debate, this statement affirmed that it was “always good to greet a fellow-townsmen whom one has not laid eyes on for a long time.”²⁰ After these opening niceties, of course, Kendall had launched a blistering, root and branch attack on pacifists of Sibley’s ilk. Indeed, if one connects the dots of his speech, the Yale professor had called his own father a barbarian, heretic, and parasite. Therein lies a tale.

NOTES

1. Thomas Schrock, Email to Author, October 17, 2017; Kent M. Lloyd, Introduction to *War & the Use of Force—Moral or Immoral, Christian or Unchristian—A Debate at Stanford University* by Willmoore Kendall (hereafter WK) and Mulford Q. Sibley (Denver: Swallow Press, 1959), 2; Oscar Pemantle, *Contrasting Arguments: The Culture War and the Clash in Education* (New York: Peter Lang, 2019), 201.

2. “Plan for Peace,” *Hammond Times*, May 15, 1944, p. 6; Paul K. Damai, “Radio Short Circuits,” *Hammond Times*, August 13, 1944, p. 8; “Goble to Speak,” *Evening Courier*, February 18, 1945, p. 7; Duane L. Cady, “What’s On My Mind: Remembering Mulford Q. Sibley,” May 20, 2019, duanelcady.com; Letter to the Editor, *YDN*, October 17, 1957, p. 2

3. Lloyd, “Introduction,” 2–3; WK and Sibley, *War & the Use of Force*, 5.

4. Letter, *YDN*, October 17, 1957, p. 2; “Kendall-Sibley Debate,” *Stanford Daily*, March 1, 1959, p. 1; WK/Sibley, *War*, 5–6.

5. WK/Sibley, *War*, 6–9.

6. *Ibid.*, 7–10.

7. *Ibid.*, 12–13.

8. *Ibid.*, 14.

9. Cady, “Sibley”; “Kendall-Sibley Debate,” 1; “Capacity Crowd Attends,” *Stanford Daily*, May 4, 1959, p. 1; WK/Sibley, *War*, 15–16.

10. *Ibid.*, 18–21.

11. *Ibid.*, 21–22.

12. *Ibid.*, 22–23.

13. *Ibid.*, 24–25.

14. *Ibid.*, 26–29.

15. *Ibid.*, 30–32.