

War Tax Resistance and the Mennonite Peace Witness

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First Mennonite Church of San Francisco, Sunday, June 9, 2024.

I know not all of you were raised Mennonite. So parts of this sermon may lie outside of the framework of your life.

But you may — in some way — have been touched by the Mennonite peace witness. And so it might be an interesting question to ask yourself when and how the Mennonite peace witness first touched your life.

For me, the answer to that question is easy.

It was the fall of 1966. I was in eighth grade. The Vietnam War really flared up that year. And a key point for us boys was that there was a draft. Now I wouldn't have been called up for five years, but the question still seemed overwhelming: when my number comes up, what should I do?

But I didn't ask this question openly. I was the only Mennonite in my class at Riverview School, a small country school between Reedley and Parlier in the San Joaquin Valley. And all around me, it looked like the question of whether my life belonged to Caesar or to God was crystal clear: the Vietnam War was all about our battle against godless Communism, so God and Caesar were *obviously* on the same side.

Which was nice and simple.

But at church, there was also the Mennonite Peace witness.

And in the General Conference Mennonite congregation that my family attended in Reedley, that witness vibrated. It was alive. But there was no uniform agreement on what the Mennonite Peace witness should be. There was no blanket position on whether I should enlist and serve my country, or be a noncombatant (which could be just as dangerous, but it wouldn't require me to kill and I could still

fight Communism), or be a conscientious objector and do some kind of service, or dodge the draft and go to Canada, or recognize the corruption inherent in the system as a whole by resisting the draft and going to prison.

In short, by age 13 the Mennonite Peace witness had me asking myself really hard life-and-death questions. Broadly stated, I had to determine what my Mennonite peace witness would be. This question came to me through my congregation. But Reedley First Mennonite did not provide a prescriptive answer.

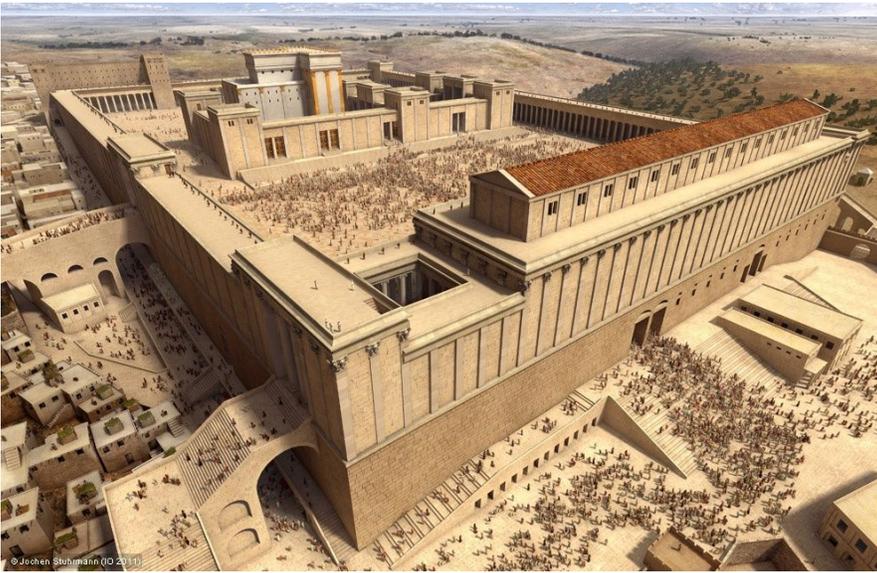
Jesus's answers weren't prescriptive either. Well, "love your enemies" is pretty directive. But when he was being challenged, he might just tell some mystifying story. Or just throw the question back in the questioners faces.

Who was asking the question here? Herodians and Pharisees. And their aim was to trap Jesus, to get him arrested. And Jesus knew his answer — give unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, and unto God that which is God's — would force them to look back on who they were, what they represented, and what they were about.

