

John Beecher's Statement and Call



John Beecher at work in his studio.

My decision to join the San Francisco-Moscow Walk for Peace was not a sudden one despite appearances. Ever since the end of World War II, in which I took part as a believer that its successful conclusion would usher in the epoch of universal peace, I have been moving steadily in the direction of pacifist conviction and final disillusionment with chimerical programs of achieving humane ends through inhumane force and violence. Having as I say taken part in World War II and having written a book All Brave Sailors about my experiences which was considered "patriotic" enough for the United States Navy to stock it in 600 ships' libraries, I wound up the war years as the director of the UNRRA displaced persons camps in the Stuttgart, Germany, area. Here the spectacle of appalling human degradation, involving conquerors as well as conquered, started me on a long progress of re-evaluation which has only now reached its logical term of public commitment to nonviolence.

Corruptio optimi pessima. The church in which I was reared puts it succinctly, "The corruption of the best is the worst." Shakespeare expresses the same concept in poetic metaphor: "Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds." The perversion of the American dream into a hideous thermonuclear nightmare exemplifies this ethical ambiguity to perfection. I spring from stock which has been historically identified with America and the democratic tradition. My first American ancestor, also named John Beecher, was one of the founders of the New Haven, Conn., colony in 1638. My great-grandfather, Edward Beecher, was a pioneer Abolitionist, first president of the first college in Illinois, and a co-founder with the martyred Elijah Lovejoy of the Illinois Anti-Slavery Society in 1838. Edward Beecher's sister, Harriet, wrote Uncle Tom's Cabin which Abraham Lincoln called "the little book that caused the great war." A brother, Henry Ward Beecher, helped by his oratory to keep England from intervening in that war on the side of slavery. A cousin, Julia Ward Howe, wrote the magnificent anthem of that war, "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." Through my father's mother I am related to the Revolutionary hero Nathan Hale and to Edward Everett Hale

who wrote the patriotic classic, The Man Without a Country. This heritage has been a tremendous force in shaping the conscious course of my development. I have striven to live in my own day the kind of life these forebears of mine lived in theirs, to be true to the evolutionary spirit rather than the dead letter of American democracy . . . I have consistently sought to serve my country's true interests as well as to equip myself by study and experience to play the poet's role as Whitman stated it: "The direct trial of him who would be the greatest poet is today. If he does not flood himself with the immediate age as with vast oceanic tides. . . and if he does not attract his own land body and soul to himself and hang on its neck with incomparable love. . . and if he be not himself the age transfigured. . . let him merge in the general run and wait his development."

Lest it be thought that I have no stake in the future beyond my own personal fate, I should perhaps confess that I have four sons and a daughter, two grandchildren already and two more imminently expected. My wife is joining me in my stand. Without these hostages to fortune I might for yet a while longer dodge the compelling issue of the day. However, I could not face my children and their children as well as my compatriots if I now failed to stand up and be counted amongst those who say "No!" to the catastrophic course on which our nation is presently embarked. Thoreau once wrote that the "embattled farmers" who held the bridge at Concord and defended their country in its hour of need were heroes to be sure but that a higher order of heroism was manifested by one who stood up and opposed his country when it was in the wrong.

I call on all American intellectuals and professional people, scholars, writers and artists who recognize the unparalleled danger of this hour to come out unequivocally now in support of national defense through nonviolence and an immediate end to the insane arms race.