

## **Now is the Time to Resist**

**By Henry Rosemont, Jr. | July 28, 2005**

In his April 2005 FPIF Discussion Paper “Reclaiming the Prophetic Voice (RTPV),” John Humphries describes how a group of clergy and lay people—Christian, Jewish, and Muslim—drafted a *Call to Resist the War in Iraq*, which committed signers thereof to become actively complicit in differing acts of civil disobedience designed to end the illegal U.S. occupation and warfare in Iraq. Humphries describes the RTPV call as inspired by and modeled after the 1967 *Call to Resist Illegitimate Authority*, which led to the formation of an organization named RESIST that actively opposed the illegal U.S. war against the South Vietnamese. The model indeed fits, as both calls are grounded in basic ethical principles rather than purely utilitarian concerns: The wars and occupations must be resisted, not because they were and are too costly or might drag on too long but because they were and are morally loathsome.

The author’s account of the RTPV call is excellent overall, but the article may be misleading in one respect because it suggests that the RESIST of 1967 is a thing of the past, which it most assuredly is not. It is the oldest progressive funding organization in the United States today, distributing a third of a million dollars last year to 146 groups actively struggling for peace and social change. It also provides technical assistance to startup groups, publishes both print and electronic newsletters, and participates in organizing demonstrations and supporting like-minded organizations.

Most of the groups that RESIST has funded for the last three decades transcend anti-military organizing. They confront oppressive policies and actions at all levels of government ranging from prison-building to assaults on reproductive rights, from racism and homophobia to police brutality and attacks on immigrants. RESIST broadened its scope beyond the war in Southeast Asia in the belief that the United States cannot contribute to lasting peace abroad unless and until it has achieved social and economic justice at home. Parallels between the war situations in 1967 and today are numerous, and RESIST’s work may thus be of interest to those planning strategies to end Middle Eastern violence.

The *Call to Resist Illegitimate Authority* was drafted and circulated in the late spring of 1967, and a section of the final version was published in the *New York Review of Books* and the *Nation* in early autumn. By year’s end there were over 20,000 signatories to the call, and it received added notoriety when it was placed in evidence at the arraignment of the “Boston Five,” a group of signers arrested for conspiring with the 281 young men who had collectively turned in or burned their draft cards at the Arlington Street Church three months earlier.

Although the early members of RESIST actively organized and participated in demonstrations, spoke at teach-ins, engaged in civil disobedience actions, and offered extensive draft and military counseling, the organization has always also been a funding source providing financial support to anti-war and draft resistance groups around the country. These grant monies came from many small donations made regularly by people increasingly morally outraged by the continuing war and wanting to help stop it in any way they could, including financial support for resistance activities that the government regularly claimed were illegal.

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RESIST’s pledge system of regular small donors rendered these donors complicit in the “illegal” actions of the activists. This involvement by association contributed measurably to maintaining and increasing opposition to the war even after early resistance efforts seemed not to have been successful as Nixon, Kissinger, and Laird replaced Johnson, Rusk, and McNamara, and the killing fields spread from South Vietnam to North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. As opposition to the war grew, RESIST began to expand its support for resisters, first to the equally confrontational civil rights and anti-racist movements that paralleled anti-war efforts and then later to the burgeoning women’s movement.

Support for parallel movements was not undertaken merely because they opposed the war (“the enemy of my enemy is my friend”) but because a multiplicity of consciousness-raising ideas and actions nationwide—think of Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, Shulamith Firestone, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and groups such as Redstockings, NOW, SNCC, and CORE—made it abundantly clear that racism and sexism were as morally wrong as the war in Southeast Asia and were indirectly linked to the violence of militarism. Given that link, it was morally obligatory that any governmental actions encouraging or condoning any prejudicial behavior against minorities or women be resisted by anti-war activists.

A decade later RESIST expanded its outreach still further, aiding and abetting progressive groups struggling against homophobia, oppressive U.S. policies in Latin America, and environmental degradation, especially in poor communities. It also supported organizing for prison reform, immigrant rights, universal health care, and more.

