



For Immediate Release

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P.O.V.'s "Soldiers of Conscience" Cuts Through Politics to the Moral Dilemma Facing Every Soldier in Combat , Thursday, Oct. 16 on PBS

When the Moment to Shoot Comes, Soldiers Face a Split-Second Decision:
To Kill or Not to Kill

"A thoughtful, challenging, and remarkably wide-ranging examination of the nature of war and its alternatives." – John Hartl, Seattle Times

Soldiers of Conscience is a dramatic window on the dilemma of individual U.S. soldiers in the current Iraq War — when their finger is on the trigger and another human being is in their gun-sight. Made with cooperation of the U.S. Army and narrated by Peter Coyote, the film profiles eight American soldiers, including four who decide not to kill, and become conscientious objectors; and four who believe in their duty to kill if necessary. The film reveals all of them wrestling with the morality of killing in war, not as a philosophical problem, but as soldiers experience it — a split-second decision in combat that can never be forgotten or undone.

Soldiers of Conscience by Gary Weimberg and Catherine Ryan (directors of the P.O.V. films "The Double Life of Ernesto Gómez, Gómez," 1999, and "Maria's Story," 1991) has its broadcast premiere on PBS on **Thursday, Oct. 16, 2008** at 9 p.m., part of the 21st season of P.O.V. (Check local listings.) American television's longest-running independent documentary series, P.O.V. is public television's premier showcase for point-of-view, nonfiction films, and winner of a 2007 Special News & Documentary Emmy Award for Excellence in Television Documentary Filmmaking.

Soldiers of Conscience is not a film that tells an audience what to think, nor is it about the situation in Iraq today. Instead, it tells a bigger story about human nature and war. The film begins with a little-known fact: after World War II, the Army's own studies revealed that as many as 75 percent of combat soldiers, given a chance to fire on the enemy, failed to do so. The studies showed that soldiers, despite training, propaganda and social sanction, retained a surprising inhibition when it came to taking human life. The statistics surprised and alarmed America's generals, who developed training techniques to overcome the reluctance to kill. But if the military found a solution to its problem, the moral contradiction for the individual soldier remained. The mental and emotional burdens carried by soldiers who have killed affect America's families and communities after each of its recent wars. As this film shows, every soldier is inescapably a "soldier of conscience."

The military's very success in "reflexive fire training," which has steadily raised firing rates in combat to as high as 90 percent, may well have intensified the soldier's personal burden. Major Peter Kilner, a West Point professor of ethics and former 82nd Airborne Infantry Commander, addresses the issue in the film: "When you train them reflexively, they learn to make those decisions much more quickly, but the price of that is they're not thinking through the great moral decision of killing another human being."

Major Kilner is clear that, at times, there is a moral imperative to kill. “The million people who are out defending our country fighting our wars, and the millions who have done it throughout history are not immoral people. No one likes to kill — no healthy person. . . . It may be nasty, it may be unpleasant, but the alternative’s worse.” But facing the brutal responsibility to kill another person compels some soldiers to undergo a profound transformation that turns them into conscientious objectors. The film follows the transformation of four such soldiers. Two are honorably discharged from the Army as conscientious objectors: Joshua Casteel, an Evangelical Christian; and Aidan Delgado, a Buddhist. The other two go to prison: Camilo Mejia, the first combat veteran to come back from Iraq and publicly refuse to return; and Kevin Benderman, a 10-year veteran Army sergeant from Tennessee.

All four — Camilo Mejia, Kevin Benderman, Joshua Casteel and Aidan Delgado — had little in common when they volunteered to serve in the Army except a sense of duty and patriotism. Mejia joined the military at age 19, believing he would be bringing “freedom to other lands.” Sgt. Benderman comes from a military family steeped in a Southern devotion to honor and duty, and was already a 10-year veteran when he went to Iraq. Casteel was raised as a deeply religious, highly engaged Evangelical Christian who carried a copy of the U.S. Constitution in his pocket as a boy. Delgado signed up just before 9/11, and felt proud that he’d seen the need to serve before the Twin Tower attacks.

