

Reading the Rules of Disengagement

By [David Swanson](#)

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Theme: [Law and Justice](#), [US NATO War](#)
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Should soldiers follow illegal orders? Should they take part in illegal wars and occupations? And if they don't want to do so, what choices do they have? And what can we do to help them? These are some of the questions addressed in a new book by Marjorie Cohn and Kathleen Gilberd called "Rules of Disengagement: The Politics and Honor of Military Dissent."

This book addresses these topics as well as any I've yet seen. It draws from the latest actions taken by soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan, and makes frequent comparisons to military resistance during the Vietnam War, examining how the laws and rules have changed. The book examines conscientious objection and refusals to participate, but also the exercise of free speech and other political rights while "serving" in the military.

In addition, it examines the current state of resistance within the military to racism — both racism toward members of the military and racism toward foreign targets for killing, and the connection between the two. It takes a similar and insightful look at sexual harassment and sexual assault within the military.

The book also examines the provision of medical care to injured troops, or the lack thereof, and the hardships faced by military families, as well as the ways in which military family members are resisting illegal wars. This is an ideal book to hand to any young person who is considering enlisting in the military.

But overwhelmingly the most powerful chapter is a short one that simply recounts the highlights of the Winter Soldier testimony presented by Vietnam Veterans Against the War in 1971 and by Iraq Veterans Against the War in 2008. No torture memo, no Red Cross report, no former vice president's fantasy approaches in horrifying sickness the events recounted by these men and women whom we send into these hells and charge with stoking the fires. Here are tales of murder, rape, and torture, people bound with copper wire and tossed from airplanes, families burned, ears cut off, heads cut off, children massacred, girls raped, tear gas and CS gas and skinning alive and crucifixion, genitals electroshocked, limbs hacked off, food poisoned, yanking fathers out of homes and beating them in front of their families, beating children, shooting random passersby, arming unarmed corpses with "drop weapons," prizes for those who kill by stabbing, slamming children to the ground, riddling apartment buildings with bullets, firing on all taxis, and worse than all of it: bombs dropped on houses. And to cap it off, the suicides of veterans upon returning home, as recounted by their grieving family members.

War is hell and war makers behave as devils. Those within the military have ways out and examples to follow. It is not an easy path, but it is the only decent one.

The rest of us meanwhile, who have the privilege of following other roads freely have a fundamental duty to end the illegal orders so that soldiers no longer have to struggle to disobey them. We have a duty to force Congress to stop using our money to compel such crimes. Every war funding bill is a crime against humanity. And every crime against humanity committed by our nation is blood on all of our hands.

We can wash it away.

We must wash it away.

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David Swanson is the author of the upcoming book “Daybreak: Undoing the Imperial Presidency and Forming a More Perfect Union” by Seven Stories Press. You can pre-order it and find out when tour will be in your town: <http://davidswanson.org/book>. Arrange to review it on your blog and Seven Stories will get you a free copy. Contact crystal at sevenstories dot com.

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