There are thousands of courageous and commendable small groups struggling for basic political change and social justice in the United States today, many more than in 1967. Because their efforts regularly challenge both liberal and conservative thinking, these groups are usually seen as marginal, not candidates for funding from mainstream foundations or governmental organizations. And they are all but ignored by the conglomerate-owned media except when they achieve a significant victory against heavy odds.

Three organizations—all RESIST grantees in 2004—won such victories very recently:

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The Oregon Toxics Alliance (OTA) is a coalition working to prevent a gas-burning power plant from opening in a restricted airshed. Buoyed by a RESIST grant, the group successfully rallied several communities to stop a 900 megawatt gas power plant from locating on farmland

in Coburg, Oregon. As OTA director Lisa Arkin wrote: “Our ability to play a significant role in the denial of the Turner Power Plant application may well send the right signals to other out-of-state corporations seeking to build merchant power plants in the Willamette Valley, namely that the residents of Oregon prefer renewable energy production over large-scale gas-fired plants.”

Two member groups of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers—the Student/Farm Worker Alliance and Interfaith Action of SW Florida—received RESIST funding to help the coalition in its struggle to convince Taco Bell to increase wages and benefits for migrant farmworkers. The campaign succeeded in March of this year. “This is an important victory for farmworkers, one that establishes a new standard of social responsibility for the fast-food industry and

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makes an immediate material change in the lives of workers. This sends a clear challenge to other industry leaders,” announced Lucas Benitez, an activist in the coalition.

Some of The Prometheus Radio Project’s work is obvious from the June 12 headline: SUPREME COURT REJECTS CORPORATE MEDIA APPEAL IN PROMETHEUS *vs.* FCC. “The FCC chose a course that would add a few percentage points to the profit margin of a handful of corporations, while exposing Americans to a throttled public debate,” charged Prometheus member Pete Tridish. His colleague Hannah Sassaman emphasized that the Supreme Court’s decision “... adds fuel to our desire to help organizations across the United States start up Low Power FM radio stations, essential... to bring media control to the hands of communities.” The Prometheus Radio Project does not simply litigate, however. It also engages in radio “barn raisings” each summer, using its expertise to help local communities build an entire station, from microphones to antennae, over the course of a long weekend.

Much less noticed by the media (except in their hometowns) are many other grassroots groups that seek support from RESIST, whose board of directors meets every other month to evaluate the many and varied grant applications submitted to it. Among the more noteworthy dimensions of these applications are the following: 1) their number (over 400 each year), 2) the funds requested (\$3000 maximum, in keeping with RESIST’s limited resources), 3) their variety (see examples above and below), and 4) their geographic diversity (RESIST funded groups from 34 states and the District of Columbia last year). Below

is a brief sampling of some of the other 2004 grantees.

Opposing the Iraq war directly are such groups as Non-military Alternatives (Chicago), Veterans for Peace (Santa Fe Chapter), San Diego Military Counseling Project, and Alternatives to the Military (Lincoln, NE). Groups struggling on behalf of women include Georgians for Choice, Vecinos Unidos (CT), Women of Color Alliance (ID), Appalachian Women’s Alliance, and Arab Women’s Gathering Organizing Collective (OH).

RESIST also supported such diverse groups as CISPES-Bay Area, South Carolina Progressive Network, Coalition for the Human Rights of Immigrants (NY), Alaska Youth for Environmental Action, Queers Undermining Israeli Terrorism (San Francisco), ACT UP (Philadelphia), ADAPT (CO), Citizens for Quality Sickle Cell Care, Jobs With Justice (Denver and Seattle Chapters), Palestine Media Watch (PA), Lynne Stewart Defense Committee, Kentucky Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression, School of the Americas Watch, and Campaign to Abolish the Death Penalty (national office). One hundred eighteen additional groups also received grants, and many others worthy of support had to be turned down for lack of funds.