So what was Caesar all about? You might say Caesar was all about packaging: presenting imperial domination and expansion as nothing more than "Pax Romana." Images of Caesar fused Roman Republican values, assertions of divine lineage, and military prowess into one.

And Herod, the King of Judea and his descendants were fully on board with all of this. Between 19 BCE and 63 CE, the Herodian kings embodied their fealty to Rome by constructing one of the wonders of the ancient world: Jerusalem's





Temple Mount. It's surface could hold 35 football fields. There was nothing like it. It's destruction — when Jesus dared to suggest it — would have been almost beyond imagination at the time.

True, the Temple Mount also monumentalized something specifically Hebrew: the Temple, which adhered to the architectural specifications prescribed by scripture and certainly was a central component, it didn't really dominate. But the remainder of the construction — by far, most of the construction — closely followed Greco-Roman architectural norms as a deep bow to the empire's dominant culture.

So while Herodians questioning Jesus would have been aligned with Rome, the Pharisees were all about a revival of Hebrew scripture. I imagine Jesus's response left them staring at each other. And ultimately as Jesus seemed to know, a sufficient number of Jews would choose to defy Caesar for Caesar in turn to destroy the Temple and sack Jerusalem in 70 C.E.

The question of what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God is about so much more than baffling a circle of Herodians and Pharisees. It gets at the core of the Mennonite peace witness. John Stoner, who was executive secretary of MCC Peace Section, looked to sixteenth-century Anabaptism for his starting point. And his summary of their position was that they recognized and resisted systems of abusive power while maintaining a practice of faith that believes things can change.

And after the Anabaptists — how did we Mennonites do over the centuries? That's a complicated question. We were illegal most places, and we might be driven from one place to another. Different places, different centuries held different fates in store.

But we did pay a lot of taxes. I mean, we were heretics: if a prince were to tolerate us, he needed some kind of incentive. And it started right away. In the year of our founding, 1525, Anabaptist parents who refused to have a child baptized, there was a five pound tax. And some of the taxes — such as those that exempted our young men from military service — were war taxes.

So if that's true, did payment of war taxes help enable the survival of the Mennonite peace witness?

We need to claim every nook and cranny, every twist and turn. From the start, there were Anabaptist voices — such as the Hutterites — who stood firm against payment of war taxes. And among North American Mennonites, concerns about war taxes surfaced repeatedly over the centuries, starting as early in this country as the Revolutionary War. You might say the Mennonite peace witness kept sparking and dying down and re-igniting.

But I want to step back for a minute and take a glance at the broader history

of war tax resistance. As you see, it did not start with peace churches in North America, it actually started with the indigenous

Highlights of WTR History

1637: Algonquin Tribe refuses to pay taxes for Dutch Fort

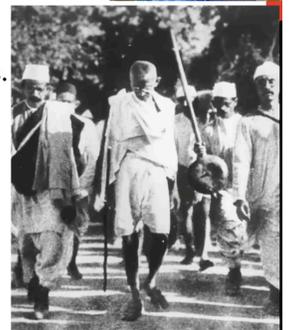
1659: Quakers begin a long tradition of refusing to pay war taxes.

1847: Thoreau refuses to pay poll tax for Mexican War

1930: Gandhi leads 240-mile march to the sea to make salt illegally and refuse British taxation on salt. Tax resistance was a major component of the Quit India campaign, 1942.

1964-75: Hundreds of thousands of people in the U.S. refuse to pay taxes because of the Vietnam War.

2021: Millions of people in Myanmar are refusing to pay their utility bills as a way to defund the military regime. To counteract this, the government has begun sending soldiers to the homes of those with an outstanding utility bill to demand payment.



