

# Brian Willson and the Problem of Obedience

by Dana Visalli

*We must know how the first ruler came by his authority. – Locke*

One of the more mysterious and problematic elements of human nature is our tendency to be obedient; to look for external authorities to tell us what to do with our lives. The Latin root of the word is *obedire*, “to obey, to be submissive.” When soldiers are told to by some purported authority to march off to war, they almost invariably obey. When taxpayers are told to stuff money into envelopes to pay for those wars, they almost invariably are submissive and do what they are told to do, even when they know that their resources will be used to kill innocent human beings. Ironically, it is often people who have served in the military and have experienced firsthand the banality and brutality of mindless obedience who come to question and then reject external authority over their own internal ethical decisions. One such veteran of military service is Brian Willson.

Brian Willson is known to many people who are concerned about war and peace because of a number of formidable statements he has made against the institutionalized violence known as war that the United States regularly visits upon other societies.<sup>1</sup> Brian was led to first question and then reject the imposition of external authority by his experiences in Vietnam as an Air Force captain.

While in Vietnam he was given the job of checking the efficacy of U.S. and South Vietnamese bombing missions on what were purported to be Viet Cong-dominated villages. He arrived at the first village fifteen minutes after the raid, and found the area strewn with dead bodies, not of Viet Cong, but of women and children. He stepped over the body of a young woman still clutching her baby. Their eyes met; it was several moments before Willson realized that she was indeed dead, her eyelids burned off by napalm. In that brief period of time Brian was overcome by a powerful sense that this young woman was a member of his own family, that in fact all humans are members of the same family. As Brian describes it, this perception



Many of the ills of the world can be traced to the hemorrhage of resources to war

was not a thought process but a deep, visceral perception.

Willson inspected four other villages, all in the same condition, strewn with the bodies of slaughtered rice farmers, mostly women and children. Back at the command bunker, he saw a map that had a pin stuck in every village in the province, indicating that all villages in the area were scheduled for destruction. He found himself spontaneously pulling the pins out of the map, saying to the commanding officer, “You cannot go on destroying innocent human life.” He was summarily thrown out of the bunker and threatened with court martial.

In the years since the Vietnam war ended, Willson has been astonished at his own capacity for obedience, for

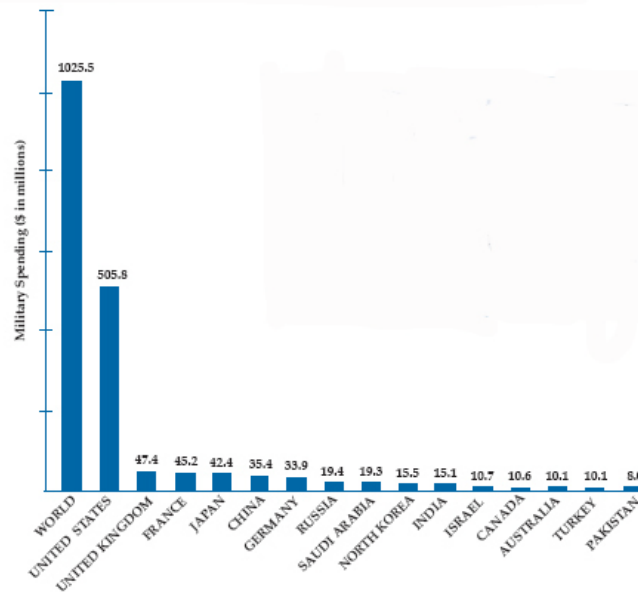
doing what he is told to do by some purported authority without ever questioning, much less resisting such commands. “Why was I willing,” he has asked himself many times, “to travel 10,000 miles from home to participate in the murder of innocent people that I knew absolutely nothing about? How could such a thing be possible?”

There is no easy answer this very critical question of why humans have this proclivity be obedient to external authority. After studying the problem for years, Brian has come to suspect that it is a by-product of the ancient transition from hunter-gatherer to agricultural societies.<sup>2</sup> Agriculture led to large food surpluses, which freed some in the community from the need to work in the fields. Over time this led to a hierarchy of social roles, with farmers growing the food, a military force to guard the surpluses, and a ruling elite to intervene with the mysterious forces that influenced weather and water. Willson points out that we have now lived in these vertically-structured societies for 250 to 300 generations, long enough to be deeply habituated to external authority.

After his experience in the military, Willson tried to forget what he had seen in Vietnam, first as a lawyer and then as a dairy farmer. But he knew that by pay-

ing taxes he was complicated in the 3.5 million people killed in Vietnam, in the massive carpet bombing of Laos and Cambodia between 1968 and 1973, and in the new proxy wars that were developing in the 1980s in Central America. His awareness of this complicity was literally making him sick. As Brian tells it, “My right wing farmer neighbor pointed out that it was the tax issue that was making me sick, I realized that he was right. My body was getting sick because I was doing something that I don’t believe in.”

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lives by simply being observant of the thoughts and emotions that color our day and move us to act in the world. Once we see the web of fear, obedience and complicity we are caught in, we can choose to move beyond it. “The process of making radical choices,” notes Willson, “is both individual and communal, but I can’t wait for the movement, just as I couldn’t wait when I went into the command bunker in Vietnam and saw the pins on the map that showed they were going to destroy every village in the province.”

Brian realized that he was trying to figure out a way to not pay taxes that would not have a personal cost, and that this condition created a paradox that was irresolvable. He finally realized that the only way he could be free of the destructive nature of externally-imposed authority was to be willing to accept the consequences of acting from his own inner values. “That perception,” he says “was very liberating. In the process of tax refusal I went through a divorce, and I lost my farm because of the divorce, it was very painful. On the other hand it is very painful to know that I am murdering people. In one week in Vietnam I went into five villages and saw about 900 dead people. I don’t want to be part of this. I want to be part of a movement that says no to that.”

We may never fully understand the roots of our obedient nature, but it is easy to see this force at work in our

For Further reading on obedience:

De La Boetie, Etienne. (1997, 1553). *The Politics of Obedience: The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude*. Montreal, written in 1550, available on Amazon. See [www.lewrockwell.com/rothbard/rothbard29.html](http://www.lewrockwell.com/rothbard/rothbard29.html)

Hedges, Chris. (2002). *War Is A Force That Gives Us Meaning*. New York: Public Affairs.

Jensen, Derrick. (2002). *The Culture Of Make Believe*. New York: Context Books.

The Milgram Experiments and other musings on authority; see

<http://submoon.freeshell.org/fr/valium/aadc.html>

Dana Visalli is a botanist living in Twisp, Washington. He doesn’t send money to international war criminals.

1. In 1986 Brian was one of four Vietnam veterans who fasted for 47 days on the steps of the U.S. capitol building in an effort to stop U.S. aggression in Central America. In 1987 Brian sat on the tracks in front of a U.S. Navy ammunition train taking land mines and other munitions to the Contras in Nicaragua. The Navy had been informed well in advance that the non-violent action would be taking place, but as the train approached it increased its speed rather than stopping. Brian was struck by the engine and lost both of his legs at the knee. He was back on those same tracks a month later in a wheelchair.

2. Brian has an essay on this subject, titled *Root and Structural Causes of War*, posted at his website, [www.brianwillson.com](http://www.brianwillson.com).