RESIST has certainly not succeeded in bringing about a peaceful and just United States or world, but in its organizing it has contributed to lessening violence and injustice, especially during the Vietnam War. As a funder it has also provided assistance to many other groups who have won struggles for a better world. Its success and longevity—plans are currently under way for a major fundraising 40th

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anniversary celebration—stem from its understanding that most issues have both material and ideological roots. These factors loom large in most of the ongoing evils destroying societies at present and are themselves thus further links between peace and social justice.

Regarding material conditions, much of the death and destruction abroad in the world today is traceable to poverty. Violence reigns in Iraq, Kashmir, Afghanistan, Palestine, Colombia, the Congo, and wherever else hunger, disease, premature death, and grossly inequitable distribution of wealth plague a society.

The ideological roots of contemporary violence are often expressed most vocally by Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Hindu fundamentalist sects. But passions can also be fanned by both liberal and conservative secularists who insist that achieving the sacrosanct universalist ideals of freedom and democracy—as they narrowly define these terms—fully justify U.S. intervention in the internal affairs of other sovereign nations.

RESIST addresses both the material and ideological dimensions needed in the dual struggles for peace and social justice. Its modest financial support, provided by pledges and donors, has contributed much toward peace and justice on the material front, and its consistent and continuous opposition to U.S. military interventionism and unjust domestic policies has provided a secular moral basis with which many other individuals and groups can identify, no matter what, if any, their religious allegiance.

The organization's ethical foundation differs from both the religious fervor characteristic of many fundamentalist sects and from the dogmatic moral

certitude of secular conservative and liberal interventionists. By rejecting meddling in the internal affairs of other countries, RESIST and its supporters do not have to engage in endless means vs. ends debates. The invasion of South Vietnam would not have been any more morally defensible had there been no tiger cages, Operation Phoenix, or My Lai. Likewise the invasion and occupation of Iraq would remain morally abhorrent even without the Abu Ghraib atrocities, the killing of tens of thousands of civilians, and the widespread physical destruction and environmental degradation that have occurred.

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Those who condemn these evil means or unfortunate consequences of warfare but nevertheless claim that the United States always has a right—and at times an obligation—to attack another country in the name of freedom, democracy, or human rights should reflect more on the past. U.S. governments have directly intervened overtly or covertly in the internal affairs of other

sovereign nations more than 100 times since the end of World War II, but it is very difficult to find examples of any peoples who are better off for our intervention. Are the Vietnamese, Laotians, Cambodians, Guatemalans, Nicaraguans, El Salvadorans, Panamanians or Colombians happier as a result of U.S. military activities in their countries? Somalia remains a failed state whose inhabitants are no less hungry now than when Clinton ordered the troops in. And how did our occupation of Lebanon help the Lebanese? Moreover, Washington's covert actions undermining democratically elected governments and replacing them with dictators in, for example, Iran, Guatemala, and Chile certainly were not beneficial to the Iranians, Guatemalans, or Chileans. Unfortunately, the list of horrors is quite long.

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In the same way, there is precious little true freedom, democracy, or human rights in Iraq or Afghanistan today. By no conceivable moral argument can the 100,000 plus Iraqi civilians killed in the past 28 months be considered better off on account of the U.S. invasion and occupation of their country. And the killing is ongoing. To be sure, the death toll thus far represents less than half of 1% of Iraq's population, but the dead were not asked whether they were willing to make the supreme sacrifice for their fellow citizens, nor were their parents, children, or grandparents.

Instead, that decision was made unilaterally by the United States government, which was not elected by its citizens to play God with the lives of innocent others. Unless a physical invasion of the United States were imminent, no end could justify such actions. The immorality of Washington's aggression in the Middle East is further compounded by Abu Ghraib, Bagram, Guantanamo Bay, and the high probability that the United States will not bring any more freedom and democracy to the Iraqis and Afghans tomorrow than it brought to the numerous other countries it invaded or otherwise meddled with yesterday.

