



May 2004
Volume 17
Number 5

THIS MONTH

LETTERS TO Z

Commentary

QUIDDITY:

Salvadoran Presidential Elections

EUROPE:

In Spain, A Bush Ally Pays the Price

LATIN AMERICA:

Plan Colombia Bleeds into Neighboring Countries

REPRODUCTIVE

RIGHTS:

The Death of HB 1191

CONSERVATIVE

WATCH:

NED Targets Venezuela

GAY & LESBIAN

NOTES:

Sermonizing on the Sex Lives of Animals

SHELTERS, INC:

Globalization from a Caribbean Beach

Activism

ANTI-WAR

ORGANIZING:

Tax Resistance

OVERSEAS:

Americans Abroad, A Force to Reckon With?

MARCH 20:

Photo Extravaganza

ANNIVERSARY:

Labor Notes Celebrates its 25th

Features

BIG PHARMA:

Eli Lilly, Zyprexa, & the Bush Family

Anti-war Organizing

Tax Resistance

By [Mark Anderson](#)

Printer friendly [version](#)

Lee Gough didn't pay her federal income taxes this year. That doesn't mean, however, that the artist and part-time temp worker didn't set money aside—just that the federal government didn't get any of it. Gough decided to make 2004 the year that she took a stand, a move she'd been working towards for some time. "I asked the temp agency to increase the number of allowances on my W-4 form and when I had unemployment, I told them not to take any taxes out," she says. "I also stopped paying the federal excise tax on my phone bill and I've taken the \$13 and redirected it to a more worthy cause."



Gough is part of a small but dedicated group of U.S. citizens known as war tax resisters, people who refuse to pay all or part of their taxes to avoid feeding a war machine they believe has grown out of control. Whether by withholding a symbolic amount, reducing their income to below the federal filing level, or refusing payment altogether, tax resisters hope to slow U.S. government spending on militarism by cutting off its funding at the source, an act many feel is among the most pure forms of direct action available to them. According to the National War Tax Resistance Coordinating Committee (NWTRCC), anywhere from 2,000 to 10,000 people nationwide may be dedicated war tax resisters, while thousands more are likely engaged in lesser, more symbolic resistance.

According to the War Resisters League, a long-standing pacifist organization, nearly one-half of all government spending goes for the express purpose of supporting military activities, while less than a third is spent on social programs. Each year, the League calculates what portion of the federal income tax collected goes to the military and for the 2005 budget a full 49 percent is earmarked for past and current military purposes, up from 47 percent the year before. According to the League, that doesn't include the unknown costs of current activities in Iraq and Afghanistan.

War tax resistance has a long, distinguished history in the United States, ranging from colonial Quakers, who refused to pay taxes during the American Revolution, and author Henry David Thoreau, who went to jail rather than pay a Massachusetts poll tax that

War tax resistance has a long, distinguished history in the United States, ranging from colonial Quakers, who refused to pay taxes during the American Revolution, and author Henry David Thoreau, who went to jail rather than pay a Massachusetts poll tax that generated funds for the Mexican-American war, to more recent war tax resisters, such as Gloria Steinem, Joan Baez, and Noam Chomsky.

CURRENT ISSUES

Subscribers to *Z Magazine Online* can access the full content for the previous five months' issues. The full content of older issues is available to both subscribers and non-subscribers in the [archive](#).

Current Issue
April 2004
March 2004
February 2004
January 2004

Z MAGAZINE ARCHIVE

Browse older issues

- [By Table of Contents](#)

You can also browse older *Z Magazine* articles in a framed navigation system:

- [By Topic](#)
- [By Author](#)

Z RELATED LINKS

ZNet
Z Video Productions
Z Media Institute
Alternative Radio
Parecon Project

INTERVIEW:

Justice for Palestine

JUSTICE:

Defending the Defense

GREEN TIDE:

Plan War and the

Hubbert Oil Curve

FOG WATCH:

The United States as

Torture Central

Culture

TV-LAND:

The Passion of Donald

BOOK REVIEWS**DEAD ON ARRIVAL**

by Colin Gordon

THIEVES IN HIGH**PLACES**

by Jim Hightower

Zaps

Cartoons

South End Press
Speak Out

generated funds for the Mexican-American war, to more recent war tax resisters, such as Gloria Steinem, Joan Baez, and Noam Chomsky. Currently, there are about 50 or 60 local groups across the country supporting the movement in one way or another, such as the inter-faith social outreach program Fellowship of Reconciliation, the National Campaign for Peace Tax Fund, and the Mennonite Central Committee, an arm of the North American Mennonite Church.

