

DISPUTATION CLXXXIV

May 3, 2018

Dear Peucinians:

One last time

Relax, have a disp. with me...

Wow, we're finally here: the last disputation. Peucinian's 184th, and the 19th of the 2017-2018 academic year. We heard 34 orations from 25 different people, we welcomed over 85 different people around the table, and we asked over 600 questions. Our smallest disputation had 24 attendees; our largest had 40. We destroyed ___ boxes of Sunset Blush (I'll leave this to someone else to figure out).

We discussed physical beauty, the right to die, gender roles, Confederate monuments, immortality, surveillance, liberal education and service, shame, capitalism, the Second Amendment, vegetarianism, striving for greatness, raising children, non-monogamy, the Western Canon, conventions of politeness, social media and democracy, and humanity's relationship to nature.

Thank you to everyone for making this year so special. We got to explore so many fascinating topics, hear from fantastic orators, and ask burning questions. Along the way, we had a ton of fun and made some sweet memories.

I'm very glad to give it one more go around the table before we have to say goodbye and goodnight for good—at least until the fall. I'm even more pleased to welcome de Gouges to the lectern for the first time, where she will engage Bellow on the following proposition:

RESOLVED: COMPULSORY MILITARY SERVICE IS IMMORAL

Affirmative: Olympe de Gouges '21

Negative: Saul Bellow '20

When I think about the draft, my mind immediately jumps to Phil Ochs's "[Draft Dodger Rag](#)" from the Vietnam War era:

Oh, I'm just a typical American boy
From a typical American town
I believe in God and Senator Dodd
And a-keepin' old Castro down
And when it came my time to serve
I knew "better dead than red"
But when I got to my old draft board, buddy, this is what I said:

Sarge, I'm only eighteen, I got a ruptured spleen
And I always carry a purse
I got eyes like a bat
And my feet are flat
And my asthma's getting worse
Yes, think of my career, my sweetheart dear
And my poor old invalid aunt

Besides, I ain't no fool, I'm a-goin' to school
And I'm working in a DEE-fense plant

I've got a dislocated disc and a wracked up back
I'm allergic to flowers and bugs
And when the bombshell hits, I get epileptic fits
And I'm addicted to a thousand drugs
I got the weakness woes, I can't touch my toes
I can hardly reach my knees
And if the enemy came close to me
I'd probably start to sneeze

Ooh, I hate Chou En Lai, and I hope he dies
One thing you gotta see
That someone's gotta go over there
And that someone isn't me
So I wish you well, Sarge, give 'em Hell!
Kill me a thousand or so
And if you ever get a war without blood and gore
I'll be the first to go

Obviously, the song is amusing, but underlying Ochs's levity are the extraordinary lies he would tell to get out of fighting in Vietnam, fighting for a cause he doesn't believe in. (I take his lines about Castro and Choi En Lai as sarcastic.) Yet we should not overlook the final two lines quoted above, "And if you ever get a war without blood and gore / I'll be the first to go." These lyrics suggest that the cause of the war is irrelevant; Ochs does not believe in violence. His opposition to being drafted is about preserving his own right to choose, for he recognizes "That someone's gotta go over there" so long as "that someone isn't me." In other words, he seems to recognize the necessity of war but feels he personally does not have a duty to serve.

There are fundamental questions about war and military service embedded in this song. (The rest of the album, "I Ain't Marching Anymore," is also incredibly poignant.) Bellow and de Gouges will elaborate those questions for us through their articulation of two different views on the moral standing of the draft, or compulsory military service.

What is the relationship between a citizen and her nation's war? Is the draft a violation of freedom, or a legitimate call to duty? Is state violence a morally justified way to settle conflict? Is the moral legitimacy of the draft at all related to the particulars of the war? Have we given implied consent for being drafted by consuming national security services as citizens? For what causes can the state justifiably expend the lives of its citizens?

There are many more questions to ask. I leave that up to you. Bring your curiosity, your passion, and your open minds—see you soon.

Thursday, May 3, 7:45 p.m.
Third Floor of Massachusetts Hall
Semi-formal attire

PLSH,
JJR

P.S. You might have read *The Things They Carried* in high school. I was lucky enough to read it again in Prof. Morten Hansen's class "The Great American Novel in the 21st Century" my freshman year. The chapter "On the Rainy River" explores the narrator's agony of deciding whether or not to dodge the draft. It is powerful and beautiful. If you have the time, I recommend reading it. I've attached a PDF.