The moral stance and political analysis that characterize RESIST, its supporters, and its grantees shatter any claim that conservatives, Republican or otherwise, are more concerned with values than are progressives. They also undermine any claim of superior virtue on the part of the United States vis-à-vis the rest of the world.

It has always been a bedrock assumption of RESIST's work that the American people are intelligent, decent, and capable of acting justly when empowered to do so. Some polls seem to indicate

that this assumption is false, suggesting that in addition to being overweight, Americans don't read any more, narrowly worship a vengeful God (and celebrities), are largely apolitical, and are self-serving or hawkish when they do become involved. But the one-sidedness of this assessment is revealed when it is acknowledged that the government commissions many of these polls and resorts to fabrications and rhetoric to gain the support of the people for its adventurism abroad. From the Tonkin Gulf nonincident to the nonexistence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq to the bogus Iraq-al-Qaida link, U.S. governments consistently misrepresent why they engage in acts of war. Somehow there is always

enemy "provocation." As casualties mount and victory becomes elusive, this rationalization evolves into claims of fighting to bring freedom, democracy, and human rights to the enemy's oppressed people.

Groups struggling for social justice at home often help broaden and deepen opposition to foreign wars, since the issues remain closely linked. Without poverty and racism in the United States, for example, the Army would have a difficult time meeting its recruitment quotas even in peacetime. One month's budget for the war in Iraq could fully fund Head Start into the 22nd century. It is a short step from abusing prisoners abroad to abusing prisoners at home, from ignoring popular sentiment overseas to ignoring it domestically.

At their nexus, domestic and foreign policy issues are wedded economically. A more humane, multilateral, and equitable foreign policy requires a re-industrialization of the economy (as Germany and France have done) with far greater energy efficiency, environmental sensitivity, and wealth distribution than currently obtains.

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Thus, struggles against U.S. violence overseas should be recognized as extensions of struggles for social justice at home, and vice versa. With no Soviet Union and only a relatively weak United Nations (largely due to U.S. obstructionism), the only real checks on the Pentagon and corporate juggernauts today are the American people themselves. Only the resistance of U.S. citizens can truly check the government—difficult though the effort may be—through a long-range struggle for true freedom, democracy, and human rights both at home and abroad. As long as political openness continues to exist, Americans will not likely have to risk their lives to press for progressive change, but activists need a long-term vision and commitment. The dual passions for peace and social justice inspired the first *Call to Resist Illegitimate Authority* in 1967, which urged “...active resistance to all forms of illegitimate authority until such time as the United States ceases to be a terror in the politics among nations.” These are heavy moral burdens, but they must be borne by all Americans of good will. Now, more than ever, is the time to resist.

*Henry Rosemont Jr. signed the 1967 call, joined RESIST in 1969, has been a member of its board of directors since 1971 and thus claims only accuracy and not impartiality for the contents of this article. When not engaged in political activity, he studies Chinese philosophy and religion and teaches at Brown University, where he is currently Distinguished Visiting Professor of East Asian Studies.*

## **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

Readers who wish to:

- 1) learn more about RESIST and its political orientation,
- 2) request funding from RESIST, or
- 3) contribute to RESIST

should look up its website at [resistinc.org](http://resistinc.org) or talk to a member of its most helpful and knowledgeable staff directly at (617) 623-5110. The RESIST website includes addresses for the groups mentioned in this article and for all others receiving assistance from RESIST. For readers wishing documentation or suggestions for further reading, please write the author: [Henry\\_Rosemont\\_Jr.@brown.edu](mailto:Henry_Rosemont_Jr.@brown.edu), or [hrosemont@smcm.edu](mailto:hrosemont@smcm.edu).

## **FOR MORE INFORMATION FROM FOREIGN POLICY IN FOCUS:**

*Reclaiming the Prophetic Voice*

By John Humphries (April 5, 2005)

<http://www.fpif.org/papers/0504rtpv.html>

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