WHERE YOUR INCOME TAX

U.S. FEDERAL BUDGET 2025 FISCAL YEAR

MONEY REALLY GOES

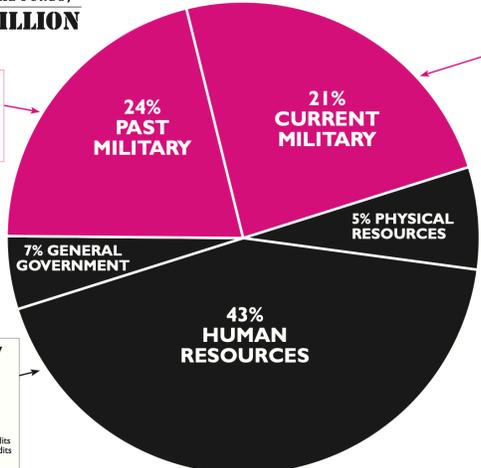
TOTAL OUTLAYS
(FY 2025 FEDERAL FUNDS)
\$5,568 BILLION

MILITARY: 45% AT \$2,529 BILLION

\$1,337 BILLION
• Veterans' Benefits \$269 B
• Interest on national debt \$968 B (80% est. to be created by military)

\$369 BILLION
• Treasury, incl. 20% interest on debt (\$242 B)
• Govt. personnel
• Justice Dept.
• State Dept. (partial)
• Homeland Sec. (partial)
• Int. Sec. Ass. (partial)
• Judicial
• Legislative

\$2,377 BILLION
• Health & Human Ser. Sec. Admin.
• Education
• Food/Nutrition prog.
• HUD
• Labor Dept.
• Earned Incl/Child Credits
• Health Insurance Credits
• Clean energy credits



\$1,191 BILLION
Total DoD \$871 B:
• Personnel \$203 B
• Op. & Maint. \$330 B
• Procurement \$167 B
• Research & Dev. \$139 B
• Construction \$17 B
• Family Housing \$2 B
• Supplements \$13 B
Non-DoD Military:
• Army Corps. (mil.) \$157 B
• DoE rule weapons \$32 B
• NASA (50%) \$13 B
• Interest Security Ass. \$16 B
• Homeland Sec. (mil.) \$47 B
• State Dept. (partial) \$9 B
• Justice/FBI military \$14 B
• Treas/Sec Serv/other \$12 B

\$294 BILLION
• Agriculture
• Interior
• Transportation
• Homeland Sec. (partial)
• HUD (partial)
• Commerce
• Energy (non-military)
• NASA (50%)
• Environmental Protection
• Nat. Science Fdn.
• Army Corps Eng. (civil)
• FCC and other

NON-MILITARY: 55% AT \$3,039 BILLION

American population in the 17th century. That's interesting. And not surprisingly, the role of Quakers was prominent. In terms of numbers and momentum, a dramatic swelling develops during the Vietnam War.

And what proportion of our federal taxes go to warfare? If we take a quick

look at the pie chart for next year's federal budget, the portion going to the military is typical: it's usually between 40 to 50 percent of where our tax dollars go.

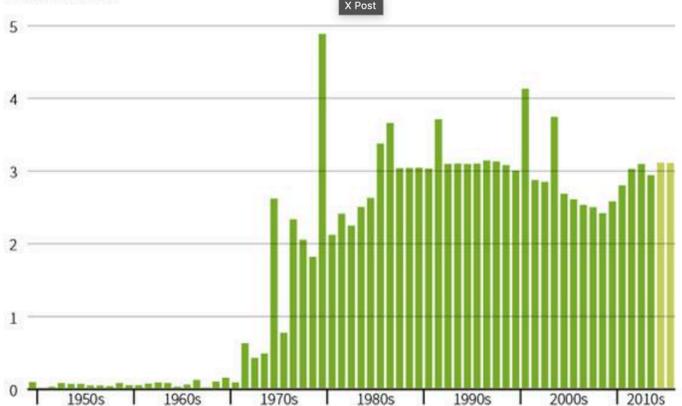
Now we can object to how our taxes are being used, and we are doing that actively. We have been very involved in this as a congregation. One of the key concerns with the horror of what is going on in Gaza lies in the fact that our tax dollars are contributing to what is happening there.

