

## Reclaiming the Prophetic Voice

By John Humphries | April 2005

As the United States plunged into war against Afghanistan following the attacks of September 11, 2001, Revs. Allie Perry and Kathleen McTigue wondered why there was so little visible response from religious leaders. Where was the moral outcry? After several weeks of perplexed discussion, they decided to stop waiting for the “leaders” to lead and instead began organizing to take action. Beginning with a small steering committee of like-minded friends, they formally launched Reclaiming the Prophetic Voice (RTPV) in April 2002 as a Connecticut-based interfaith network of clergy and lay people willing to stand together against a militaristic response to terrorism. RTPV’s leaders believed that if they began to speak and act boldly and prophetically, other people of faith would find their voices. The group’s informal, “streamlined” structure allowed them to act quickly. The participation of Christian denominational leaders and Jewish and Muslim clergy, along with an ability to mobilize fairly large numbers of people, gave RTPV credibility. The group’s members lobbied legislators, helped galvanize a statewide peace coalition, and participated in civil disobedience before and immediately following the invasion of Iraq.

### Responding to War Crimes

As the graphic details of abuses at Abu Ghraib Prison and other military detention facilities surfaced last year, RTPV once again observed a lack of an organized, vocal response from the religious community. “Where’s the moral outrage? Where are the voices of our national religious leaders?” the group wondered.

Although torture is merely the most blatant aspect of the ongoing crime of an illegal war that has caused the deaths of more than 100,000 civilians, the general revulsion against torture offers an opportunity to reach out to people not active in the peace movement—the people in the pews. Clearly, these war crimes cross the boundary of what is morally acceptable. By framing torture as a moral issue, RTPV encourages people of faith to question the underlying assumptions of the war on terror.

To counter the tendency to blame the soldiers on the ground, RTPV is focusing on the responsibility of the high government officials who gave the orders sending men and women physically and morally into harm’s way. The group has sought ways to be allies with the soldiers and their families, who are themselves victims of Washington’s immoral military adventures.

### The 1967 Call to Resist

Pondering how to respond in a way that might challenge others to find their voices and take action, Reclaiming the

Prophetic Voice has drawn inspiration from the 1967 *Call to Resist Illegitimate Authority*. This statement was initially signed by well-known cultural, religious, and intellectual figures who were then joined by thousands of others.

The 1967 *Call* challenged the legality of the Vietnam War and the legitimacy of the government that was pursuing it. The document argued that the war was unconstitutional and illegal because it was not declared by Congress, as required by the U.S. Constitution; it violated every nation’s obligation under the UN Charter to settle disputes peacefully; and it contravened the Geneva Conventions of 1949, which outlawed as war crimes many of the U.S. military’s activities in Vietnam. All of these arguments can clearly be made about the current war in Iraq.

The *Call to Resist Illegitimate Authority* had a significant impact on the growth and development of the anti-war movement. The document placed the authority of highly respected intellectual and religious leaders behind young draft resisters. The risk that thousands took by signing the statement led many others to consider their own responsibilities to take action to end the war. The 1967 *Call* challenged the legality of a war legitimated by presidential endorsement and congressional acquiescence. The U.S. Justice Department charged some of the statement’s signers with conspiracy in “counseling, aiding, and abetting” young men to avoid and resist the Selective Service System. The trial of the “Boston Five” became front-page news, helping move the moral, legal, and political issues raised by the anti-war movement from the margin to the mainstream.



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## RTPV's Call to Resist

In December 2004, the RTPV steering committee decided to draft its own *Call to Resist the War in Iraq*.<sup>1</sup> The group was not seeking to produce the definitive statement that all groups across the country would sign and support. Rather, it wanted to craft a powerful call that could inspire others to develop their own documents, generating discussion, outreach, and signature campaigns in dozens of local communities.

The RTPV statement begins by presenting the case against the current war and then identifies the interlocking and mutually reinforcing moral, legal, and social reasons for opposition. It then highlights individual and shared responsibility for active resistance by declaring, "We believe it is our duty as both Americans and members of the international community to insist that our government immediately adhere to the international agreements binding us...."

Seeking to establish itself as a form of civil disobedience, the statement applauds military personnel who are seeking ways to avoid military service and pledges "to do all that we can to encourage others to follow their example." The text includes specific commitments: to "support and ... spread the word about the GI Rights Hotline and other efforts to support soldiers in withdrawing from the military;" to "counsel young men turning eighteen on the moral obligations as well as risks inherent in a refusal to register with the Selective Service;" and to provide financial assistance for the legal defense of resisters. Finally, the appeal's signers pledge to "encourage young men and women not to comply" with any reinstated draft.

