

MULFORD SIBLEY

1912-1989

"THE CONFRONTATIONS OF OUR DAY RAISE MANY QUESTIONS." Mulford Sibley wrote fifteen years ago, both among those who challenge the existing structure and among those who rule. For the first group, the issues include "the meaning of conscience, the nature of obligation, and the purposes of disobedience," and for the second, "the justification for repression, the inherent limitations of the law, and the inertia of institutions."

Across four decades, in essays, books, and pamphlets, including *The Obligation to Disobey* (1970), Professor Sibley has provided the most useful body of writings on the politics of pacifism since Gandhi. In the meantime, he has maintained an active, even famous career as a teacher of political theory and as a civil libertarian and war resister.

Born in Marston, Missouri, on June 14, 1912, Mulford Q. Sibley grew up in Oklahoma, graduating from Central State University, Edmund, and the university in Norman in the mid-thirties; in 1938, he completed a doctorate in political science at the University of Minnesota. After teaching for ten years at the University of Illinois, he returned to Minneapolis/St. Paul, and has taught at colleges and universities there, and throughout the United States and abroad. His other longtime associations include the American Service Committee and the Martin Luther King Institute of Nonviolent Social Change in Atlanta, which he advises.

In the Upper Midwest, Sibley is something of a legend as a teacher and Socialist. His debate with a St. Paul alderman in the late 1960s about who should or should not be allowed to espouse what causes on a state university campus attracted audiences throughout the region; it raised basic questions about the relationship between the university and the community among

the

general public, as well as among scholars and students throughout the United States.

The significance and originality of Sibley's political thought is best suggested by one of his earliest pamphlets, *The Political Theories of Modern Pacifism: An Analysis and Criticism* (1944), which contains both a summary of modern pacifist thought and a critique of its major arguments "insofar as they related themselves to the world of politics."

It describes the philosophical bases of Hindu pacifism, Christian pacifism, and the pacifism of the secular revolutionary movements of the 19th and 20th centuries, and then evaluates several main currents or propositions that all pacifist theories hold in common. Among them are (1) that violence hinders the achievement of a democratic and peaceful order; (2) that decentralization in politics and in the economic order is desirable; and (3) that the ideology of nonviolence has a direct relevance to politics. The last two tenets provide modern pacifism with its greatest challenge, if, that is, it is to deal with questions that go beyond personal witness.

In showing how pacifism speaks to these concerns, Sibley prefers Gandhi's theory of politics to that of the Christian anarchists, secularists, or other utopians of the last two centuries, particularly regarding the State. "While the pacifist is right in protesting against the swallowing up of the individual personality by the Leviathan State," overemphasizing decentralization and agrarianism raises problems, too, he says. "A world in which the binding tie of political cohesion is practically severed would be a poor setting for social harmony and nonviolence."

Like Gandhi and unlike the anarchists, Sibley regards maintenance of the State as compatible with a pacifist ethic; and he argues against those, such as the late Reinhold Niebuhr, who say pacifism has no direct relevance to modern politics. It may, in fact, be "the only context in which to discover the road to a new polity," Sibley argues. "In this respect Hindu and secular

revolutionary pacifism are far more penetrating than most emphases of Christian pacifism." Gandhi, for example, whose political theory involved a philosophy of history, a doctrine of the ideal State, as well as a theory of revolution, saw that in any mass action previous agreement is essential, "if the power of the State is to be effectively challenged."

It is against this background—providing a theoretical basis for a new politics based upon nonviolence—that Sibley's work is best understood, including his later discussions of *power*, *authority*, and *violence*. These concepts, as Hannah Arendt also has argued, must be clarified if one is to deal with the crucial issue in politics, Who rules whom?

In considering various sides of this question, including those related to civil disobedience, Sibley calls upon a fund of knowledge of past nonviolent resistance—from his own book, *The Quiet Battle* (1968), as well as from the Civil Rights and antiwar movements and resistance to the nuclear arms race. He often supports an argument by reference to alternative or "revolutionary" practices, such as resisting conscription and war taxes, hiding political prisoners (Jews in Germany, for example, during World War II), and exposing secret government war agreements. Sibley recognizes at the same time the hazards that continue to make the application of the pacifist principles

difficult "in a world that is more violent and less free" than it was forty years ago. He wrote in *The Obligation to Disobey*.

In attempting to make ends and means compatible with each other, the pacifist is both a revolutionary and a political realist. Only radical social reconstruction can provide a framework which will encourage respect for human personality. But peace cannot be attained by war, and reverence for human beings will not be advanced by methods deliberately meant to kill and maim them . . . Only when radicals emancipate themselves from the fatal fascination which violence still apparently has for them can they become leaders in the cause of equalitarian revolution.

As political theory, the writings of Mulford Sibley deserve serious study by everyone who works for fundamental social change. As a scholar, teacher, and "quiet battler" in his own right, Sibley has helped to lay the groundwork for a radical culture. In his own life, also, he provides a vivid example of the necessary relationship between political theory and practices between the politics of pacifism and nonviolent direct action.

Sibley has been an especially popular teacher, admired even by those not particularly sympathetic to his pacifist and socialist politics. For forty years his tall, lanky figure was almost as much of an institution as the Mississippi River that cuts through the University of Minnesota campus, where he taught seminars on Plato and Marx, general courses in Medieval political thought and political theory, and served as adviser to the program in American Studies.

Now a lecturer at Hamline University and Macalester College, he is known for his ability to present all sides of a question fairly, even while making clear his own position. This reputation for integrity has prompted several people, including a vice president of the United States, to come to his defense when political bureaucrats occasionally harassed him for questioning conventional behavior and publicly espousing unpopular causes.

BY MULFORD SIBLEY

The Obligation to Disobey: Conscience and the Law. New York: Council on Religion and International Affairs, 1970.

The Quiet Battle: Writings on the Theory and Practice of Non-violent Resistance. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1963 and Boston: Beacon Press, 1968.

The Political Theories of Modern Pacifism: An Analysis and Criticism. Philadelphia: The Pacifist Research Bureau, 1944, 1970.

And others.

ABOUT MULFORD SIBLEY

Morphew, Clark. "Peace Prof: Controversial Ideas Still Propel Mulford Q. Sibley." St. Paul (Minn.) *Post Dispatch* (March 3, 1984), pp. 1B-2B.