

• MAR 6 1973

NYTimes
Motivations of Deserters

To the Editor:

I wish to challenge the assumption made by The Times in "Buckley on Amnesty" (Feb. 20) that "there is a sharp distinction between them [jailed draft resisters] and, for example, deserters from the armed forces."

The implication—that "deserters" neither stood by their principles nor formed an important part of war protest—is nowhere supported in fact. With one stroke of its mighty editorial pen, The Times presumes to judge the motives and the political effect of the desertion of over 432,000 young Americans from military service during the Vietnam era. Certainly some of the calm reasonableness that The Times advocates to Senator Buckley would be in order in discussing deserters.

At present, the only official studies of the motivations of deserters are from the Department of Defense itself. Careful examination of these studies by The Times would show that small samples of men returning to military control from foreign countries were used, and that questions were asked by the Armed Forces before punishment was administered. Even under these conditions nearly two-thirds of the deserters sampled listed no reason or a clearly antiwar or antimilitary reason for leaving. The bulk of the rest listed their status as aliens as reason for leaving for foreign countries. Only one-third of the interviewees had had previous disciplinary actions taken against them, and the majority of those were, as in most military cases, for previous A.W.O.L.'s.

The final word on the motivation of deserters is clearly not yet said. It would serve the public better if The Times were to attempt to determine facts rather than repeat ancient clichés about deserters. Certainly the Pentagon's explanation that men deserted for the same time-honored reasons of personal problems, inability to adjust and fear will not do. This explanation does not begin to explain why desertion rates in the Army in 1971 were more than triple the highest rates of the Korean war and higher than any recorded in World War II.

Our organization has counseled countless A.W.O.L.'s during the Vietnam years, and in far more trusting and confidential relationships than a man filling out a questionnaire before his court-martial. We find that most A.W.O.L.'s possess strong antiwar motivations, mixed with other factors. Of these, racism, physical and mental abuse, lack of proper medical care, improper denial of lawful discharge and fear of stockade treatment rank high.

In the meantime, The Times might better question the motivations of armed forces which attempt to explain away the response of nearly 500,000 American servicemen to Vietnam; to the dehumanization and brutality of basic training; to racism; to arbitrary and harsh punishment; to the lack of political rights; to the failure to provide proper treatment and discharges, and to other abuses, by claiming that its members are either personally maladjusted or dishonorable.

ROBERT K. MUSIL
Associate Secretary
Central Committee for
Conscientious Objectors
Philadelphia, Feb. 29, 1973