Now since I've taught Israeli history some, I do like to point out that as long as socialist parties

U.S. aid to Israel since FY1949

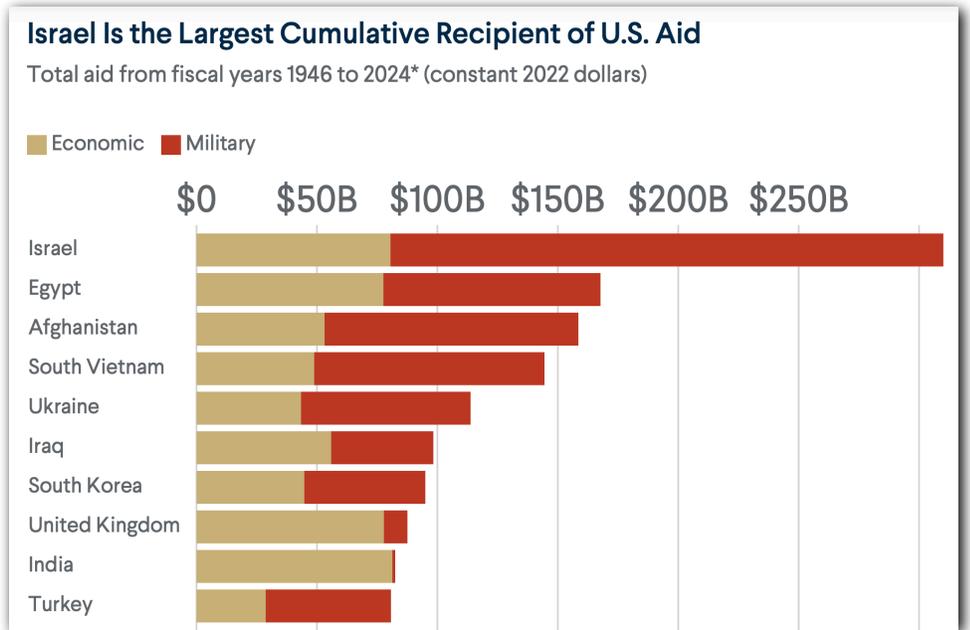
The United States has provided more than \$121 billion dollars in aid to Israel since FY1949. Military grants make up most of the aid.

BILATERAL AID TO ISRAEL
Billion dollars



dominated in Israel during it's first 25 years, U.S. support for that nation was lukewarm at best. A firm turning point comes — well, this may not help you, but for me I

put that turning point in 1977 when the former Irgun terrorist Menachem Begin is Prime Minister and he meets Liz Taylor. It is VERY striking how strongly our country has supported Israel militarily, and it gives us good reason to feel accountable for how Israel uses that support.



So the concern for the impact of war has been a key motivation for war tax resistance. The key organization in this country for those who choose to resist war taxes is the National War Tax