Each of these men later underwent what military regulations call a “crystallization of conscience” that turned them against war and allows them to apply, under rules first promulgated by the Continental Congress in 1775, for conscientious objector status. Says Mejia: “Nothing ever prepares you for what that does to you as a human being, you know, to kill an innocent person.” The shock of what he saw and did in Iraq turned Mejia into the first combat veteran to come back from Iraq and publicly refuse to return; he appeared on *60 Minutes* before turning himself in to the Army.

Benderman had a similar experience seeing “how war affects civilians.” It put him in mind of the warnings his father gave against going to war, despite the elder Benderman’s own service in World War II. After one tour in Iraq, followed by “a lot of deep down reflection, and I guess the term is soul-searching,” Benderman applied for C.O. status, and then did not return to Iraq with his unit, instead reporting for duty at his U.S. base to await his fate. Casteel’s turnaround came when he worked as an interrogator at Abu Ghraib and the faith of an admitted jihadist deeply challenged his own faith. Soon he found “my position as a U.S. Army interrogator contradicted my calling . . . as a Christian.”

Delgado’s doubts began in basic training when he was first exposed to “the venom” of reflexive fire training. They crystallized when his unit was assigned guard duty over Iraqi soldiers, whom he saw as men like himself. “It’s the nature of war to set the other apart, because you can’t kill someone who’s like yourself.” Buddhism, which Delgado had already been studying – and whose first precept is not to take life, without exception — became his guide as he applied for C.O. status and became an outspoken anti-war activist.

But the film extends equal sympathy to the viewpoint of soldiers who are willing to kill, including three who served in Iraq and are still on active duty, as drill sergeants, Thomas Washington, Todd Savage and Jaime Isom. Like Major Kilner, each of these men in his own way justifies the killing of war as inevitable and necessary if the world is to be made a moral place. They see the pacifism of conscientious objectors as utopian, as a dereliction of duty not only from the soldiers’ military oath but also from the duty to protect their families and the weak. “When you’re out there in the middle of combat, sometimes it’s kill or be killed,” says Sgt. Washington, who also admits, “When you first do actually get into the first battle and you actually wound or kill someone, it starts messing with your head . . . it’s just like shaking up a pop bottle with your thumb over it; [the stress] just keeps building and building.”

The film’s surprising revelation is how many beliefs these soldiers, in fact, share. All are eloquent about the moral dilemma of having to kill in war. Where they disagree is how each should act – as soldiers and as human beings. Mejia, Benderman, Casteel and Delgado are strong spokespeople for

the idea that peace need not be an unrealistic idea, and that achieving it must begin as an individual responsibility — just as, in the field, the decision to kill becomes a devastatingly personal one. Major Kilner and the three drill sergeants feel their responsibility differently. “War is necessary sometimes because it’s been brought upon peace-loving people by people who are . . . not willing to let another society . . . live in peace,” says Major Kilner. “You can’t say that you believe in human dignity and human rights if you’re not willing to defend them.”

Soldiers of Conscience is a timely and powerful look into a central drama of our time — how the soldier decides to kill or not, and the life-changing consequences that come with either choice.

“This film is about the burden of conscience,” says co-director Weimberg. “If you break the taboo and talk to a soldier about killing in war, as we did for this film, you’ll learn that if soldiers have to kill, almost every single one suffers the rest of his or her life for doing so. We previewed the film for West Point cadets and for Quaker pacifists, and both audiences learned something new about the question of ‘to kill or not to kill’.”

“Another goal we had in making this film was to build respect for one another — even when we disagree,” says co-director Ryan. “We tried to make a war film that examines and explores our common ground. Where we can find common ground, we can eliminate problems. Perhaps even war.”

Soldiers of Conscience is a Luna Productions Film.

