

Is it Worth it?

C. Uhl

I am imagining that, like me, you have had the experience of paying money for something—groceries, some new cloths—and then looking at what you have bought and wondering, “Is this really worth the money I just shelled out?”

As my wife and I prepare to pay our Federal income taxes this year we find ourselves asking this same question: Is the ‘good’ that we are receiving from the Federal Government worth the money we are shelling out?

It's hard to answer this question unless we know how our Federal tax dollars are being spent. So, here, in three sentences, is an overview of the numbers. For the fiscal year 2003 the federal budget is \$1,700 billion. A little over half of this money will go for education, health, roads, agriculture, environmental protection, and so forth. The remainder of our federal tax dollars--almost half--will support military-related expenditures.

This comes as a surprise to many citizens. Indeed, according to the government's official numbers, only 17% goes to the Military, but this number is a misrepresentation for several reasons. First, there are some military expenditures in the federal budget that are not directly attached in the Department of Defense. For example, a portion of the Department of Energy's budget is for military purposes (e.g., construction of nuclear weapons). Also, not included as "military outlays," are the expenditures for veterans' benefits and interest payments on the national debt stemming from past military expenses (Think of these as inherited military expenditures). Finally, the Government makes the military portion of the budget seem small, in percentage terms, by including Trust Funds (e.g., Social Security) as part of total federal spending but these funds are raised and spent separately from our income taxes.

In sum, a line-by-line analysis of the projected figures in the "Analytical Perspectives" book of the Budget of the United States Government for 2003 reveals that somewhere between 40 and 50 percent (depending on one's definitions of what constitutes "military") of our IRS income tax payments this year will go to military-related expenses.

The vast monetary and human resources devoted to military endeavors during the past century resulted in horrendous military carnage; more than a hundred million people, mostly civilians, were killed by military weapons. It is amply clear that threatening postures and violence do not settle differences, irrespective of the short-term relief they may offer us. Genuine peace cannot be born of mind states mired in fear and ill will. The ultimate challenge for humanity in our new century is to move, step by step, toward global disarmament. For the time being this should mean paring back to a prudent system of national defense, not expanding our war making capacities by building new weapons.

In the sixties my government expected me to fight in Vietnam and I said "no." I was a conscientious objector because I am morally opposed to all war. Thanks to the struggle of many courageous American war resisters who came before me, there was a legal means in place for me, as a young man, to follow the higher law of conscience. Each year, as I prepare to pay my taxes, I feel as if I am again being conscripted against my will--a portion of my tax dollars is being "drafted" to perpetuate an approach to resolving conflict which by its violent nature subverts human dignity.

But there is a seed of hope in this dilemma because we are, at heart, a peace loving and just people, and I believe that we will grow beyond our dependence on war making as

a means of exercising sovereignty. Indeed, just as we shake our heads in disbelief as we look back at an America where slavery was the norm, child labor was acceptable, and women had no right to vote, I see a day when our descendants will look back at our time, incredulous that we squandered so much of our wealth and technological creativity on weapons and war.

The first signs of this new day are beginning to appear. For example, Ohio Congressman, Dennis Kucinich, has recently introduced a bill (HR 2459) to create a Department of Peace that would seek ways to protect human rights, avoid international conflicts and cultivate peaceful conflict resolution at home. In addition, there is the National Campaign for a Peace Tax Fund which supports legislation (HR1454) giving citizens the right to redirect their military taxes to a special fund used only for non-military purposes. Finally, the nationwide campaign, "One Million Taxpayers for Peace" is calling on American citizens to take a first step in speaking their hearts, saying "No" to the military culture which has for far too long imprisoned our national psyche. This "first step" consists of committing low risk civil disobedience--namely, withholding \$10.40 from one's IRS payment and sending this "peace tax" to a designated fund which will finance conflict resolution training in our schools and communities.

My wife and I will take this first step, along with many others, to relieve to some small degree the moral dissonance which occurs when individuals live in violation their personal moral code. In taking this action, we are guided by the U.S. Bill of Rights which asserts that the legitimacy of a government is born of the consent of the governed and whenever government actions or policies becomes destructive, it is the right and duty of the people to take corrective actions (www.civilliberties.org). We also take inspiration from Henry David Thoreau who 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" (On the Duty of Civil Disobedience).

Relevant web sites: www.onemilliontaxpayersforpeace.org; www.peacetax.com; www.warresisters.org; www.fcni.org