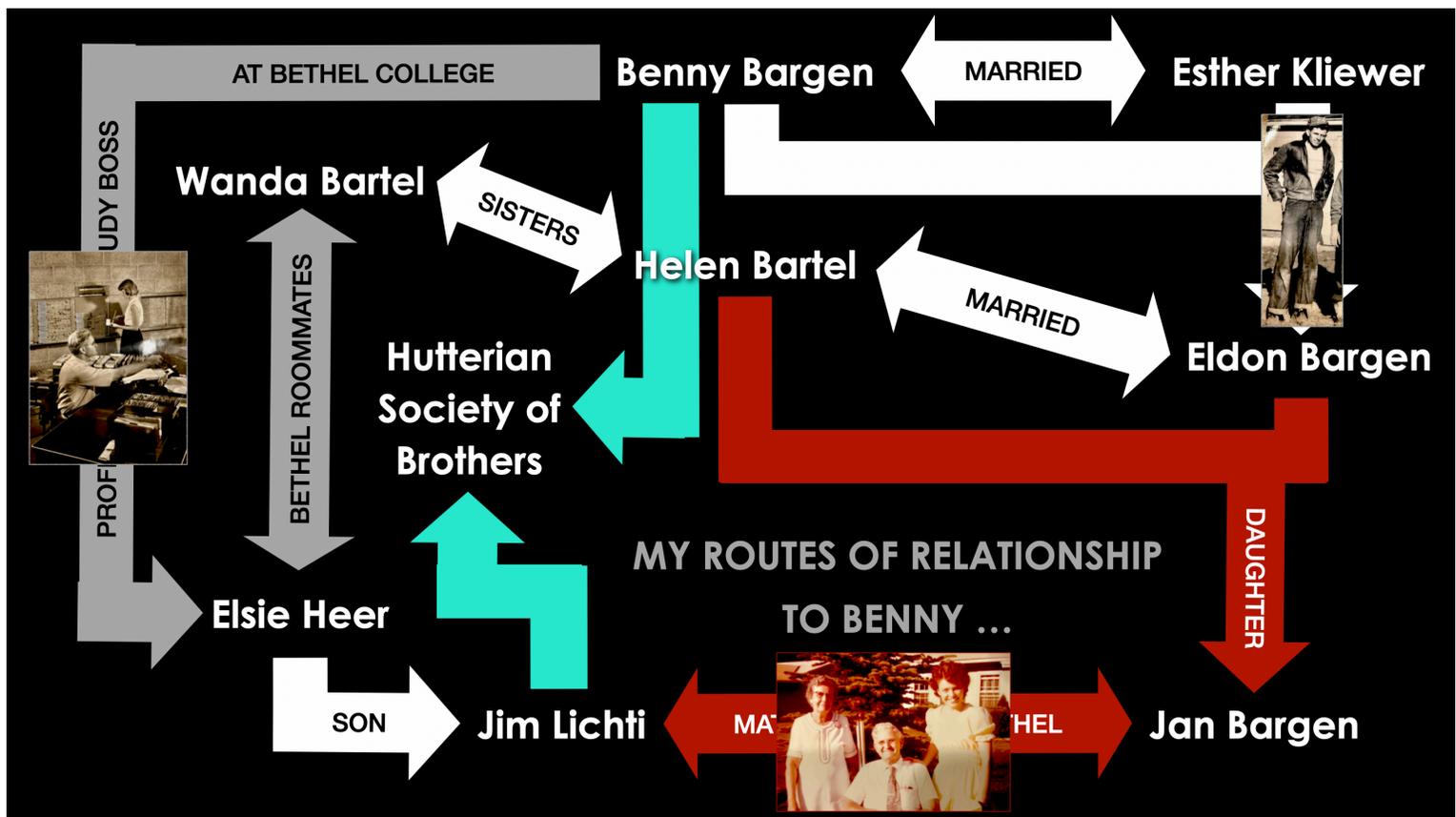
Resistance Coordinating Committee, or “new trick” for short. And as you can see, MCC is a national affiliate of “new trick.”

And a striking dimension of how “new trick” presents the history of war tax

resistance in the United States is the extent to which The pioneers of war tax resistance here have been isolated individuals who took a stand. The print's too small for you to read, but the first name is that of a woman who was fired from her teaching position for refusing to encourage her students to “BUY

National War Tax Resistance Coordinating Committee
(NWTRCC - or “new trick”)

National Affiliates:
 Community Peacemaker Teams
 Center on Conscience & War
 Episcopal Peace Fellowship
 Fellowship of Reconciliation
Mennonite Central Committee
 National Campaign for a Peace Tax Fund
 Nonviolence International
 Sojourners
 War Resisters League
 War Tax Resisters Penalty Fund



And Wanda moved to Fresno, California, and during the 1950s she'd drive down to our farm every Saturday, which was Mom's baking day and they'd sit and have coffee and eat whatever Mom had baked and do girl talk. And there were things to talk about with Helen and Eldon.