About the filmmakers:

Gary Weimberg

Director/Producer

Gary Weimberg has spent the last two decades making award-winning documentaries as a producer, director, editor, writer and cameraman. He has won two national Emmy Awards, for “Earth and the American Dream” (HBO, 1992) and “Loyalty and Betrayal: A History of the American Mob” (Fox, 1994). He edited the Academy Award-nominated documentaries “Memorial” (1989) and “Superchief: The Life and Legacy of Earl Warren” (1991). In 1999, he received a Director’s Guild nomination for Outstanding Documentary Director for “The Double Life of Ernesto Gómez Gómez,” a film that contributed to the Presidential Pardon of 11 U.S. political prisoners. From 2004-2006, as part of Luna Productions, Weimberg produced a series of documentaries that have helped to raise over \$1.6 million for nonprofit organizations. He recently completed the feature documentary “Three Women and a Chateau.” He is married to Catherine Ryan; they live in San Francisco.

Catherine Ryan

Director/Producer

Catherine Ryan has been producing, directing and editing award-winning documentaries for over 20 years. **Soldiers of Conscience** is her third film to be shown on P.O.V. The other two are “Maria’s Story” (1991), and “The Double Life of Ernesto Gómez Gómez.” Ryan has also produced and directed documentaries for primetime network television, including “The Story of Mothers & Daughters” (1997, ABC), “The Story of Fathers & Sons” (1999, ABC) and “Teens” (2000, WB). She and Gary have been producing partners, creating independent films for too long to mention.

Credits:

Co-directors/-producers:	Gary Weimberg, Catherine Ryan
Executive Producers:	Stan and Mary Friedman, Philip and Donna Harris
Cinematographer:	Kevin O’Brien
Editors:	Gary Weimberg, Josh Peterson
Original Music:	Todd Boekelheide

Running Time: 86:46

Awards & Festivals:

- Best Film, Conflict and Resolution Category, Hamptons International Film Festival
- Best Documentary, Foyle Film Festival (Northern Ireland)
- Best Documentary, Rhode Island International Film Festival
- Finalist, Best Documentary, Denver Film Festival
- Best Documentary, Salem Film Festival



Produced by American Documentary, Inc. and celebrating its 21st season on PBS in 2008, the award-winning P.O.V. series is the longest-running showcase on television to feature the work of America's best contemporary-issue independent filmmakers. Airing June through October, with primetime specials during the year, P.O.V. has brought more than 250 award-winning documentaries to millions nationwide, and has a Webby Award-winning online series, *P.O.V.'s Borders*. Since 1988, P.O.V. has pioneered the art of presentation and outreach using independent nonfiction media to build new communities in conversation about today's most pressing social issues. More information about P.O.V. is available online at www.pbs.org/pov.

P.O.V. Interactive (www.pbs.org/pov)

P.O.V.'s award-winning Web department produces special features for every P.O.V. presentation, extending the life of our films through filmmaker interviews, story updates, podcasts, streaming video, and community-based and educational content that involves viewers in activities and feedback. P.O.V. Interactive also produces our Web-only showcase for interactive storytelling, *P.O.V.'s Borders*, and the *P.O.V. Blog*, a gathering place for documentary fans and filmmakers to discuss and debate their favorite films, get the latest news and link to further resources. The P.O.V. website, blog and film archives form a unique and extensive online resource for documentary storytelling.

P.O.V. Community Engagement and Education

American Documentary | P.O.V. works with local PBS stations, educators and community organizations to present free screenings and discussion events to inspire and engage communities in vital conversations about our world. As a leading provider of quality nonfiction programming for use in public life, P.O.V. offers an extensive menu of resources, including free discussion guides and curriculum-based lesson plans. In addition, P.O.V.'s *Youth Views* works with youth organizers and students to provide them with resources and training so they may use independent documentaries as a catalyst for social change.

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American Documentary, Inc. (www.amdoc.org)

American Documentary, Inc. (AmDoc) is a multimedia company dedicated to creating, identifying and presenting contemporary stories that express opinions and perspectives rarely featured in mainstream media outlets. AmDoc is a catalyst for public culture, developing collaborative strategic engagement activities around socially relevant content on television, online and in community settings. These activities are designed to trigger action, from dialogue and feedback to educational opportunities and community participation. Simon Kilmurry is executive director of American Documentary | P.O.V.

DVD REQUESTS: Please note that a broadcast version of this film is available upon request, as the film may be edited to comply with new FCC regulations.



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