“The basic idea behind refusal is that the government doesn’t demand anything else of us in support of a war and the growing military-industrial complex other than to pay taxes,” explains Karl Meyer, a long-time war tax resister and political activist in Nashville, Tennessee. “No draft, no demand that we vote—in fact, the only thing they demand of us in support of militarism is to pay our taxes. If we want to show that we don’t support what they’re doing, we have no choice but to refuse.”

Ruth Benn, who serves as the one-person Brooklyn office for NWTRCC, says there’s currently a wide range in the types of citizens who engage in resistance. The most common method of resistance is refusal to pay the federal telephone excise tax, which was created in 1898 as a means to raise taxes to finance the Spanish-American War and expanded by President Johnson in 1966 to support the Vietnam conflict. The phone tax, which puts about \$6 billion dollars a year into the federal treasury, is among the most painless ways to resist, primarily because of the bureaucratic gray area between whose job it really is to collect the taxes—the phone companies or the Internal Revenue Service.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is well-known activist Julia Butterfly Hill, who last year publicly refused to turn over \$150,000 claimed by the government as tax due on an out-of-court settlement arising from the unauthorized use of her likeness. Hill, a Californian best known for living in the branches of a 1,000 year-old Redwood tree for more than 2 years to keep it from being cut down, says the decision was a difficult one, despite her stated intention of turning every penny of the settlement she received over to social and environmental causes she champions. “I knew if I did this,” she said, “it could affect the rest of my life. I struggled with taking this stand for quite a while—since I’m a public figure, it could have easily made me a target.

“When the first bombs were dropped in Iraq, I was out in the streets,” she recalled. “I was out protesting. But I was already struggling with whether or not I had to pay, even though my lawyers said I had no choice. But then I realized: how many of us out here on the streets are going to go back to our regular lives and feed this system when we’re done? I knew then that I couldn’t support the same system I was protesting.”

Despite recently receiving the first of what may be many letters from the IRS, Hill says she’s made up her mind. “As long as our government uses our money to pay for war on the planet and war on people,” she says, “I refuse them the right to any money that I make.”

Ed Hedemann knows firsthand what kind of problems a war tax resister can run into. After filing his annual federal tax forms each year, he redirects the amount of his disputed tax to charities and organizations “working to improve the lives of all people,” while sending a letter to the IRS explaining what he has done and why.

“The primary motivation for many war tax resisters is that they don’t want their money to go to the government,” Hedemann, the author of a book on the subject, says. “But a second reason for some of us is that we want the government to know why we do what we do.”

After years of collection attempts, threatening letters, and visits to his employer, in 1999 the IRS took Hedemann to court, attempting to force him to turn over all of his papers relating to his tax refusal in an effort to locate and seize his assets. Invoking the Fifth Amendment, he refused on the grounds that as a pacifist he was morally and politically opposed to spending money that would kill or threaten to kill people. After years of legal wrangling, the case currently languishes in the IRS’s collection division, but not without untold toil and trouble.

Cases like Hedemann’s point up the unswerving commitment and conviction war tax resistance often requires. “I think war tax refusal is part of a larger piece of resistance, which is to form a counter-cultural lifestyle,” says Kathy Kelly, co-founder of Voices in the Wilderness, which currently engages in direct action with civilians in Iraq. “Once you get into the war tax refusal, if you’re really serious about making sure the IRS never gets the money, then you have to tailor your lifestyle,” she adds, “but it’s a tailoring I would recommend to anyone if they’re pretty sure they know about the direction their life is heading and they’re going to stick with it.”

For Lee Gough, the decision came to a head last year, when her brother, Daniel, a lieutenant in the U.S. Navy, wrote a letter to his commanding officer declaring his status as a conscientious objector. After nearly a decade of service, including weapons training on a guided missile destroyer, the widely respected 35-year-old had begun to re-examine some basic assumptions, especially in light of the invasion of Iraq and questions from his 4-year-old daughter about what he did for a living. After being initially refused, Daniel declared his status a second time a year later before being allowed to resign his commission in October 2003.

In the face of her brother’s courage, Lee went looking for ways to live her own life with greater purpose. “War tax resistance has come to be a way to exert my own personal power, which I believe no one can take away from me,” she says. “Just like declaring conscientious objector status when you are in the military, war tax resistance is not something someone is going to give you. It’s a power you’re going to have to assume for yourself.”

It’s given me a feeling of having much more control over my consciousness and how I live,” she says. “When you are a tax resister, you know where your money is going. That’s important to me.”

Mark Anderson is an independent writer and journalist based in Chicago.