

Fed Up With War, Some Won't Pay Taxes

Some Activists Fed Up With Iraq War Refuse to Pay Taxes, Interest Is Growing

By JOHN CHRISTOFFERSEN
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When the United States invaded Iraq more than four years ago, war opponent David Gross asked his bosses for a radical pay cut, enough so he wouldn't have to pay taxes to support the war.

"I was having a hard time looking at myself in the mirror," Gross said. "I knew the bombs falling were in part paid with my tax dollars. I had to actually do something concrete to remove my complicity."

The San Francisco technical writer was making close to \$100,000 a year. He didn't know exactly how big of a pay cut he would need to fall below the federal tax threshold, but later figured out he would have to make less than minimum wage.

In any event, his employer turned him down and he quit. Gross, 38, now works on a contract basis, and last year he refused to pay self-employment taxes.

War tax resistance, popularized by Henry David Thoreau in the 19th century and by singer Joan Baez and others during the Vietnam War, is gaining renewed interest among peace activists upset over the Iraq war.

"Clearly this year we definitely had more people calling, sending e-mails about how they decided to start resisting," said Ruth Benn, coordinator of the National War Tax Resistance Coordinating Committee in New York.



Illustration 1: Some Americans opposed to the war in Iraq are withholding taxes in protest. (AP Photo)

Based on the committee's mailing list and reports from numerous groups it works with around the country, Benn estimates 8,000 to 10,000 Americans refuse to pay some or all of their federal taxes over war objections. Internal Revenue Service officials say they don't have figures for that specific category, but earlier this year reported an overall noncompliance rate of 16.3 percent and estimated the annual tax gap at about \$345 billion.

Peace activists are considering a mass tax resistance campaign next April to step up pressure to end the war in Iraq, Benn said.

Many tax protesters say they redirect the money they withhold to charities. Some, like Joanne Sheehan of Norwich, keep their income below taxable levels.

"I don't see the point of working for peace and paying for war," Sheehan said.

Gross said he now manages to live on about \$15,000 per year by carefully tracking his spending.

He acknowledged the tax resistance movement is too small to stop the war.

"But I think what we're doing is showing the way for people in the anti-war movement," Gross said. "I can look myself in the mirror and say at least I'm not supporting it, at least I'm not part of the machine."

The IRS said that while taxpayers have a right to express their opinions, they still have an obligation to pay their taxes. Tax resisters place an undue burden on taxpayers who pay their fair share of taxes, IRS spokeswoman Dianne Besunder said.

John Ubaldi, spokesman for Move America Forward, which supports the military and the war on terror, said the government would not be able to function if everyone opposed to a program stopped paying taxes.

"They're showing the terrorists that America is not committed," Ubaldi said.

The IRS considers it a frivolous argument when a taxpayer cites disagreement with the government's use of tax money as the reason for not paying taxes.

A new federal law increases the penalty for frivolous tax returns from \$500 to \$5,000. The IRS says it investigates promoters of frivolous arguments and refers cases to the Department of Justice for criminal prosecution.

Unlike the days when Thoreau was sent to prison in a tax protest against the Mexican-American War, modern war tax protesters rarely go to prison, according to tax resisters. The IRS may take their money from wages and bank accounts with penalties and interest after sending a series of letters.

"They're very polite, which makes it a little boring," said Rosa Packard of Greenwich, a longtime anti-war tax protester.

But Randy Kehler, who has refused to pay federal income taxes since 1976 to protest U.S. military policy, was evicted with his wife from their home in Colrain, Mass., in 1989 for nonpayment of more than \$45,000 in taxes, interest and penalties. Kehler was also jailed for nearly three months for contempt of court.

Their tax fight was the subject of a 1997 documentary called "An Act of Conscience," narrated by actor Martin Sheen.

War protesters have been pushing for a law called the Religious Freedom Peace Tax Fund that would allow designated conscientious objectors to have their income, estate, or gift taxes used for nonmilitary purposes. After years of efforts, they hope a Congressional hearing will be held on the proposal next year.

"People fear the IRS more than they fear God," said Alan Gamble, executive director of the National Campaign for a Peace Tax Fund. "They're paying under a tremendous burden."

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