And this was because Eldon — can we just notice for a moment that he's a good looking guy? — Eldon was a lot like his Dad: he followed his principles, and those principles were in line with his Dad's principles. So he didn't marry Helen until he had told her that he had decided to resist the draft. This was during the Korean War. I don't know how many people were resisting the draft at that time, but he was determined to do it. So Helen married him, and a few months later in 1951 he went to prison for about a year.

That was Eldon's first Mennonite peace witness. And Eldon and Helen also spent the rest of their lives committed to living below the taxable income level.

I can just imagine what Wanda and mom would have had to say about all that. I was really young, so I can't claim any specific

memories — but I can almost hear the tones of admiration and disapproval in their voices.

But Mom had her own personal and direct relationship with Eldon's father, Bennie. She knew him from her years at Bethel College. He developed a unique work-study program where students could develop skills and earn money at the same time — which made a big difference to students like my mother. She really admired and respected him.

And I also got to know especially Helen and Eldon better through their daughter Jan, who's listening in this morning. Jan and I were born four days apart in 1953, and our lives started intersecting when we were one year old and Helen and Eldon visited my parents in California. There's a story that Helen and Eldon visited the farm around our first birthday. Interestingly, she does not remember her parents commitment to living below the taxable income level the way I remember my mother doing. She just thought they were thrifty and resourceful — like a lot of Mennonites, but maybe more thrifty and resourceful than most.

Jan sent me a stockpile of photos that span Benny's life — and you can't help noticing one more thing that set him apart: at age one, he had polio. This did not keep him from making an impact. The tribute written for him upon his death by a fellow Bethel professor described Benny as "exasperating" for those content with things as they appear, and "a source of ideas" for those searching for a new way."

And it was at the time of Bennie's death in 1971, during the Vietnam War, that war tax resistance became more widespread as one component of their Mennonite peace witness. In 1983, the General Conference Mennonite Church made the institutional decision to be openly complicit in the civil disobedience of their employees who chose to withhold their

federal taxes illegally. According to the Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online, this appears to be the first time in U.S. history that an employer refused to withhold taxes for those employees who requested that action for reasons of conscience. And when the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church merged to create Mennonite Church USA in 2002, this new body chose to continue this stance.

So what had been the action of isolated individuals became a community-supported peace witness.

I haven't found any statistics on how many Mennonites currently resist war taxes, but I know in our own congregation, Sharon Heath chose to live below the taxable income level for about seven years. And there are a variety of ways in which people choose to resist war taxes. At Community Mennonite Church in Harrisonburg, there are 14. Most of them have been doing it for decades. Some withhold the percentage of taxes supporting the military; some withhold a symbolic portion of those taxes; and some live below the taxable income level.

Their stories are striking. Nathan and Elaine Zook Barge had worked for 14 years in Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador. They kept losing friends who were killed by U.S. weapons. The day they were on a bus in El Salvador and guns from 10 U.S. helicopters strafed the area around them — in their own words, “That day, we became tax resisters for life.”

And they are not naive about the impact of war tax resistance. As Rick and Carolyn Yoder put it: “We're not under the illusion that our letters and voice will change things, but it does change us.”

I love that statement. But I'm not sure it's the note I want to end on. While the Mennonite peace witness is my foundation, I sense a need to reach beyond it as well.

So I will end with the words of Sofia Orr, who — alongside Tal Mitnick and Ben Arad — is an Israeli draft resister. Tal and Ben are currently in prison; Sofia has been released. (For those of you who may not know this, the Israeli army drafts both men and women.).



The way it works is If you refuse to serve, you're released, you come before the Israel army's Conscientious Objection Committee, and it decides whether you stay or go back for another month. Tal has been in and out of prison since fall; Ben started in April. Sofia has been in prison most of the time since December but was release a week ago.

This is the statement she then released:

"I was released from prison, but this horrific war is not over yet. On the contrary - things are becoming worse. These long months in prison resealed for me the importance of empathy and humanity and strengthened my faith in equality, solidarity, and the need to reach a political solution. It is now more important than ever to fight for these values. I will continue to fight for them and for the release of my friends Tal and Ben."