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War objector sparks US debate

Since he hit the US headlines for refusing to return to serve in Iraq, Camilo Mejia has been described as everything from a "brave leader" to an "utter coward".

From the fairly sober reports in the mainstream American media to the more strident comments of online bloggers, a national debate has raged over the 28-year-old staff sergeant that reflects the country's divisions over the continued troop presence in Iraq.

Mr Mejia, a native of Nicaragua who has permanent US residency, has said he wants to be the first Iraq war veteran to challenge the morality and conduct of the conflict.

"I'm prepared to go to prison because I'll have a clear conscience," he says.

But he could find himself caught in the crossfire between pro- and anti-war campaigners, all eager to use his case as ammunition for their cause.

Disillusioned

Mr Mejia came to the US with his mother Maritza Castillo, a naturalised American citizen, when he was just 19.

The father he left behind in Nicaragua, Carlos Mejia Godoy, has been described as one of the country's most important singers and composers, and many of his songs are closely identified with the Sandinista revolution of 1979.

Mr Mejia said he joined the military when he arrived in Miami because he wanted to feel part of American society.

He served in the US army for three years and then spent five years in the National Guard.

He was studying at the University of Miami and was about to graduate when his unit was sent to Iraq in April last year.

During his five months of active duty there, Mr Mejia led a squad in the area known as the Sunni Triangle - an area north and west of Baghdad where the anti-American insurgency has been most active.

He says he became increasingly disillusioned by his experiences and failed to return to his unit after being allowed home for two weeks last October.



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“ I was an instrument of violence. Now I have decided to become an instrument of peace ”

Camilo Mejia

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