

Alternative Service for Drafted Dollars

Peace Tax Campaign Works to Expand the Rights of Nonviolent Taxpayers

BY CHRIS FRETZ

On Nov. 29, 2006, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that the Pentagon is considering an "emergency supplemental" request of at least \$127 billion in war funding.¹ As government spending for waging war becomes increasingly exorbitant, especially compared to health care and education, many Americans are realizing that currently there is no legal alternative for taxpayers who are morally or ethically opposed to having their taxes used to commit violence. Americans who practice principled nonviolence, that is, nonviolence as a way of life, must break the law and refuse to pay for war, live below the taxable income level, or pay for state-sponsored violence in spite of their beliefs.

In addition to funding the war in Iraq, American tax dollars are also being used to fuel violence between Israel and Palestine, to staff and maintain over 770 military "sites" outside of U.S. territory, and to maintain an arsenal of 5,735 active or operational warheads.² In addition to the overt violence of waging war, the buildup of weapons also causes structural violence by denying essential infrastructure and social services necessary to meet needs at home and abroad.

HISTORY OF WAR TAX RESISTANCE

One of the earliest known examples of people practicing principled nonviolence regarding the payment of taxes was in 1637 when the Algonquin Indians resisted taxation by the Dutch to help improve a local Dutch fort.

War tax resistance became a mainstream issue when author and philosopher Henry David Thoreau refused to pay to fund the Mexican-American war of the 1840s. In his essay, *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience*, he wrote, "If a thousand men were not to pay their tax-bills this year that would not be a violent and bloody measure, as it would be to pay them, and enable the State to commit violence and shed innocent blood."

During the Vietnam War, war tax resistance surged immensely in popularity after folk singer Joan Baez announced that she

withheld 60 percent of her 1963 income taxes in opposition to the war. Later, 300 celebrities and high-profile figures, including Baez, Dorothy Day, the founder of *The Catholic Worker*, and linguistics professor Noam Chomsky took out an ad in the *Washington Post* announcing their intention not to pay all or part of their 1965 income taxes.⁴

WAR TAX RESISTANCE TODAY

Today thousands of conscientious citizens hold beliefs that prevent them from participating in war, both physically and financially. Many conscientious objectors (COs) agonize over the dilemma between following their beliefs and following the law. Some of these people impoverish themselves so as not to owe taxes. Others face IRS-imposed penalties for their refusal to pay for violence. Two COs from New Jersey, Joe Donato and Kevin McKee, are currently serving prison sentences of 27 and 24 months respectively, for refusing to pay taxes for war, and Donato's wife, Inge, recently finished a 6-month sentence.

"We would have gladly paid our full share of taxes if only the government could assure us that the amount we paid would not go to fund war making," Joe Donato said. "The lack of any provision like that forced us to either violate our religion or risk being branded as criminals. At that point, we saw no choice but to honor our beliefs."⁵

THE CAMPAIGN FOR A PEACE TAX FUND

The movement to create a legal provision for conscientious objectors to military taxation was organized by a Quaker physician named David Bassett. In 1971, Bassett convened various peace and civil rights groups and religious denominations to discuss the creation of legislation that would enable COs to pay their federal taxes into a fund earmarked for nonmilitary purposes only. Former U.S. Rep. Ron Dellums introduced the bill in 1972 as the World Peace Tax Fund Bill. It has been reintroduced each congressional session since then, with several name and wording changes over the years.

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The legislation, now called the Religious Freedom Peace Tax Fund Bill, had 46 cosponsors in the past session of Congress, and U.S. Rep. John Lewis of Georgia is planning to introduce the bill into the current session of Congress in April or May. The bill would be a win-win situation for American citizens and the U.S. government. It would increase religious freedom and civil liberties for citizens while increasing tax revenue for the federal government that would not be used for military purposes. Money paid into the fund would be appropriated toward any nonmilitary government activity.

The National Campaign for a Peace Tax Fund is a nonprofit organization established to advocate for a peace tax fund through grassroots lobbying.

"In a usually divisive political atmosphere, we see this bill as a real unifier," said Alan Gamble, the executive director of the Campaign. "It blends practical peacemaking with a fundamental freedom to practice one's faith. For those who believe they, as taxpayers, are equally responsible for violence as those who manufacture or use weapons, this bill offers a way to practice good citizenship without violating deeply held beliefs."

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THE MOVEMENT CONTINUES

Gamble and Campaign staff are working at building and renewing relationships with supporters of the bill. They are currently working to find local organizers across the country to lobby for the bill and to publicize the need for increased religious freedom and civil rights. Recently the Campaign also received endorsements from several public peacemaking figures including Pete Seeger, Medea Benjamin, and Father Daniel Berrigan.

Gamble believes the Campaign will play a critical role as a watchdog group after the bill's passage.

"Just as several organization are working to ensure the rights of conscientious objectors to military service, there will need to be an organization which guides taxpaying citizens in making legitimate claims of belief in and practice of nonviolence," Gamble said. "We also plan to monitor the bill's requirement for an annual report from the U.S. Treasury on

the amount of taxes paid into the Peace Tax Fund and how it was allocated, and to publicize the results widely. We are also aware of the effect this movement has on similar campaigns around the world."

The Campaign is working for passage of the legislation, but is dependent on grassroots support. It would be a watershed event if a major military power acknowledged that its citizens who conscientiously object to paying military taxes have a just claim, and would be a great step forward in creating a more just, peaceful world.



Chris Fretz is the former outreach and development assistant for the Peace Tax Fund Campaign and he is currently working with Mennonite Central Committee in Bolivia.

Resources:

National Campaign for a Peace Tax Fund:
<<http://www.peacetaxfund.org>>
National War Tax Resistance Coordinating Committee:
<<http://www.nwtrcc.org>>
War Resisters League Pie Chart:
<<http://www.warresisters.org/piechart.htm>>
Center on Conscience and War:
<<http://www.centeronconscience.org>>
Conscience and Peace Tax International:
<<http://cpti.ws>>

References:

- ¹<<http://www.latimes.com/news/politics/la-na-warcosts29nov29,0,3254027.story?coll=la-headlines-politics>>
- ² <www.defenselink.mil/pubs/20050527_2005BSR.pdf, http://www.thebulletin.org/article_nn.php?art_ofn=jf06norris>
- ³ *ibid*
- ⁴ <<http://www.peacetaxseven.com/history.html>>
- ⁵ <<http://www.peacetaxfund.org/resources/newsletters.htm/2005-3.pdf>>