RTPV concludes the statement by grounding its actions in international law, quoting the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal's "principle of individual responsibility:" "Anyone with knowledge of illegal activity and an opportunity to do something is a potential criminal under international law unless the person takes affirmative measures to prevent the commission of the crimes." The declaration's signers commit themselves "to undertake all affirmative measures available to us to fulfill our obligations under these treaties, which have guided our world for half a century."

At the core of this statement is the understanding that the authority and powers of the U.S. government have been usurped for illegitimate and immoral purposes, making it necessary for U.S. citizens, both individually and collectively, to take action to halt the war crimes being perpetrated in their names. By publicly committing to

such action, RTPV seeks to challenge others to meet their own responsibilities under international law.

At the same time, RTPV challenges the leaders of the U.S. peace movement to think more strategically and creatively than just preparing for the next demonstration. Activists must learn from the very "successful" global day of protest on February 15, 2003, that mobilizing millions to take to the streets may be necessary, but it is insufficient. The two-year anniversary mobilizations were also important, but they must be integrated into a broader strategy and deeper analysis that identifies both potential weaknesses in the imperial armor and potential levers to raise public consciousness and spark moral outrage.

RTPV continues to enjoy the advantages afforded by its informal structure. While larger organizations with broader constituencies and established bureaucracies struggle to find consensus on bold statements or action strategies, this nimble group is able to draft an appeal and initiate an action campaign providing tools and examples that others can draw upon. Recently, the Fellowship of Reconciliation has endorsed RTPV's *Call to Resist* and featured it on their website.<sup>2</sup> This national endorsement will likely lead other groups to adopt the statement.

While national and diocesan religious leaders may not be able to fully endorse the *Call to Resist* or the action strategies, they can share the information with local and regional religious bodies as an example of a faith-based response to the war.<sup>3</sup> The newly formed Clergy and Laity Concerned about Iraq (CALC-I)<sup>4</sup> has so far shown minimal interest in RTPV's *Call to Resist*, even though one of the authors of the 1967 *Call* is among the CALC-I's leadership. This group is currently focused on organization-building and establishing its own identity, but local initiatives like RTPV's can provide inspiration when CALC-I moves more solidly into action and seeks to mobilize local clergy and congregations in a more systematic way.

## Public Action Attracts National Attention

In January 2005, RTPV organized a public witness on the New Haven Green to mark Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday. The program included a reading from King's April 1967 sermon at Riverside Church with the text altered by the insertion of "Iraq" in place of most of the references to "Vietnam." Participants honored U.S. soldiers and Iraqi civilians who had been killed in the war by reading the names of all the dead U.S. soldiers along with an equal number of Iraqi casualties. RTPV highlighted its *Call to Resist* with a choral reading and public signing.

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In addition to local media coverage, RTPV's action received national attention. During the week prior to the event, the group's media release was posted on the CommonDreams Newswire.<sup>5</sup> As a result, RTPV received email and phone inquiries from activists throughout the country wanting more information about the *Call to Resist*, about the lists of names of the war dead, and about the action campaign being launched. Some groups incorporated the *Call to Resist* and/or the reading of the names into their own events marking Martin Luther King Day.

## A Strategy for Coordinated Resistance

Following its public action, RTPV has continued reaching out to clergy and denominational leaders, speaking with them about the *Call to Resist* and the action campaign. In these discussions, the group presents the challenge: "This is how we are responding to the atrocities of war crimes and our responsibility to take affirmative measures. How are you going to respond? How will your congregation or denomination respond?"

RTPV's action campaign implements aspects of its *Call to Resist*. Specifically, the group is organizing to support military personnel considering a refusal to fight in Iraq and to support counter-recruitment efforts that seek to dissuade young people from entering the military or National Guard.

RTPV is organizing workshops on GI rights counseling and advocacy with the intention of establishing a network of clergy and lay people who can provide support and information to soldiers and their families in communities throughout Connecticut. The group plans to make this network a visible witness against the war by securing media coverage and advertising that will list the names and contact information for those who have been trained. At the same time, RTPV will publicize the GI Rights Hotline<sup>6</sup> through leafleting and advertising that targets communities surrounding military bases and National Guard facilities.

Supporting counter-recruitment activities is the other pincer in a strategy designed to squeeze the military by exacerbating the growing shortage of active-duty personnel. RTPV is soliciting volunteers to receive training and then take the information into the public schools, and group members are organizing public actions at recruiting stations with the participation of young people.

The group has also begun meeting with members of Congress. Issuing them the same challenge being given to clergy and faith communities, group members ask, "What

affirmative measures are you going to take?" RTPV is presenting a concrete proposal to investigate the Bush administration's war crimes by demanding the appointment of an independent commission with the power to subpoena testimony and evidence.<sup>7</sup>

RTPV's leaders believe that a focus on war crimes has greater potential than calls to cut funding for the war, which can too easily be construed as denying soldiers the support they need. Furthermore, military spending is a local bread-and-butter issue. For example, one of Connecticut's Democratic members of Congress publicly stated her intention to support the supplemental appropriation because it provides defense contracts in her district. RTPV also believes that a focus on personal responsibility and public accountability has more prophetic power and creative energy than measures such as the recent initiative urging Congress to pass a simple resolution stating the intention ultimately to withdraw all troops and bases from Iraq.<sup>8</sup>

Calling for a War Crimes Commission has the potential to tap into the public revulsion over graphic photos of prisoner abuse in Iraq. A broad-based push to appoint such a commission could overcome stiff resistance, just as the families of September 11 victims successfully lobbied for the creation of the 9/11 Commission.

As RTPV moves forward with these strategies, it encourages other groups to develop their own creative actions. Some may pursue a different set of affirmative measures, but everyone has a responsibility to act. Drawing upon contacts with groups around the country, RTPV is seeking ways to increase the coordination of local and regional efforts. Although RTPV's leaders do not yet have a clear vision of how such coordination will unfold, they have been sharing strategies and action ideas with other activists across the country. The group feels that the peace movement can be strengthened by evaluating successes and failures and by having the movement's leaders challenge each other to be more strategic and less reactionary. In order to succeed in bringing the troops home and halting Washington's war crimes, activists must move beyond banners and protests and begin to take greater risks. Religious leaders and communities of faith must reclaim their prophetic voice and translate words of resistance into meaningful action.

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*excerpted from a contribution to the forthcoming book In the Name of Democracy: American War Crimes in Iraq and Beyond, edited by Jeremy Brecher, Jill Cutler, and Brendan Smith (New York: Metropolitan, 2005).*

## ENDNOTES

- 1 <<http://www.ReclaimingthePropheticVoice.org>>. See also <[http://internationallaw.pro-se-institute.org/ct\\_clergy.html](http://internationallaw.pro-se-institute.org/ct_clergy.html)>.
- 2 <<http://www.forusa.org/media/IraqCalltoResist.html>>.
- 3 RTPV received one inquiry from a woman in Salt Lake City, who had received information about the group while attending a regional gathering of Unitarian Universalists. Reverend McTigue had previously forwarded information to some of the national leaders within her denomination.
- 4 <<http://www.unitedforpeace.org/article.php?type=90&list=type>>.
- 5 <<http://www.commondreams.org/news2005/0112-09.htm>>.
- 6 <<http://girights.objector.org/>>.
- 7 See the article by former Congresswoman Elizabeth Holtzman at <<http://www.commondreams.org/views04/0616-02.htm>>. See also Bob Herbert, "We Can't Remain Silent," *New York Times*, April 1, 2005, at <<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/01/opinion/01herbert.html>>.
- 8 <<http://www.fcnl.org/iraq>>. FCNL did, however, actively support the Markey Amendment addressing the issue of "extraordinary rendition" <[http://www.fcnl.org/act\\_lam\\_current/lam0310\\_05.htm](http://www.fcnl.org/act_lam_current/lam0310_05.htm)>. Extraordinary rendition is a policy of the U.S. government that involves extraditing terrorism suspects from one foreign state to another for interrogation and prosecution. Critics contend that the unstated purpose of such renditions is to subject the suspects to aggressive methods of persuasion that are illegal in America—including torture. For discussions of this program see Jane Mayer, "Outsourcing Torture," *The New Yorker*, February 15, 2005, at <[http://www.newyorker.com/fact/content/?050214fa\\_fact6](http://www.newyorker.com/fact/content/?050214fa_fact6)> and The Committee on International Human Rights of the Association of the Bar of the City of New York and The Center for Human Rights and Global Justice, New York University School of Law, *Torture By Proxy: International and Domestic Law Applicable to "Extraordinary Renditions,"* 2004, at <[http://www.abcny.org/pdf/report/Torture%20by%20Proxy%20-%20Final%20\(PDF\).pdf](http://www.abcny.org/pdf/report/Torture%20by%20Proxy%20-%20Final%20(PDF).pdf)>.

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